

Forever *and a* Night



LANA CAMPBELL

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TATE PUBLISHING
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1

“Somebody come get these orders!” Mia shouted, pounding the little bell next to the pick-up window, ready to wring some servers’ necks.

Tavania’s was packed, and the wait for seating currently stood at about an hour. They were two servers shy tonight, and the ones here, whom Mia needed to be running food, were chasing their tails in the dining room, trying to get checks to the guests and basically keeping them happy in the midst of the chaos.

She glanced across the fifteen plates under the heat lamp, taking up every inch of the pass window and groaned. The food had to go out now.

Andrew, the line cook, came around her with two more steaming orders, ready to be run. He took one look at the pass and cursed. “Where the hell are all the servers? What am I supposed to do with these?”

“As deep in the weeds as the kitchen right now, at least the ones who are here.” She snarled the last part, furious with the two who weren’t.

Mia dashed out the kitchen door into the servers’ station, grabbed a large oval tray and jack, set it up, and began pulling plates, lining the carrier with them.

“What are you doing?” Andrew asked, frowning at her through the kitchen side of the window.

He was twenty-three, the age of her oldest daughter, tatted like a jailhouse skinhead but a talented cook. “Running this five top myself. What choice do I have?”

“Man, Brittany and Michael suck, doing this to us on a Saturday night.” He put the two new steaming plates in the spot she’d cleared. “When Joe finds out they both ditched work tonight to go to that Deathroid concert, their asses are going to be grass. I wanted to go too. This is the first time they’ve played in New Orleans.”

“Well, I’m not into that ear-raping, heavy metal music, but I agree with you on one thing—I hope he mows both of their backyards.” She hoisted the heavy tray onto her shoulder and grabbed the jack, sparing Andrew one last look. “Keep the orders coming. I’ll be back as soon as I can to help.”

“Hurry. The POS printer is spitting them out faster than I can hang them.”

Mia glanced at the table number on the ticket, then took off. When she returned to the server’s window, she groaned.

No more orders had gone out, and some were starting to seriously wilt and dry. She noticed a lone plate at the far end of the window, which was completely toast, grabbed it, and tossed it in the buss tub.

“Andrew!” she yelled through the window. “Remake on table 59. A Tour of Sicily. Flying!”

He shot her an are-you-frickin’-kidding-me look, then got busy.

So did she, running more orders and filling in where needed on the floor. On her next trip to the pass, Andrew had just dropped 59’s remake.

She snatched the plate and ran it to a one top in the far back of the restaurant. When she arrived, she found a lone man seated there with long black hair tied into a ponytail, studying the screen of a laptop. He glanced up at her, offering a warm smile. Mia let out a sigh of relief. Whatever he’d been doing seemed to have kept him occupied. At least he didn’t appear primed to unload for his long wait.

She smiled back with a calm winning one. “I hope you’re having a pleasant evening, sir. I have your Tour of Sicily plate.” She sat it in front of him next to his computer. He didn’t answer immediately because he glanced over her chef attire, and she noticed his nostrils flare. The look in his eyes seemed intrigued. Mia suspected he was curious as to why kitchen staff delivered his order, and he probably thought she reeked. Marinara and other garlic sauces were

splattered across the front of her white chef's jacket, which she hadn't time to even think about changing.

"Thank you. This looks wonderful. I can see you're a bit understaffed here tonight, but don't be concerned about me. I'm easy to please."

Mia glanced about the room then back at him, thinking he did seem like the most centered person in the place at the moment. The couple at the table just right of them were scowling, whispering to one another and looked minutes from bolting.

God, Joe, why did you have to come down with the flu on a Saturday night? she thought, referring to her boss and the head chef.

"Are you okay?"

He obviously sensed her anxiety, given his concerned expression. She opened her mouth to reassure him, and then her gaze fused with his and her breath caught. His eyes were captivating—violet, like the color of the African Violet flower, the irises huge and widely dilated. The amount of light in the dining room was marginal for ambiance, but enough caught his brilliant gaze and for a brief second, gave the illusion of light catching a diamond at just the right angle. They sparkled *literally* then filled with mirth.

"I take it you're the chef?"

Boy, he had quite the Southern drawl. Deep south. Not Louisiana though. More like Georgia. Maybe Alabama.

And he was sinfully good-looking. Like if it were a crime, he would be outlawed in forty-eight states, gorgeous.

She cleared her throat and centered herself. “Sous chef. But I’m cooking tonight. I hope you enjoy, and thanks for dining at Tavana’s. I’ll do my best to get a server your way as soon as possible. Is there anything else you need?”

He glanced at his plate and bottle of wine. “I’m perfect and low maintenance. No one need hurry on my account.”

Mia grinned and rolled her eyes. “Lord, I wish you could extend those vibes to the rest of the diners.”

He chuckled. It was a deep, pleasant, sexy sound that married well with his smile, one which had probably led more than a few women to their demise. He was the epitome of male eye candy, but she had no time to indulge that particular sweet tooth. “Anyway, enjoy.” She turned and hurried back to the kitchen.

It had been a three hundred plus cover night, and Mia’s angst finally settled into gratefulness. Not one plate came back, and as far as she knew, none of the guests had pitched any fits, although she had yet to speak to all the servers. The time was a little after midnight, but she knew from experience there would still be guests present in the dining room because the bar stayed open until one in the morning.

She and Andrew had just finished kitchen clean up on their end and were fixing their shift meal. She walked over to one of the stoves with a couple plates where Andrew cooked them both steaks and grilled squash.

“Crap, talk about a night from hell,” Andrew said as he took the empty plates from her. He filled hers, then his own, and turned off the grill and range top.

“I know, but hey, we rocked, without Joe and without those mutinous deserters.” Everyone in the house tonight knew Brittany and Michael ditched work to go to the Deathroid concert. When Joe refused their request for the night off, they’d obviously plotted a rotten little scheme to call in sick, which had coincided with Joe’s flu thing. A coincidence, she was sure, yet perfect debauchery on their part. No one would tattle on them, but Mia knew Joe to be savvy enough to smell a rat where those two kids were concerned when he learned of their “sick” day.

They were college students, into the whole heavy metal thing. She had children their age. Granted she’d raised her three girls in church, with godly principles, and taught them to be better than sneaks and liars, but kids were kids. Anyway, it was all water under the bridge now.

Plate in hand, she went to the bar to eat her very late dinner. Andrew headed for the outside break area with his meal. As crazy as the night had been, she knew he’d be jonesing for a cigarette.

Cody, their lead bartender, a guy about her age, early forties, with light-blond hair and cornflower-blue eyes, flashed her a smile when she seated herself on a stool at the far edge of the bar. “Want a glass of wine?”

“You bet.” Mia didn’t hesitate. After tonight, she might have two.

Knowing her preference, Cody poured her a glass of Cabernet and sat it in front of her. “You know, I’m not sure Joe could have pulled off what you did tonight. Mostly because he can’t move as fast as you.”

Mia chuckled and gave him a chiding grin. Joe was a very large man, and he enjoyed every aspect of the culinary industry, especially eating his creations.

Cody grinned back, then continued. “Yeah, there were long waits for food, and people were getting antsy. But at least from what I saw, customers left happy.”

“I hope so,” Mia replied, cutting into her steak. She took a bite, swallowed, then added, “I can’t take all the credit. Andrew had the grill, and he was literally smoking the orders off of it. I had to end up running plates because we had no more room under the heat lamp.”

He huffed and picked up a couple of empty highball glasses next to her on the bar. “I saw you running orders earlier. I think the girls should tip you out.”

Mia took a sip of her wine. “No, I think Brittany and Michael ought to tip us all out for their little splurge tonight, but we both know that’s not going to happen.”

Cody chuckled and began wiping down the oak surface next to her with a wet bar rib. “True. Let me know if you want a refill.” He nodded toward her glass then walked over

to a trendy-looking thirty-something couple who had just seated themselves five barstools away.

Mia was starved. She dug into her meal. There had been no time to eat today, which was par for the course in a busy restaurant. Generally, she only ate twice a day. Breakfast before she left her apartment for work and her shift meal always falling around this time.

Restaurant hours were long and laborious, twelve to sixteen hours, but the overtime pay made up for the exhaustion. She intended to use some of the money she'd saved when her three daughters—Tiffany, Danielle, and Chelsie—all living in Springfield, Missouri, came to visit her later this summer.

“You’re having a very late dinner.”

Mia’s head shot up, her gaze slashing toward her right. The speaker was that drop-dead-gorgeous man she’d delivered the one top order to earlier, and he was standing beside her holding a glass of wine. She swallowed the bite in her mouth and said, “This tends to be my normal dinner hour. How was your dinner?”

She was surprised to still find him here but not unusual she supposed. Tavana’s was one of the tamer establishments here on Bourbon Street. Guests, whether single or in a group, often came here to eat, hook up to Wi-Fi and work, or just hang out in a nonparty atmosphere.

“Amazing, actually. You’re a talented chef.” He took up residence on the stool next to her and sat his glass on the bar.

Mia noticed him studying her. His eyes, the most beguiling she'd ever seen, held intrigue. She felt a little unnerved by his perusal, but she chalked it up to a customer desiring to speak to the chef. It happened all the time. Mostly with Joe because he was head chef. Happy guests often asked to speak to him. She had a roll to play. So play it she would.

Mia pushed aside her plate and smiled. "I'm Mia Peebles. Is this your first time at Tavania's?" She extended her hand.

He gave it a cordial shake. "Yes. I drove by tonight and decided it might be a quiet place to do some work. Not so much, but I managed to accomplish what I needed to. I'm Nathan Davenport."

Mia laughed. "Yes, it was a bit crazy tonight. It's good to meet you, Nath—" She broke off and glared at him. Her heart did a little trip over in her chest when her brain cells began to fire and comprehend the name the man had given her.

"Oh my god," she breathed. Suddenly, his features began to morph with the memories of numerous news and other TV show interviews she'd witnessed over the last ten years or so. Nathan Davenport was a real estate mogul and currently the richest man in the United States and possibly worldwide. Also the most sought-after bachelor on the planet. A playboy. He had a different supermodel or Hollywood starlet on his arm every other picture or interview taken of him.

He looked amused. “I guess you know who I am.”

“Duh.” She laughed, picked up her glass of wine, and sipped. “My biggest question is, how did you end up here? I thought you lived in New York.”

“I do primarily, but I have a number of homes, and one of my favorites is here in New Orleans in the heart of one of the historical districts. Circumstances have brought me to the city. Unfortunately, I don’t have a private chef here, just a housekeeper, so I went out for the evening.”

Mia blinked at him. *A private chef? Wow!* Of course a man like him would have all sort of household and personal staff. Her background was redneck, Missouri rural. Just having food on the table every day for her ex-husband and children had been a miracle of God for many years. That kind of wealth stymied her.

In her four years with Joe, she’d had many encounters with well-to-do folk and had learned to accept and accommodate their eccentricities. Not every wealthy patron she’d met were all up in their stuff, but she suspected Nathan Davenport about as spoiled as a rich person could get.

“What?” he demanded, grinning at her.

“Nothing. Just glad you happened by tonight and enjoyed your meal. And truly, I hope you’ll visit Tavania’s again.” She tried for a kind smile then stood, intending to take her half-eaten plate and wine glass to the dish pit.

He laid a hand on her arm, halting her. “Are you finished for the evening?”

Mia's smile faded. There was a hungry look in his eyes, which had nothing to do with food, and she didn't like the implications. "No. I'm closing tonight and have another hour or so ahead of me. Why?"

"I was going to ask you if you'd like to have a drink with me when you're finished. I'd be happy to wait."

His expression seemed polite enough. Maybe her thinking was a little harsh. He'd been completely cordial, but Mia was forty-two years old and wise enough to recognize a player when she saw one. "That's very kind of you, but no. It's been an extremely long day, and I'm beat, but I appreciate the invite."

He appeared disappointed, but Mia didn't care. She hadn't dated since her divorce. Hadn't had time and certainly tonight, she had no time for a guy like Davenport. The man would have been a temptation for a nun. She'd lived like one for the last five years because work left her no time for a social life. However, she wasn't thinking very sisterly thoughts at the moment, which solidified her refusal. That and the fact he was Nathan Davenport. Dating required commonalities. She couldn't think of one they might share.

She'd taken several steps away from the bar when she heard him speak.

Mia, look at me.

His voice had taken on a deep hypnotic tone, which seemed to echo in her head. In fact, it seemed to only be in her head, not audible. The strangeness of that reality should

have been terrifying, yet something compelled her to turn and face him. She sat her dishes on the bar.

“Come with me.” He gave her a kind, reassuring smile.

She opened her mouth to say, *Hell, no*, but the word that came out instead was, “Okay.” Her heart tumbled over in her chest.

Mia realized she was seriously losing it because she allowed him to escort her out the front door of the restaurant without a peep. As hard as she tried to get her feet to obey her mind’s order to run back inside the restaurant, they were useless. They just kept taking her the direction he led them. Her voice was useless too. Her jaws felt locked. She began to pant and look around.

Mia, relax. You have nothing to fear. I’m not going to hurt you.

Her gaze, wild and crazy, she was sure, shot toward him. His words and voice had been in her mind. She hadn’t heard them audibly.

Oh god, please tell me this is not real, that I’m going to wake up from this any second.

He gave her a reassuring smile and took her hand. She wanted to yank it away and use both to scratch his eyes out, but she couldn’t move them either.

You will be afraid no more. Understood?

As his words filtered through her head, fear evaporated, and her breathing and pulse gained normal momentum as desperately as she tried to fight both. He must have drugged

her. That was the only explanation Mia could come up with, because her mental and physical control were history.

She looked around to gain perspective. Everything seemed surreal. All the Bourbon Street noises and smells were alive to her senses yet distant, all stationed in a tunnel, contained with her in the midst, separate yet, apart. Nathan stood beside her, holding her hand. At some point, a long black limo pulled up to the curb. He opened the door and gently ushered her inside.

She perched on the edge of the plush ebony leather and stared forward, vaguely aware of her surroundings. She felt Nathan settle in beside her, but her mind still held the strange, trancelike state, which made her ambivalent to the atmosphere or danger. It was all so illogical. Somewhere way in the back of her mind, she knew fear would have been a handy tool at the moment. She wanted it more than anything but couldn't scrounge it up.

“Mia, look at me.”

The only option was obedience because she couldn't think for herself. This had to be a dream because she had zero control over speech, thoughts, or motor skills beyond those he commanded.

His expression was gentle and warm. He reached up and trailed the back of his fingers across her cheek. “I'm not going to hurt you, little one. You won't feel pain or fear, only pleasure I promise, which even that you won't remember come tomorrow.”

Mia just blinked at him. None of what he'd said made sense, until he leaned in and captured her lips. That ambient part of her, which kept protest or any other actions at bay, broke free when he began wreaking some major havoc on her mouth. She drove her fingers into his hair and pressed in, taking all he gave and returning more and then some.

She hadn't been kissed in over five years and like this never in her life. Everything carnal in her had been unleashed, by Nathan, herself, she didn't know, but she had to have more. She broke the kiss just briefly to crawl onto his lap, then returned to devouring his mouth, vaguely aware she now had physical control. She should have been using it to get the hell out of here, but it was the last thing she wanted.

He started sucking and biting at her lower lip while trailing one palm across the side of her black tank top, down her Levis and back again. She was on fire! When he broke free of her mouth, she let out a little grunt. Disgustingly enough, because she wanted more.

He looked at her, those strange violet eyes shimmering again now with pure hot lust. He grinned. "My instincts were right. There's one hell of a fire simmering beneath that prickly exterior. However, as strange as this may sound, based on what we're about to enjoy next, I've never forced a woman sexually. Know you're in complete control there."

She looked at him as if he were a lunatic. So was she, because she realized he hadn't been prompting her actions

for the last several minutes. They'd been all hers, which astounded her. She didn't do casual sex. "I need to go."

"Not yet." He frowned at her, then leaned in and abducted her lips again. Whatever drug she was tripping on still had her in its thrall. She caved in like a semi on a sinkhole. It got wild and crazy for a bit, then his mouth left hers to trace kisses across her cheek and neck. That felt really good. Her eyes rolled back in her head, and she moaned. He began to suck on the skin where her pulse pounded out of control.

All of it, everything he did to her, was kinky, sexy, and felt great. She leaned her head back to grant him further access. He pulled away for a brief second, then she heard him growl. Really growl. The sound was deep and scary, like a wolf's warning just prior to attack. It reverberated loud with menace in the small space. She glanced up and caught a flash of white hovering below his upper lips as he leaned forward and buried his face in her neck.

A sharp stabbing pain in her throat snatched a cry from her, but immediately, her body went limp, and she felt no more pain. Her arms fell to her side, and her head lolled back. Thankfully, he was holding her because she had lost all muscle control. She hung like a rag doll in his grip. Once the concern of her immobility passed, she realized what he was doing to her.

He had bit her neck and was now drinking her blood. The last rational cell in her brain told her this was wrong

in every sense of the word. Sinful! As if it would have mattered. She had no ability to move, let alone fight. The rest of her brain cells were saying, *Oh my god, more please more.* They won, despite her desperation to scratch for her morality. What he did to her, wrong or right, felt incredible. Pure, raw, sensual crazy took over. Wild, raunchy thoughts between her and this insanely hot man were racing out of control in her head. Somehow she knew they weren't just hers, but his, because she wasn't that creative.

Everything happening to her mind, emotions, and body at the moment held time in limbo. Eventually, he stopped and spent a good while kissing and nuzzling her neck until the hurricane of sensuality he'd created between them settled into a gentle shower.

She made a little grousing noise when he pulled her off his lap and settled her next to him. Her mind was still in a fog, a dream, she didn't know, but she looked at him, hoping to gain some answers.

He gave her a heated look, then said, "You'll remember us meeting but not what happened here. Go finish your dinner. I'll be seeing you again soon."

He opened the door, then assisted her out. Mia didn't even remember how she managed her way back into the restaurant. The next thing she recalled was the irritating buzz of her alarm clock.

2

Nathan closed the front door and paused in his long foyer, outfitted with family portraits and antiques, some of the few things he'd managed to save after the war between the states.

He scented, then frowned. Julia and Dimitri were somewhere on the first floor, waiting up for him no doubt. Last night when he arrived home around this same time, one in the morning, he'd ran into Julia in the hallway outside the kitchen. She'd been raiding his refrigerator again, something she'd been doing a great deal lately. She'd reeked of pastrami, peanut butter, pickles, and suspicion.

She started drilling him about where he'd been and why he smelled of jasmine and lavender for a second night in a row. His attempts to blow her off had probably only fueled her suspicions. Dimitri's too. No doubt she'd immediately reported her findings to her husband.

Nosy woman.

He'd just spent the last two hours in his limo with Mia again, enjoying those accused scents, along with her company, her kisses, and the ever intoxicating aroma of her blood. "Oh hell." He was in trouble and not just from Julia and Dimitri.

He'd told Julia the woman was a mere donor, a huge mistake. Ethical vampires didn't repeatedly feed from the same human. Those who did were a scourge to their race. After feeding from Mia three nights in a row, he was feeling very scourge-worthy.

Nathan didn't bother walking softly. He rounded the corner, which gave way to the west wing of his New Orleans Antebellum house, then continued toward his office. Halfway there, he heard footsteps behind him, then turned. The lifemated couple emerged through the archway leading from the kitchen into the hallway. He sighed and forced a smile for his two friends.

Dimitri gave him a studious once over. Julia popped a piece of pastry in her mouth, obviously remnants of a beignet, judging from the powdered sugar on the end of her nose. She studied him with a prim, judgmental frown as she chewed.

He rolled his eyes. The way she'd been eating lately, he needed to have a commercial food purveyor deliver groceries to his home. Poor Jazerra, his housekeeper, had been making supermarket runs on a daily basis over the last couple of weeks. She was threatening to quit over it. Then

again, she'd been threatening to quit over one matter or another for the last forty years.

When Julia's mouth was clear, she asked, "Who is she cher?"

The words "to you" were left unspoken. Since he had no answers yet to that question himself, he speared Dimitri with a pointed look. "It's nearly one in the morning. The two of you should be in bed. Do I need to have a refrigerator installed in your suite? Julia has to be exhausted running up and down the stairs to rifle through the contents of the ones in the kitchen all night long."

Dimitri chuckled, his shiny, silver eyes flashing mirth. "That won't be necessary. The exercise does her good." He sobered a bit and continued in his Slavic accent, reproof in his voice. "We are worried about you, Nathan. We've known you for over seventy years, but even I have never seen you spend three consecutive nights feeding from the same human."

Nathan was a hell of a lot more than worried. He was bewitched by Mia, and his actions scared the hell out of him. He could have made up a lie, told them she knew he was vampire, and their encounters a mere sexual dalliance, but he'd developed respect for her. Even ambiguous to them, he couldn't sully her that way. "I was hunting. She was convenient, and it's no concern to either of you."

They looked at each other, their expressions gaining the emotion.

“What?” he demanded.

“It might be our concern.” Dimitri’s tone was hard, his gaze too.

Nathan knew what Dimitri meant and didn’t like what he implied. He was a 175-year-old unmated vampire. They feared he verged on feral because insane ones of their kind fed voraciously and often repeatedly on the same human until they killed or turned them. “Back off. It isn’t what you’re thinking.” He stalked off down the hall to his office.

They followed.

He opened the door, faced them, and said, “Both of you are way off base.”

Were they? He’d just fed from Mia tonight again, erasing her thoughts of course. He’d allowed her to remember their encounters at her restaurant but not what happened after her shift inside his limo.

Turning feral had never entered his mind. Like it could. He’d been so obsessed with Mia, he could think of little else. He’d never fed from the same human more than once.

Maybe the two of them had a point.

“We hope so,” Dimitri said. “We’ve never met a vampire prior to turning feral, but we all know what the signs are.”

Nathan didn’t answer. He knew the signs too, and the fact he exhibited some scared him shitless.

In the terms of their kind, feral meant insanity beyond redemption, and death was the only course of treatment. He’d been turned by a feral female vampire, Isabella

Ravini, when he was a mere nineteen-year-old human boy. The insanity she'd visited upon his mind while he'd been her fledgling made him realize if he trekked toward that heinous point of no return, his friends would have no choice but to extinguish him for the safety of their kind as well as human kind. Their affection for him would not matter, only the best interest of their race. Sadly, he would have acted exactly the same.

How ironic, he thought. The very reason he was in New Orleans had to do with Isabella stalking him. When a male vampire's sire was a feral female, she was never really gone from his life. Both he and Dimitri had been turned by Isabella years apart, but both of their infant days as vampires had been a hellish nightmare, and a number of them since.

Nathan rounded the massive mahogany desk that ate up the back half of the room situated in front of a large bay window. He pulled out a plush office chair, sat, and gave the computer's mouse a little click—a futile attempt to brush off the two nosy vampires who had followed him inside.

They seated themselves in the cocoa Italian leather chairs across from him and stared. Subterfuge and evasion would have been a waste of time, so he opted for a version of the truth. "Obviously, I met a human and was intrigued. You know it happens."

He glanced between them and his screen, settling on the couple because they stared at one another intently, and

he knew they *mind spoke*. Mind speaking was only possible with vampires if they were blood bonded or lifemates.

Julia nodded at her husband, then faced him. “If this donor is just a casual liaison, then we apologize for intruding. You are unmated, and we understand that difficulty and the need to find comfort in the arms of a human until you find the woman God designed for you. Neither of us want to think the worst, Nathan, rather the best. Could there be something brewing with her? We generally seek those of our own kind for our mates, but we often find ours among the human population. Thank God, or I would have never found my Dimitri.” She reached over and squeezed her husband’s hand, an adoring look in her green eyes, the color of an Irish spring meadow. She was a beautiful woman with long strawberry-blond hair, and she loved Dimitri as he did her.

Nathan envied their bond, because he’d never experienced anything close to what the two shared. He recalled the day they discovered one another. Julia and her sister Anne Marie had been on the verge of gang rape by a half dozen German soldiers inside a rickety barn in a village south of Paris.

Being vampire, both of them heard the women’s screams over the endless rounds of ammunition firing between Allied and German forces and stormed the barn. He and Dimitri dispatched the German scum in mere minutes without unloading one round.

Long and short of it, the moment Julia and Dimitri laid eyes on one another, it was on. If not for Nathan, Dimitri would have gone AWOL to get to the woman over the months that followed while she and her sister were at an aunt's in London, and they back in trenches across Europe fighting Nazis.

Once the war ended and they reunited, less than a month later, Dimitri turned her. He really did love her, enough so he tried to talk her out of it, but she'd wanted to be a wife to him in every way. She wanted to give him children, something she couldn't do as a human.

Humans and vampires were two separate species. Actually, vampires were a subspecies of humans. They had evolved from them due to a blood disease, which could only be managed by ingesting the blood of their sire species.

"Does she have any idea?" Dimitri asked.

Nathan knew what he meant. He shook his head. "I haven't allowed her to remember anything. She's the sort of human whom I suspect wouldn't take the truth well." Few would once they discovered they'd been an unwitting buffet of pleasure for a vampire for three consecutive nights.

"You must have some plans, Nathan," Julia said, then glanced at Dimitri, worry in her eyes.

Dimitri added, his voice stern, "You know you can't continue with this sort of behavior. Humans are frail and have their limits."

“And it is unethical,” Julia added, her expression as priggish as a schoolmarm.

Nathan grunted. “You think I don’t know that? I’ve been cautious, but I have no future plans for her at the moment. If I did desire to consider some, the two of you are making it impossible for me to formulate any.” He wasn’t sure he should as much as he wanted to. Taking on another distraction when he was neck deep in Isabella troubles wasn’t wise.

The couple gazed into each others eyes, mind speaking again. *A handy tool when talking behind someone’s back in front of them*, Nathan thought sourly.

Dimitri had a valid point. He was attracted to Mia physically but also in a bloodlust way, which was very abnormal when combined. Rarely did the two lusts mesh when a moral vampire fed from a human donor.

Feeding was merely an act to replenish one’s body, the same as food or water. Like eating, it was pleasant; and within the right circumstances, it could be wildly sensual. Taken to the dark side, immoral ones of their kind, ferals would enchant a human and have sex with them while feeding, then often kill them.

Turning feral was an ever real and present danger for an older male vampire. All sought a lifemate in their youth between sowing oats. Eventually, reality kicked in, time marched on, and that vampire realized years were passing, and he was still alone. Then he’d lose hope of sharing a life

with another of his kind. Work and hobbies sufficed for awhile, but eventually, loneliness had her whorish way, and that male ended up dying young or turning feral.

Davenport Enterprises had consumed him for years, and he'd given little thought to finding a mate. He couldn't be on the verge of feral. No way.

Besides, Nathan made it a rule to never feed on a female human he found attractive, unless he chose to disclose the fact to the woman that he was vampire, and she agreed to the sexual liaison. Even then, it was a one-time thing. Of course if the news troubled the woman, nothing would happen, and she wouldn't remember the conversation. If something did happen he still erased the woman's memory. Doing so was a matter of survival for his kind.

It wasn't fair to keep the truth from the human regarding any sexual or sensual issues, but he'd been extraordinarily unfair to Mia, doing exactly that. He swallowed hard, trying to get rid of the lump of guilt in his throat.

"I think you lie, my friend." Dimitri arched a brow. "I've rarely witnessed guilt in you, but the emotion is as you American's say, written all over your face."

"I think the two of you are wasting your time. I'm not talking about this anymore." He tapped his mouse, bringing up his personal staff correspondence from Davenport Enterprises. He clicked on an e-mail from Dominic.

"We can't help you if you won't talk, Nathan," Dimitri said.

"And you obviously need help, cher," Julia pointed out.

He agreed. Not so much regarding Mia, but he was in serious need of a crowbar to pry these two out of his office. “You’re both making mountains out of molehills. I merely find her interesting. Nothing more.”

He was lying through his teeth. He’d been feeding from humans for over 170 years, but never had a human’s blood courted him the way Mia’s did. The moment he’d scented her in that little bistro, having her had been like a mental disease.

The intoxicating smell of her life force had sucked him in, but her beauty, wit, and humor had snared him. He liked her—a lot. He wanted her too, but even under enchantment, she drew a line in the sand there. Disappointing but he had no desire to enchant a woman into his bed. If she didn’t go willingly, no enjoyment could come from the experience.

“What is she like, my darling?” Julia asked, eagerness edged her tone.

He glared at her and let a soft vampire growl rumble in his throat, hoping she’d get the message. She just pursed her lips and continued to stare.

However, she’d succeeded in her mission to drive him to distraction. Visions of Mia played through his mind. For a human woman, she was fairly tall, thin boned, with classically elegant curves that his hands and eyes had spent a great deal of time exploring.

She had an exotic yet earthy sort of beauty, wide set almond eyes, so dark and bewitching he couldn’t count how

many times he'd labored on a reply while they'd engaged in conversation in his limo tonight. Her skin was a rich golden brown, which coupled with her eyes and high cheek bones, suggested she had a prominent Native American background. Not exclusively because her long thick auburn hair was a riot of curls which he'd played with for a good while earlier, the source of the bewitching jasmine and lavender scent, which still clung to his clothes.

He stifled a groan, having a sudden, urgent need to tug at the waistband of his jeans where just below an uncomfortable tightness had developed. Damn Julia and her meddling! He glared at his computer and tried to focus on Dominic's e-mail. He read the words, but what his mind translated was, "Blah, blah, blah, blah, blah, blah."

He couldn't think straight. Mia captivated him for a number of reasons. She was hands down one of the loveliest women he'd ever met, body and soul. There was great genuineness in her. Purity and honor too. She took her job very seriously and cared deeply about those she worked with. Her children even more. She had three grown girls and adorned them. She talked about them incessantly under enchantment.

There were many things she hadn't told him, yet he knew because when he enchanted her, it gave him full access to her mind. For one, she was not a woman for casual sexual encounters. Perhaps that was one of her most intriguing attributes. He couldn't remember the last time he'd met a

woman with a value system parallel to the one he'd been raised with but had lost eons ago because of the vile things he'd done while under Isabella's mental control.

Aside from Isabella, he felt spiritually lost because he was vampire. Some of their kind believed God had included them in whatever form of religion they observed. Julia and Dimitri for one. They were staunch Catholics. Nathan had read the Bible a number of times. In God's opinion, what he did to survive was an abomination. And he sure as hell felt like one after this three-night splurge with Mia.

He heard Julia huff and glanced her way. She looked very disappointed that her efforts to get him to blab about Mia had failed.

Too bad.

Dimitri on the other hand appeared troubled.

"What?"

"I know we've been pressing you for answers, but our motivation is concern."

Nathan sighed. "I know that. I don't have any answers. The truth is, I can't stop thinking about her, lusting after her blood and body. She has morals, which put a kink in the latter lust. Maybe it's best I leave her be. She's a complication I don't need right now with Isabella an ever-present threat."

Dimitri nodded. "Any word from Dominic?"

"He sent me an e-mail, which I've been trying to read, and perhaps could if the two of you would shut up long enough for me to do so."

That put a chagrined look on Julia's face. *Good*. Dominic was their son and Nathan's lead attorney at Davenport Enterprises, although he handled a great deal more for him than legal matters. He was vampire and could get things done humans couldn't. Currently, his number one mission was tracking down Isabella.

Nathan scanned it quickly, then sighed. "Nothing, I'm afraid. No credit card or phone trails. No sightings. She's gone under." Meaning, her initial plan of attack had failed, and she was regrouping.

About two months ago, she'd shown up at his office in New York. He hadn't seen her for nearly twenty years. And good years those had been. Of course her first order of business had been to attempt to seduce him, which nearly made him upheave his lunch that day. He'd have rather been seduced by Medusa.

She claimed to have made the biggest mistake of her life when she'd dumped him 175 years ago. She claimed to still love him. Nathan had told her to kiss his ass.

He snorted. The notion of her loving anyone was so ludicrous, it was almost funny. A feral's affections only extended to themselves. They were the most narcissistic beings on the planet. But what Isabella wanted from him wasn't funny at all. She wanted to be his wife, not lifemate. What she really desired was his money and the power and fame marrying him could bring her.

“This is not good.” Dimitri shook his head, his features creased with concern.

Nathan sighed. “I know. I’m not going to avoid her forever. I’m safe here. We’re all safe here for now, but eventually, I’ll have to face her.” There would be no reasoning with her when that day came. It would be war, and like any war, people would die.

With a couple mouse clicks, he logged off, then glanced at Dimitri, and frowned. “Enough Isabella talk. It’s late.” He stood, and they followed suit.

Julia glanced at Dimitri with a worried frown, then back to him. “Nathan, I know my son. He will find Isabella. From there, I’m certain the two of you can finally put an end to that miserable woman. God forgive me, but a joyful day that will be. That unpleasant matter aside, you have another woman to think about. My heart tells me you could never turn feral. You are too good of a man. This woman you’ve been seeing could be your lifemate. You need to examine that possibility, cher.”

He resisted the urge to groan. “I’m trying to, Julia. I just need time to think, which maybe I could do if the two of you would go away.”

She nodded and gave him one of her famous motherly looks. The two children they had were grown, and apparently, her empty nest had gotten the better of her lately because she’d sought to mother him.

“I understand, Nathan. I know you’ll keep us informed about Isabella, but please be careful there. As far as this human, should the need to talk arise, you know Dimitri and I will be here. Good night, my darling.”

He let out the breath he’d been holding and unclenched his teeth when the two finally left. He really was on the edge. Normally, he could tell Dimitri anything. For the most part, Julia too. Not presently because whatever was happening between him and Mia had him scared and confused.

Nathan had no idea how to tell if his actions with Mia were preferal or prelifemate. One thing was for sure, he wasn’t about to back off from her until he found out.

However, his evasiveness with his friends stemmed from guilt. Mia had no idea he’d fed from her. Until he allowed it, she wouldn’t remember any of the conversations or passionate encounters they’d shared while he’d had her enchanted. Or worse, that he’d mined her thoughts during those times.

What was wrong with him? He’d never treated a human with such thoughtless disregard. His guilt morphed into self-loathing. He had to do something to make this right. What that might be, he hadn’t a clue.

“Hell,” he muttered, then rounded his desk to shut down his computer. He strode toward the door. Bed was his destination, but he doubted he’d be getting much sleep tonight.



Nathan stayed away from the little Italian bistro and Mia for the next three days and absorbed himself in work. He'd ached to see her, but those three prior days of indulgence made him realize he needed a serious vampire time out. It hadn't been an easy conviction, but he'd used the time to think. A few productive thoughts had sprouted, but most had been memories of her, plaguing his mind like a drug. And just like any junky committed to his or her addiction, he'd worked on measures to obtain a permanent fix.

He grunted, then tossed the real estate contract Dominic had faxed him earlier on his desk. He couldn't make sense of it or anything for that matter because his mind was snaked around thoughts of Mia and what he would say to her tonight.

That talk with Julia and Dimitri the other night had been far more beneficial than he'd realized. It had resulted in a conscience spanking too. Nathan knew if he wanted to explore a relationship with Mia, it had to be on even terms. Meaning, he could never feed from her again. As a human anyway.

Soon he would see her and present her with an offer she'd be hard-pressed to refuse. At least he hoped so. She'd refused every request he'd made for a date, shot down every flirtatious effort he'd employed to gain her interest when she'd been in her natural, conscious mind. He knew she

wasn't playing hard to get, but she'd proved impossible to attain thus far, and her actions only made him more determined to have her.

Hiring her was the only thing he could think of that would give them time and opportunity to get to know one another. If nothing developed between them, fine. At least he'd gain a chef. With her passion and drive, he had a feeling she would be a good one.

He glanced at the time on his computer screen, which read 10:15 p.m. Time to go. He placed the document he'd been studying inside a file folder and laid it next to his keyboard, then pulled out a drawer to his right and extracted an employment contract he'd had Dominic draw up for him. He stared at it, imagining Mia's reaction once she read it. Based on what he knew about her, it would be no clear-cut deal.

The offer was more than generous, one few people would refuse. Nathan had discovered enough about Mia to know she couldn't be bought for any amount of money, which meant he had to play this card before her very carefully. When he'd spoke with her under enchantment, she told him she had a daughter who had been accepted to Harvard Medical School, and she worried about funding. Her daughter could go to Harvard three times over if Mia accepted this deal. Hopefully, her need to help her daughter would be his ace in the hole.

Seconds after he pulled his Porsche out of his garage, headlights flashed across the rearview mirror then lit up his car. *Had to be Julia and Dimitri*, he thought. They'd been gone most of the day. He parked the vehicle and stepped out. Nathan waited while Dimitri pulled his Navigator into the other bay.

They were getting in late. Julia's doctor's appointment had been for three this afternoon. Nathan hoped the lateness of their return to be a good sign. They were in the city to consult with a doctor of their kind for fertility treatments, Dr. Christian La Mond, the best vampire fertility specialist in the world, so the two of them said. They'd spoke of him often, but Nathan hadn't met him.

Since the birth of their daughter, Maria, sixty-three years ago, they had never had another child. Females of their kind had difficulties conceiving as they aged but theoretically, could for over three hundred years. His friends had great confidence in Dr. La Mond. Nathan hoped the man could help them because he knew how desperate the two were to have another baby.

Both wore beaming grins as they stepped out of his SUV. Nathan returned one. "Any news?"

Julia clasped her hands together and exclaimed, "I'm pregnant!"

Nathan quirked a brow. "Well, that explains my obscene grocery bill."

3

“You and Joe really rocked the orders out tonight, Mia,” Brittany said, grinning at her across the bar as Mia took her usual stool at the end to eat her shift meal.

Mia was still miffed at the girl and her boyfriend for last Saturday night’s splurge, but she had to admit, both had worked hard this week—an obvious attempt to gain Joe’s good graces.

Everyone at Tavana’s, including Joe, knew she and Michael had gone to the Deathroid concert. Brittany had no idea how hard she’d worked to convince Joe to give her and Michael another chance. Had she not, the two would have been standing in an unemployment line this week. As sous chef, she was second-in-command behind Joe. Her voice carried weight.

Mia spiraled her fork in her Fettucini Alfredo and frowned at her. “An easy thing to do when the floor is prop-

erly staffed.” She took a bite and stared at the cute blond college coed who looked chagrined.

“I know. It will never happen again, I promise.”

“I hope ditching work was worth it, because neither of your jobs are particularly secure at the moment.”

“We know. We’ve apologized our asses off to Joe all week and you too.”

“Uhm hum.” She gave her a look that said she wasn’t buying what she was selling.

Brittany folded her arms on the bar and leaned forward, glancing at her neck. “How are you doing? Not to be nosy, but what are those marks on your neck? I’ve seen you rubbing and scratching at them all week.”

Mia reached up and fingered the tender bites. She suspected her apartment infested with fleas, maybe spiders or some other disgusting creepy crawlers, she didn’t know. Her landlady, an eccentric elderly woman with thirteen cats, lived in the apartment across the hall from hers. Fleas seemed to be the most logical answer, so she’d called an exterminator and had her place bombed. Why the little devils hadn’t bitten her anywhere other than her neck, she had no answers for. “I took care of it. I had my place sprayed on Tuesday and haven’t had any bites since.”

“Ew. That’s got to suck. So is there anything you need help with before I head out?”

Having raised three girls her age, Mia knew letting her off easy would be no benefit to either Brittany or the restaurant.

Most of the kids who worked here were in oat-sowing mode. She'd shared the gospel with all her coworkers numerous times. Many thought she was crazy, but that went with the territory as a Christian. Setting an example by one's lifestyle was critical. Responsibility was equally as important and letting these kids off easy wouldn't teach them a blooming thing.

"Actually, yes. I was supposed to clean out the walk-in tonight, but I'm beat. You can bleach the floor and walls, then pull and toss everything expired. Shouldn't take more than a couple hours."

The girl's jaw dropped. "Mia, I can't do that. Michael and I are going to that new club, Cajun Refugees, tonight to hear this really cool metal band. We've been looking forward to this all week."

Neither of the two deserved mercy. They needed to learn the value of hard work and honoring commitments. "Too bad. I guess your date can start in the walk-in. If Michael wants to be with you, I'm sure he can help you get the job done faster."

She turned her attention back to her meal but not before she caught the girl's mutinous scowl. Mia heard her mumble something nasty as she walked away. She chuckled wickedly, then took another bite.

"Sounds like you're having a good evening."

Mia's head jerked up, her gaze honing on the man who had been starring in her thoughts and dreams regularly

over the last week, all of which had been rated no less than PG13. Tonight they might be rated R or worse, considering the tight pair of black jeans Nathan had painted on and the fact he hadn't pulled back his thick jet hair but left it loose to fall across the collar of some expensive-looking silky gray shirt.

She scowled at him. "You're very good at sneaking up on a person. You know that?"

"Sorry." He gave her a grin that was far more smug than apologetic.

She was surprised to see him, because he hadn't been back to Tavana's in several days. Mia thought her repeated refusal to his date requests had run him off. Apparently not.

"You're here late. Surely, by now you know the kitchen closes at ten." That said, she could already tell by the glint in his gorgeous violet eyes, food hadn't brought him here tonight. For reasons she couldn't fathom, he'd been hitting on her. Sticking to her guns hadn't been easy, especially when he smiled at her the way he did now—sexy and confident. No wonder he was rich. He could look at someone like that, and they probably would lay whatever the heck he wanted at his feet.

"I didn't come by to eat. I came by to see you."

She groaned, shook her head, then took another bite of Fetticini. The man was relentless. Now that the whole restaurant knew Nathan Davenport had a thing for her, the subject was top conversation amongst staff. She glanced

down the bar and saw Cody, Brittany, Michael, Delanie, the restaurant's hostess, and Tina, another server with their heads together, grinning, each casting curious looks their way.

She swallowed and glared at him now seated on the next bar stool. "If you're here again to pester me about going out, save yourself a headache."

"No. I have a problem that I'd hoped you could help me with." He crossed his arms and leaned back a bit on the stool.

That peaked her curiosity. She laid her fork inside her bowl and stared at him. "Care to expound?"

He offered her a warm smile. "I would. Recently, I lost my personal chef. She was a very talented Le Cordon Blue graduate and worked for me for about three years until she married and had a baby four months ago. She still comes in upon occasion for a guest dinner when I'm in New York. On Tuesday, she called me and gave me a two week's notice. She wants to stay home with her baby, which is completely admirable, but her choice leaves me with a position to fill. I'd like to offer it to you."

Mia knew her mouth gaped because she could only imagine the money involved in being the private chef of this man. She would have been slobbering over the once-in-a-lifetime offer if she didn't suspect other motives driving him to make it. "Well, I appreciate the opportunity, Nathan, but I'm afraid I'm not qualified. I have no formal

training. I'm just a sous chef. Everything I've learned, Joe has taught me. Trust me, I'm not what you want."

"You're exactly what I want. You might not think I know much about you, but I'm a very observant individual. The most important thing I've noticed about you is your loyalty, ethics, and drive for hard work. No amount of training or college can inspire that in a person. It either comes naturally, or it doesn't. I'll take that over talent any day because anyone can be taught skills, not values."

His tone had been earnest, and his expression morphed into one she suspected he used in a boardroom when conducting multimillion dollar deals. But she had no intention of becoming a prime piece of real estate on the block for auction. "No, but thank you. I'm very happy with my job here and I have no desire to move to New York City. Yuck. I know you live there primarily."

He reached behind him and pulled a folded multipage document out of the back pocket of his jeans and laid it on the counter next to her dinner bowl. "Look this over. It might change your mind. It's a contract for your employment. Feel free to take it to your own attorney for review. I think you'll find the terms and compensation package I've included to be more than fair." He stood, held her gaze for a moment, his expression still wreathed in business mode.

Mia opened her mouth to reply, but he turned, then walked off. She watched him weave his way between the empty tables, then exit through the front door. Seconds

later, all staff members witness to the exchange converged in front of her on the working side of the bar.

“Did we hear right? Did he just offer you a job as his private chef?” Brittany demanded, her hazel eyes dancing with intrigue. She glanced at the contract.

Mia frowned at the lot of them, snatched up the papers, and began to read. She had no legal expertise, but by the time she got to the last page, her hands were shaking, and the excitement spiraling through her system had stolen the last vestiges of her appetite.

“What does it say?” Cody demanded.

“Nothing important. For the record, I’m not going anywhere.” She refolded the papers and frowned again at them collectively. “The night isn’t over yet. I’m sure you all have things to do.” To Brittany, she said, “And you, Missy Lou, have a cooler to clean along with your partner in crime there.” The last chastising look she spared for Michael.

She grabbed her bowl and Nathan’s document, then went into the kitchen. As she headed for the break room to collect her purse, she passed Joe’s office. Out of the corner of her eye, she noticed him sitting at his desk doing paperwork.

“Mia!” he hollered out as she passed back by.

She backtracked and stepped inside. “What’s up?”

“Have a seat.” He nodded toward one of the utilitarian metal chairs in front of a matching desk that looked like one she remembered from her elementary school days. Once she was seated, he said, “I saw that Nathan Davenport

paid a visit here again tonight and not for my food.” He glanced across the room where he had a video monitor set up, dissected by four separate streams catching activity throughout the restaurant.

“Yeah, so?” She tried to remain aloof. All week, Joe, as well as the rest of the staff, had been commenting about his many visits.

He scowled at her. “Look, I’m an old man, happily married but not so over the hill I can’t spot attraction. You have the richest guy in the country trying to date you, and I suppose from a woman’s point of view, he’s good-looking. I saw you blow him off again tonight. I respect you, Mia, and I’ve never had an employee as loyal as you or one who worked as hard. You also know I rarely get into the personal affairs of my staff. No offense, but what are you thinking?”

She shoved her arms over her chest and returned his scowl because she was sick of coming up with excuses for why she wouldn’t go out with the man. Of course she was attracted to him. What woman wouldn’t be? Perhaps if they had something in common, she might consider dating him. Then again, probably not, because she seriously doubted a man like Nathan Davenport would have any sort of Christian values.

“Come on, Joe. You know me. I’m just a good ol’ country girl. What would I possibly have in common with Nathan Davenport? He’s only intrigued with me because I’ve refused to date him.”

He crossed his arms over his ample belly, covered by a white sauce splattered chef's jacket, and studied her, his expression curious. "What were those paper he gave you?"

She glanced back at the monitor, her ire thickening. A person couldn't even take a bathroom break in this place without Joe noticing. She'd always been honest with Joe. She wouldn't deceive him now. "He offered me a job as his private chef, which I know to be bull. He couldn't get me to go out with him, so he laid an offer on the table he thinks I can't refuse, but you know I can't be bought."

Joe leaned forward, reached up, and scratched his bald head. "What does the contract say?"

"I don't understand legalese at all, but basically, should I quit or should he terminate me for any reason, I get a cool million as severance."

His brown eyes widened like doughnut holes blooming in a fryer. "Let me see that thing." He reached across the desk and extended his hand.

Mia dug it out of her purse and gave it to him. Minutes passed while he silently read. Finally, he handed the papers back to her and shook his head. "I know a little about legal documents, and although I would strongly advise you to have an attorney look this over, I think I can safely say, you just caught the goose that lays the golden eggs. It would kill me to lose you, Mia. You're the best employee I've ever had hands down, but I'd be an asshole to keep you from a deal like this."

That news made flutters of excitement dance in her belly. “Really? You think it’s legit?”

“Definitely. Now what you’re going to have to do for that million dollars or the crazy amount of pay he’s offering is another story. But the long and short of it is this, you could work for him for a week and decide to quit and get the money. It’s ironclad from what I can tell.”

Mia shook her head and put the contract in her purse. “That’s unethical. I could never do that. Besides, I have a feeling it would be his ethics I’d have to worry about.”

Joe nodded, looked down at the server drops spread out in front of him, then back at her. “I would never encourage you to put yourself in a compromising position, and God only knows his motives where you’re concerned. If you can negotiate a way to work for him, where you’d be safe, I’d try if I were you. Selfishly, I hope he might be a little ethically challenged but of course not dangerous so you can get your million dollars and come back to work for me.” He paused there to chuckle. “Although with that much money, you wouldn’t need to.”

Mia laughed. “Oh, I’d work for you anyway, and you know it. I just love ending my day reeking of garlic and other obnoxious kitchen smells and putting up with your cranky old butt.”

He chuckled again and leaned his elbows on the edge of the metal desk. “Do some hard thinking, and first thing Monday morning, get that document to an attorney. I

hope it pans out for you, and if it does, before you leave me, I intend to do a press release. My sous chef becoming Nathan Davenport's personal chef is going to hit the media nationwide."

Mia stood and wagged a finger at him. "Ah! I see your motives now. Free press. You're worst than that crazy billionaire."

He grinned, leaned back in his chair, and folded his hands behind his head. "I'm a businessman, and just like that crazy billionaire, I'm not stupid when an opportunity for growth or advancement presents itself."

She chuckled then headed out the door for home.



"Mia?" Delanie stepped into the break room and smiled.

Mia glanced up and swallowed the bite in her mouth. She was seated on an old, beat-up plaid, rattan couch that had serviced far more butts than it deserved. Her dinner plate was perched on her lap and that blasted contract next to her thigh, a pen on top. She'd been reading it again. "What's up?"

"You have a visitor," she sing-songed, grinning.

Mia sighed and sat her plate on the sad coffee table bearing white, drink ring stains in the hundreds. It was Friday night, end of shift, and Mia's gut had been telling her all day that Nathan would be making an appearance tonight. It had been correct. She groaned.

Delanie, a heavy-set lady, a little older than Mia, walked toward her and glanced at the contract, her expression curious, anticipatory. “Have you figured out what you’re going to do?”

Mia shook her head and sighed again. All week her decision had been lead topic amongst staff. Most of her coworkers thought she was nuts to hesitate, but she had much riding on this choice. “I’m still not sure. On the one hand, of course it’s the opportunity of a lifetime, and I think about all I could accomplish for my girls with the money he’ll be paying me. It’s Chelsie’s dream to attend Harvard Medical School. I told you she was accepted, but even with loans, it won’t be enough and neither me or my ex, Daniel, can make up the difference.”

Delanie sat down next to her and laid a hand on her knee. “Then dang, Mia, what do you have to think about? Do it for your daughter. Even if it doesn’t work out and he ends up being a pig, you’ll be set for life.”

“I know.” She picked up the papers and the pen, sat them in her lap, and stared at them. There really wasn’t anything to think about. The lawyer she’d hired seemed to believe Nathan was very serious about keeping her employed. He’d told her that in his thirty years of practicing law, he’d never seen a contract like it. Just as Joe had said, the contract was ironclad. The million dollars was hers the day her job ended for any reason, even if she did something deserving termination.

This really seemed like a blessing. She'd been praying like crazy to come up with a way to cover Chelsie's expenses so she wouldn't have to work and could solely concentrate on her studies. Mia wanted to believe this job offer was the answer to her prayers, but she wasn't stupid enough to believe Nathan wanted to hire her for her cooking skills. Most likely, he wanted to discover her bedroom skills. Hopefully, she'd covered that problem.

The attorney she'd hired had added an addendum for Nathan to sign, requiring him to furnish her separate living quarters, which he might not go for; but she didn't want to live in the same house, apartment, or wherever he resided if not in New Orleans. That scenario held too much room for temptation to abound. She also had the lawyer add major holidays off because she always spent them with her children. Lastly and most importantly, she had the guy add a sexual harassment clause that would allow her to sue him for far more than a million, if he crossed professional boundaries. She'd never do such a thing even if he did try something. It wasn't about the money. She wanted him to take her seriously where that issue was concerned.

Maybe after he read the addendum, he wouldn't want her anymore.

"I'd better go." She stood with pen and papers in hand then slowly walked toward the door.

Delanie chuckled. "You're not going to the gallows, girl."
Mia glanced back at her.

“Oh god, that scary strained smile is worse than the long face you were just wearing.”

That made Mia laugh and gave her the little bit of muster she needed to go face Nathan.

She found him at the bar, sipping on an iced highball with amber liquid, top-shelf scotch or whiskey no doubt. She planted herself on the stool next to him, then laid the contract on the bar along with the pen and slid them toward him.

No words or greetings were exchanged. He picked it up and began to flip through pages. When he got to the back one she'd added, he frowned, then pinned her with a look she couldn't quite interpret. He picked up the pen and immediately scrawled his name, then flipped the previous page over, the one requiring her signature.

“You haven't signed it yet.”

She shrugged. “I saw no need until you signed.”

He placed the document in front of her on the bar and handed her the pen. With a deep breath, she placed pen to paper, then raised it again, her hand hovering. She slashed a glance his way. “Tell me I'm not making a mistake.”

He chuckled. “Mia, this is a contract for a job, not your soul. I'm not the devil, and as I'm sure your attorney advised you, everything is in your favor, not mine.”

She laughed but signed. She wasn't so sure about the devil part. As always, he was as handsome as one tonight. His hair was down again, and he sported a sexy five o'clock

shadow. He loved black, because again, he wore the color in a trendy pair of slacks and button-up shirt. On his left wrist was a gold Rolex that probably cost more than her first home.

“So when can you start?”

“Two weeks, but if you need me before then, I’m available on Tuesdays or Wednesdays, my days off.”

He nodded. “I’ll take you up on that. I have some friends staying with me here in town. A married couple. Both very dear to me. They received some very good news recently, and I’d like to do something special for them.”

Mia bit her lower lip, hoping she could pull off this job. Her culinary creativity extended beyond Italian, but she’d never been paid for any of her personal recipes. Her ex and kids had always told her she was an amazing cook. However, Mia suspected Nathan had been served meals by some of the finest chefs in the world, and her skills were by no means of that caliber.

Lord Jesus, she prayed, I hope I’m not making the biggest mistake of my life here.

“Mia?” he prompted.

“Sorry. Can you tell me anything about them so I might know their food preferences?”

He smiled. “Well, Julia is French. Don’t even consider ratatouille. Julia thinks hers is unparalleled, and she’d never forgive you if you showed her up. Dimitri is her husband

and my best friend. He's Lithuanian, and he's like me—he'll eat anything."

Mia grinned and clasped a hand to her mouth. She knew exactly what she'd be fixing them for dinner next Tuesday.

"What?" he prodded.

"My grandfather on my mother's side was Lithuanian. I think at least your friend Dimitri will be pleased with what I have in mind."

"Care to share?"

She shook her head. "No, I'll let it be a surprise. You'll need to give me directions to your home."

"I can send a limo for you on Tuesday."

"No thanks. I'll need my truck to shop for supplies. I need specific things, and I'd rather buy them myself. I'll invoice you. But if you have your phone handy, I'll give you my number so you can text me your address."

Once he'd entered her information in his cell, he stood and collected the contract. "I'll have you a copy of this when I see you next." He extended his hand.

Mia took it and realized in that simple handshake, she had just sealed the deal of her life. Whether it turned out to be a good deal or a deal with the devil, only time would tell.

4

It was a little past two in the afternoon when Mia pulled her old Ford diesel into the drive of Nathan's New Orleans home. She killed the engine and for several minutes, just stared at the pristine white antebellum house. Greek-style columns supported a full wrap around porch for the two-story structure. The landscaping was off the charts gorgeous. Dozens of hummingbirds were fighting for dominance around the hanging bougainvilleas and fuchsias lining the front porch eaves. It was a scene out of *Southern Living*. She smiled knowing the atmosphere alone would have her happy working here, provided Nathan behaved like a proper employer.

Nathan had failed to tell her where to enter, and she hadn't thought to ask. She supposed an employee entrance would be in the back, but she didn't want to go traipsing around the huge house or bother calling him. If he had a

problem with where she parked or entered, Mia felt certain he would set her straight.

Mia gathered the groceries she'd purchased for tonight from the backseat of her truck and trekked toward the front door. Hands full, she used her elbow to ring the bell. Several minutes later, the door opened, and she was a bit surprised to see it wasn't Nathan but a black woman in her late fifties, early sixties. She wore a wild dress, covered with a crazy floral pattern, over the top a white apron, and on her feet, white socks and tennis shoes.

Mia was staring, but she couldn't help it. She would have expected Nathan to have his staff outfitted like those at a presidential function.

"I'm Jazerra, and I tend this place. You must be the chef woman. Come on inside, chil'. I'll show ya to the kitchen."

Jazerra turned and took off down a wide, richly appointed foyer before Mia could even consider a reply. She stepped inside, used her foot to close the front door since her hands were laden with plastic sacks, and trotted after her.

When Mia arrived in the kitchen, her jaw dropped, and she sat the bags in her hands on the nearest counter top. The enormous space was a culinary orgasm, and she was breathing hard at the sight of it. She spotted appliances she couldn't even place a name to, and the working space exceeded that of Tavania's.

She was cooking for only three people tonight? Dear god, she had literally died and gone to chef heaven!

“Well, don’t just stand there with your mouth open catchin’ flies, chil’. Let me show ya around so you can find stuff.”

“I’m Mia, by the way,” she told Jazerra and smiled. The woman had a thick Cajun accent, tinged with a bit of Jamaican if she wasn’t mistaken, and a very no-nonsense demeanor. Mia didn’t know what to make of her.

The woman offered her a forced one in return and a thorough once over. “I’m seein’ now why Nathan hired ya. But I’d be keepin’ my distance from him if I was you. I love the man like a son, but he ain’t one ya’d wanna mess with.”

Mia grinned. “Oh yes, I figured that one out some time ago. No worries. I’m here for a job, nothing more.”

She nodded, still sizing her up. “Whatcha fixin’ to cook tonight?”

She suspected Jazerra would have never heard of the dish she had in mind. Very few people would have unless they were Slavic. “Kugelis.”

Her black eyes widened with intrigue, and a sly smile bloomed. “Smart girl, ya are. I’m guessin’ Nathan told you about Julia and Dimitri. Ya please them, you’re solid here. They mean the world to him. I hope you’re good at makin’ Kugelis. If so, Dimitri will be your friend for life. I’ve never made it to his likin’.”

Mia chuckled. This woman obviously knew much about Nathan and his friends. “How long have you worked for Mr. Davenport?”

“Many years. He’s a good man. Fussy at times but generous and loyal. If he takes a shine to ya, which I suspect he already has, your life will be good.”

Mia let out a sigh of relief at the woman’s confidence in their employer. Maybe this job would work out.

The next half hour, Jazerra gave her a tour of the kitchen, including the walk-in, butler pantry, and all other closets and crannies that held supplies relating to the food service of the household. The place was astounding, what she’d seen of it anyway. Sometime recently, it appeared to have been remodeled to match the period in which it was created and antiques from both the Georgian and Victorian era graced the areas beyond the kitchen she’d viewed so far.

Eventually, Jazerra left her to her work. She unpacked the groceries, then started on the bag of potatoes she’d bought for the Kugelis, peeling them, zipping them through a food processor, then dumping them bit by bit into a cheese clothe, squeezing until her hands ached in order to extract the potato water. It was the most necessary process to make Kugelis right.

Kugelis was a Lithuanian peasant dish made from potatoes and either ham, bacon, or both. The execution was a laborious process, but by 6:00 p.m., the time Nathan had texted her to request dinner, the Kugelis along with a farm-fresh salad and some artisan bread she’d made from scratch had been set out, awaiting her guests. She had a

bottle of Pinot Noir open, breathing on the far end of the table, ready to pour when Nathan and his friends arrived.

They were timely. It was mere minutes after six when she heard feminine laughter and male voices coming down the hallway, which led to the dining room. She'd snagged a new black chef's jacket from Tavana's to appear professional tonight. Mia always worked behind the scenes and rarely dealt with restaurant patrons face to face. She felt very nervous about this.

Unsure what to do, she folded her hands behind her back and tried for a confident expression. Her jaw went slack, when the most beautiful woman she'd ever seen entered the room. Her eyes were a vibrant color of green. She wore a shimmery copper-colored dress just a few shades darker than her hair, which was free, falling to the delicate arch of her lower back. She held the hand of a very tall, impressively built man, the second most gorgeous male she'd ever laid eyes on next to Nathan, who entered last.

Nathan must have picked up on her uneasiness. He smiled at her in a way that seemed to say, "Relax, you're in good company." He looked at the engaging couple staring at her and said, "Julia, Dimitri, this is Mia Peebles. Mia, Julia and Dimitri Chauvinski. You'll learn soon they're great people but nosy as hell. Be prepared to be drilled on your life tonight."

Mia did relax a bit, stepped forward, and shook their hands. "It's good to meet you both."

“Yum. Whatever you have prepared smells incredible,” Julia commented in a rich French accent as she headed to the table followed by her husband and Nathan. “Tell us what you’ve prepared, cher.”

She opened her mouth to do so, but before she could form words, Dimitri said, “Is that what I think it is?” His gaze riveted on the steaming casserole dish in the center of the table.

Mia smiled. “Yes. Kugelis.”

He looked up at her with the most amazing gray eyes she’d ever seen. They were the color of an uncirculated silver dollar, and like Nathan’s, they shimmered when light hit them. Julia’s beautiful green ones too. She found the anomaly odd but attributed it to some new sort of modern contact lenses.

“What’s Kugelis?” Nathan asked.

Julia said, “Only his most favorite dish in the entire world, which I have never been able to prepare to his standards. How could you not know that about him given all the time you two spent together over the last seventy years?”

Mia felt her eyes bug out. She must have heard her wrong, but when both Nathan and Dimitri shot Julia a glare filled with reproof, she didn’t know what to think. Had she meant to say seventeen?

Julia didn’t seem affected at all. She picked up a fork and dug it into the casserole, then extended the bite toward her husband who immediately indulged. He chewed for a

few moments, then his eyes fell back in his head. Once he swallowed, he said in a thick Slavic accent, “This is better than my mother’s, and with that, you do not understand the compliment I just gave you. Whatever Nathan is paying you, I will double it.”

“Oh no, you won’t,” his wife chided, grinning. “You have a woman to cook for you. Poor Nathan has no one to cook or care for him, and you know what I mean. Hopefully, lovely Mia will bring some comforts of home to his life that he’s needed for a very long time.”

That comment caught Mia off guard. Nathan needing someone to care for him? Crazy. The man could afford a hundred household staff members if he wanted.

“Of course you’re right, love.” He leaned over and gave his wife a chaste kiss, then glanced back at her. “You will teach her to make this?”

Mia chuckled. “Sure. It’s a family recipe, but I’m not hoarding it.”

Dimitri’s brows quirked. “Your family is of what origin?”

“Mostly Lithuanian on my mother’s side. Cherokee and African American on my father’s.”

“Ah, then we have something in common.” Dimitri grinned.

“Don’t just stand there, darling. Join us,” Julia said, gesturing toward an empty chair next to Nathan, who instantly stood and pulled it out for her.

She glanced amongst the three of them, taken aback by the offer. She was supposed to be serving them. “That’s very kind, but I have a lot to clean up in the kitchen. For dessert, I have raspberry lava cakes, and I’ll need to get them in the oven shortly.”

Nathan came around the empty chair and guided her into it. “You will always eat with me or my guests when in my home in a casual atmosphere. I failed to put that into the contract, but consider it a job requirement.”

Mia blinked at him and swallowed hard, not knowing what to think. Julia got up, disappeared through the door separating the kitchen and dining room. She returned with a plate and some utensils, sat them in front of her, then began dishing out the casserole onto everyone’s plates.

This was very uncomfortable for Mia. She was here for a job, not to eat or socialize with Nathan and his guests. She stood and extended her hand toward her. “Please, let me do that.”

“Nonsense, but if you’ll pour the wine, cher, that would be nice. None for me though.”

Mia immediately did so, her hands trembling slightly. Mia was not a server, and she did not possess the grace of one, but she managed to walk around the table and fill the glasses without spilling.

Julia took hold of the basket of bread Mia had prepared and passed it to her husband.

“Sit and tell us about yourself, Mia,” Julia said as she took a seat. She smiled sweetly at her.

Nathan laughed. “I told you to be prepared for an inquisition.”

Mia shared nervous a glance between the two and swallowed. She wanted to run back to the kitchen and hide in the walk-in, afraid she’d come across like the redneck woman she was to Nathan and his friends. Like Nathan, the elegant couple were obviously very worldly.

Nathan stood. “Please, Mia, relax. Eat with us. It’s important to me that you get to know my friends. My household is very informal. Ask Jazerra. In fact, she treats all of us like adopted kids.”

Julia let out a trill of laughter. “Nathan is correct. Jazerra mothers all of us. We love her dearly, though. She is family.”

Mia regained her seat and scoured her mind for a simple answer to Julia’s question. “Well, for the last four years, I worked for an Italian restaurant here in the city. It was my first job ever in a kitchen. I started as a prep chef and worked my way up to sous chef. I have no formal training though.”

“Well, I’ve always believed the culinary arts to be something one has a passion and talent for by nature. Oh my, this salad looks delicious.” Julia scooped some on her plate then handed the bowl to her husband who had just shoveled another bite of Kugelis into his mouth. “Take this. You need to eat something green.”

He frowned but obeyed her command. Mia smiled. A mere few minutes spent with this delightful couple and she could clearly see they were in love. “How long have you two been married?” she ventured, hoping they wouldn’t find the question too personal.

Nathan supplied the answer but not directly. “A long time. Their son, Dominic, is my lead attorney for Davenport Enterprises. Also my right-hand man of sorts. They have a daughter, Maria, who is grown, married with children, and lives near them in Tuscany.”

Mia was shocked. She wouldn’t have guessed Julia or Dimitri to be her age. Actually, they had to be older than she with a son who had already graduated with a law degree.

“Do you have any children, Mia?” Julia asked, then took a bite of salad.

“Three girls. All grown.”

Julia picked up her glass of water and sipped, studying her. “Well, darling, tell us about them. Are any of them in the culinary field?”

“No. Tiffany is twenty-three, Danielle is twenty-two, and Chelsie twenty-one. Dannie and Chelsie graduated college together last year. Long story on that one, but all of my children were born exactly eleven months apart.”

“Do they live here in New Orleans?” Julia took another bite of salad.

“No. They live in Springfield, Missouri. Tiffany works for a company, which sells computers. She fixes them, sets

up websites and other stuff for their clients.” She waved her hand dismissively. “She’s tried to explain all she does, but it’s over my head. Danielle is a graphic designer for a company that produces trendy young adult sportswear. She has a painting studio in her apartment, and her works are generally earthy, rural, and absolutely astounding. Two art galleries in Springfield, Missouri have some of them, and they’re selling quite well.

Then there’s my little brain child, Chelsie, my youngest who hopefully will be starting Harvard Medical School this fall if we can get the funding situated for her. She graduated valedictorian both in high school and college. She astounds me. She minored with a music degree. She has the voice of an angel and can play a guitar and fiddle like you wouldn’t believe. She’s been part of a country western band for the last five years, which plays all across the Ozarks.”

When she finished her dialogue, the three were staring at her raptly; and she blushed because anytime she talked about her kids, she prattled on until people’s eyes rolled back in their heads from boredom. She couldn’t help it. She was proud of all three girls and the wonderful direction each of their lives had taken.

“Oh my, they sound like amazing children. You obviously are very proud,” Julia said.

Mia thanked her, then turned her attention to her plate and started on the Kugelis. She was about to ask Julia more about her kids, but Nathan said, “A number of years ago,

I implemented a program through Davenport Enterprises which offers funding to all my employees and their families for furthering their education. I'd be happy to have my assistant fax or e-mail you the program information."

Mia stared at him. His expression was genuine, kind. He'd offered her so much already. She still couldn't wrap her mind around what he planned to pay her. But if this was a company benefit, for her daughter's sake, she wouldn't refuse. "Thank you. That would be great."

"This salad dressing is amazing. What is it?" Julia asked, stabbing another forkful of greens.

"A Parmesan basil vinaigrette. My own recipe."

"If you are inclined to share, I'd love to have it and of course, the Kugelis recipe."

"As I said, I'm no hoarder of my recipes." She smiled.

The chiming of a cell phone interrupted their conversation. It was coming from Dimitri. He half-stood and pulled the device out of the right pocket of his slacks. There was something akin to fear in his eyes when he looked at the screen.

"Is it Christian?" Julia demanded.

He nodded then spoke into the phone. "We're both here. What have you learned?"

Mia didn't know what to think. Fear and anticipation had taken up residence in the couple's faces. She glanced at Nathan. His expression mimicked theirs.

“Thank you, Christian. This is wonderful news. We’ll speak with you soon.”

Mia glanced back at Julia who now had her hand palming her mouth. Her eyes were wide and riveted on her husband.

This was personal. Mia took hold of her plate, ready to stand and leave the room to give them privacy. Before she could do so, Dimitri disconnected, then smiled brilliantly at his wife. “Your blood work is good. So far, a very healthy pregnancy.”

Mia knew her mouth was in fly-catching mode, but she couldn’t help it. For a couple to start a family all over again at their age seemed wild. However, as she thought about it, she realized that if God blessed her with a second chance at love, she might consider another baby. It was risky business for women having babies in their forties, but with the strides made in medicine, some women were having children in their fifties.

Nathan frowned at the two. “Why am I just now learning of this? You never mentioned anything about complications.”

Dimitri replied, “There were tests for which we needed answers and we didn’t want to worry you.”

Mia was curious but said nothing. This was none of her business.

Tears had formed in Julia’s eyes, which harbored a misty affection as she stood and looked at her husband.

“Excuse us,” Dimitri said.

When she and Nathan were alone, she faced him and said, “That’s awesome for them.”

“You have no idea. This is what brought them to New Orleans. There’s a fertility specialist here they’ve come to consult with. Apparently, he’s very good because Julia only received one round of treatments.”

“Your friends are very lovely, Nathan. I’ve really enjoyed tonight.”

“I’m glad to hear that. You made Dimitri happier at a table than I’ve seen him in years. I know you only have two days off a week, but would you consider preparing dinner for us tomorrow night?”

“Sure. Suggestions?”

“No. Let your creativity be unleashed.”

“All right.” She stood and began collecting empty plates. “I’d better go start dessert.”

He stood and picked up his own. “No need. After what they just learned, trust me they’ll have no further appetite tonight. At least for food.”

The glint of innuendo in his eyes made her giggle. She took the handful of plates into the kitchen and sat them in one bin of the three-vat sink. Nathan trailed her, placing the ones he’d gathered on top of hers.

“Can I help?” he asked.

“Yes. You can get your butt out of here and let me do my job and earn the obscene amount of money you’re paying me. Now get.” Mia didn’t care how informal his household

was, she wasn't going to let him help her do her job. She waved her hands at him in a shooing motion.

"You sure are bossy." He chuckled.

"Yes, I am. Best get used to it." She grinned, pivoted, then turned on the faucet, and began rinsing dishes.



Mia chose to take dinner more upscale the next night after Nathan called her shortly before ten this morning to tell her one more guest would be joining them. The added guest was Julia and Dimtri's doctor. Suspecting celebrations to be in order after the couple's wonderful news, she put together a special coursed meal with Filet Mignon as the entree. The courses each had a bit of a French flair, a tribute to Julia, the guest of honor.

Again, Nathan requested dinner at six. It was a quarter till, and Mia was ready to rock and roll except for the steaks, which she would fire after the salad course and once she had temps from all the guests.

The first course was a mushroom bisque, and she began ladling it minutes after she heard the doorbell ring. She had finished settling the steaming bowls on the chargers along the dining room table when she heard voices in the hallway.

She dashed across the space to stand at the door parting the kitchen and the elegant dining room. As much as she liked Nathan and his friends, maintaining professionalism seemed proper.

Julia and Dimitri entered first, gazing at one another like lovestruck teenagers. Mia smiled at the sweet sight the couple made until her gaze riveted on the man who filed in last. Her jaw dropped because he was easily Nathan's build and height, around 6'5" and sported a long blond ponytail, a pair of Wranglers, cowboy boots, and a T-shirt with some rock band logo. He had eyes the color of honey, and they were warm and inviting. The man rivaled Nathan and Dimitri in the looks department. If he was a doctor, she'd sure like to know what HMO he was a part of.

Julia spotted her and grinned. "Mia darling, thank you so much for cooking for us again tonight. Let me introduce you to a very special friend of ours." She turned to the blond man and said, "This is Mia Peebles, Nathan's new chef. Mia, this is Dr. Christian La Mond, the most amazing doctor in the whole wide world. Also a personal friend." She smiled at her husband with affection, and he returned one.

The doctor crossed the room and extended his hand toward her. "Pleasure to meet you, Mia. Julia and Dimitri told me you rocked their world last night with some dish Dimitri is partial to."

His accent was pure Texan, and it took a minute for Mia to reach out and shake his hand because he simply didn't fit the stereotype of what she'd always known doctors to be. None of these incredibly beautiful people filed into any stereotypes. The world she'd landed in seemed more and

more like some alternate reality. Not bad, just strange as heck. “Pleasure to meet you too, Dr. La Mond.”

“Call me Christian. I’m not one for formalities.” He offered her a warm smile.

No, he wasn’t, she thought, eyeing him again. He appeared about as down home as she. He was the hot male stuff inspiring many a country song. She noticed he wore no wedding ring but not surprising, she supposed. He looked early thirties. He too seemed to be sporting those weird contacts like Nathan and his friends. His gold eyes literally shimmered in the soft lighting of the room.

“What have you prepared for us tonight?” Nathan asked, his expression warm and curious.

“Mushroom bisque is the first course.” She gestured toward the table. “I’m doing a coursed meal tonight, so settle in and enjoy. The next course is a spring salad with a honey garlic balsamic vinaigrette. The entree is a filet with a porcini mushroom Marsala gravy Au Puv paired with some tiny new potatoes and sugar snap peas I found at a farmers’ market today. I need to get everyone’s preferred temperatures on the steaks please.”

Almost in tandem, they said, “Rare.”

Mia smiled. *That would be easy*. She headed back to the kitchen.

Running courses kept her busy with no time to socialize, even though Nathan and Julia had asked her several times to take a moment and join them. Finally, when she had the

chocolate soufflés served to all, Julia got up, grabbed her by the hand, and forced her to the table in a chair between Nathan and the doctor. “Sit and relax, cher. You deserve a break after that wonderful meal. Later, we must talk about recipes.”

“Of course.”

Nathan poured her a glass of wine and handed it to her. “This was an amazing dinner, Mia. Thank you.”

The warmth in his eyes was humbling. Her heart did a little flippity flop, not just for his praise, but because no man had ever looked at her the way he did right now with appreciation, admiration, and a couple other undecipherable emotions that were having a liquifying effect on her body.

She forced her attention to her wine glass and began to sip. She could not afford to let him get to her. She liked this job and needed it for Chelsie. All she had to do was stay strong. Eventually, he would grow bored and move on to some other woman who snagged his interest, and her job would be secure. At least she hoped.

“Julia was telling me you’re a Missouri girl,” Dr. La Mond said.

Mia turned in her seat to face him. “Yeah. Born and raised in southwest Missouri. I lived on a farm all my life until I moved to New Orleans. I can tell you’re from Texas. Where?”

He chuckled. “San Antonio. So how’d a gorgeous, midwestern, country girl like you end up in good ol’ New Orleans?”

Mia laughed softly. “That’s a long story, which I’m not even sure I have an answer to. After my divorce, I just got a wild hair and needed a radical change. A long time ago, I came here on vacation and just fell in love.”

“Gotcha. Sort of the same reason I settled here. Bet you like country music.” He grinned, then took a sip of wine.

“Oh, yeah. Actually, my youngest daughter plays in a country band all across the Ozarks. She’ll be giving it up for awhile though. She’ll be starting Harvard Medical School this fall.”

His eyes widened with interest, and he smiled. “Congratulations. That’s where I graduated. She’ll be set for life.”

“I know. I’m so proud of her.”

He was a very nice man, easy to talk to, and redneck like herself at least in a social environment. However, she was sure he had a professional side since he was a fertility specialist and a Harvard graduate. Obviously, he was a brilliant man.

“Do you like to line dance? I know some really awesome clubs here in the city. I’ve been trying to get Julia and Dimitri to go with me, but neither are partial to country music.”

Mia offered him an appreciative smile. She knew he was a bit younger than her, but from first impressions, he struck her as the sort of man she’d enjoy spending time with. “Sure, but it’s been years since I’ve danced. I might be a rusty partner.”

He chuckled. “No worries. I might be a little rusty myself, but if you’re willing to give it a shot, so am I.”

Their banter was interrupted by a growl directly behind her, a sound that reverberated with the viciousness of a wolf protecting a fresh kill. She spun in her chair and saw rage boiling in Nathan’s eyes, directed at the doctor. Terrified by his fury and that sound he’d made, she started to rise, bolting the first rational thought, but a hand clamped on her wrist. She looked to her right and saw Julia leaning across the table, smiling kindly at her.

“Let me help you with the dishes, my darling. The men are getting antsy to go play poker and smoke smelly cigars.” She began gathering plates.

What the heck just happened? Mia was overwhelmed and confused by the fierce looks on the men’s faces as they glanced between each other. Even Dimitri looked pissed. She grabbed Nathan and Dr. La Mond’s empty plates and rushed off to the kitchen, when what she really wanted to do was flee the nearest exit and never look back.

5

“What is wrong with you?” Dimitri demanded once the women were gone, his expression fiercely chastising. “She is human and has no idea we exist. You could have exposed us all.”

Nathan shared a rigid glance between his friend and the not-so-good doctor. It settled on La Mond. “You know she’s human, and she’s in my employ. Don’t even think to mess with her.”

There was no fear in his eyes, only curiosity. He stayed in his seat, dangerous really, because Nathan was close enough to rip his throat out, and he still toyed with the idea that had taken deep root when he started flirting with Mia.

Male vampires were very carnal by nature, driven by instincts bred into them from the onset of their evolution. Their need to procreate was so powerful, they would risk life and limb, even if that vampire merely suspected the female to be his lifemate. Maybe because it took so long

for most male vampires to find the woman—as Julia liked to say—designed for that vampire. Nathan had no solid answers where Mia was concerned, but he wasn't about to stand idly by and watch her start dating another vampire. Or anyone for that matter.

“I didn't realize she was more to you than an employee. If she could be your lifemate, I won't interfere. Julia told me Mia has no idea she's surrounded by our kind. I hire humans but not without them being aware of the nature of my practice because I find it unethical to do otherwise.”

The man's self-righteous statement further fueled Nathan ire, but before he could sport a reply, Dimitri said, “Enough. Nathan, Christian has a point. You are going to have to find a way to reveal the truth to Mia if she is yours. Do you have any plans in place?”

He slashed a hard glare Dimitri's way. “I will tell her in my own time and way.”

Dimitri shook his head, his expression disapproving. “Christian is correct. You must tell her and soon.”

Nathan was starting to get pissed by this moral exercise. “We've discussed why I can't,” he ground out. He knew Mia now, far better than she knew him because of those nights he'd spent with her when he'd had her under enchantment.

An enchanted human generally believed they were in the midst of a dream, which allowed their true nature and desires to come out, and that had certainly been the case with Mia. She'd allowed inhibitions she'd probably held

in check for years slide with him. Physical ones yes but emotional ones too. She'd shared things with him regarding her life, desires, her children that he suspected she'd shared with few people, if any.

Nathan grit his teeth and suppressed the urge to cringe as he considered her reaction should she ever discover those dreams to be reality. He had seriously screwed up with Mia. When she discovered the truth, it would take a miracle to make things right.

Dimitri sighed. "I understand. However, you've backed yourself into a corner, Nathan. You're always ten steps ahead of everyone and every deal you've ever made, but this human female has sucked every sensible cell out of your brain."

He snorted. "You've got room to talk. I clearly recall your stupidity when you discovered Julia was your lifemate. Your head was so far up your ass, you nearly got us both killed numerous times. It was a miracle some Nazi didn't plant a bullet in your addled brain."

Dimitri's face bloomed with a sheepish grin. "Yes, you are correct. As you like to say, I was a mess back then. Be that as it may, Julia knew what I was the moment we met, and I never enchanted her when I fed from her while she was still human. I pity you, my friend, if Mia is your lifemate. One day you'll have to reveal the truth to her, and I have no doubt it will be a very difficult day for both of you."

Dr. La Mond bit out a curse. “You enchanted her and fed from her, knowing she might be your lifemate?”

He glanced at the doctor, growing more angry because of the appalled look on his face. “This is none of your business, but no, I did not. I’m still not sure if she’s my lifemate.”

He muttered something and shook his head. “No, it’s not my business, but as a physician, I know a thing or two about lifemating. If she is yours, you’ve committed the unpardonable lifemate sin. If you tell her the truth and think for a second she or any woman would ever forgive you, you’re absolutely delusional.”

He knew that all too well and didn’t appreciate this morality peanut gallery. “Keep it up, you two. I’m pissed and itching to tear into someone.” His gaze slid toward the vampire of his choice, then back to Dimitri. “But at the moment, I won’t be picky.”

Dimitri gave him an arched look, then stood. “Pay him no mind, Christian. He has a very short fuse, but it tends to extinguish just as quickly.” He glanced between the two of them and said, “Enough of this. Nothing will be solved here tonight. Why don’t we take Julia’s suggestion and go play poker. I have a feeling as fueled as you are, Nathan, I might profit from your foul mood.” His gaze cut back to Christian. “Join us? I promise to keep him from attacking you.”

Christian snorted. “I don’t need your protection from some spoiled, immoral New York City boy.”

Nathan's ire was on a downhill trek, so he took the man's comment in stride. He had a better and more a friendly notion to stick it to both of these vampires; and by midnight, he'd succeeded, ridding the doctor and Dimitri each of several grand at Texas Hold'em.

The poker game had extended into the wee hours of the morning, and it was half past ten when Nathan entered the kitchen the next morning seeking a cup of coffee.

He found Jazerra loading plates into the dishwasher, so he went to the coffee maker and poured himself a cup.

"I just cleaned up your office. Ya obviously had a late night judging from the two empty scotch bottles I found." Reproof laced her tone.

"Dimitri and I were playing poker with that doctor of Julia's. What's your point?"

Jazerra was always poking her nose into his business when he lodged here in New Orleans. She'd been in his employ since she was a teenager. As she grew older, she'd become treacherously bossy and nosy. A human female thing, he supposed. He'd developed a great affection for her over the years, so he put up with it. To a point.

She shut the door of the dishwasher and approached him. Her expression was chiding, and he knew he was in for a lecture, the nature thereof had him clueless.

"I came down last night to get something to eat and ran into Julia, and that woman ya hired to cook for ya. I've seen

folk who knew they had a voodoo curse on them that didn't look as scared as that girl. Whadaya do?"

Meddling old woman. "Nothing," he lied, then took a sip of his coffee.

She harrumphed. "Nothing, hell. She's on the verge of figuring things out, I'd say, and when she does, she'll disappear like a puff of smoke. Best be running an AD for another chef, cuz the way you're actin', ya ain't gonna keep the truth from her much longer. Ya think I don't know what ya have in store for her? Shame on you."

Nathan knew he could lie, and they would play this game the rest of the morning, but he was in no mood. He just wanted to get her out of his hair. "You're wrong. I have nothing ill planned for her. I like and respect her. I would never use her. Happy?"

The last was a big, fat lie, but Jazerra didn't need to know that. He had a pretty good idea the thoughts rolling around in her head regarding Mia, but he didn't care. It was none of her business. In all the time he'd known her, he'd never dipped into the woman's mind. There was no need. She was forever giving him a piece of it.

"Not at all. Ya know I've always had a great affection for your spoiled ass, and I know what ya need to do to survive, but the way I'm seeing it, having this woman here with what's going on in your head ain't no different than buying and lotting a cow for slaughter. I saw the marks on her neck. Eventually, the chil' is going to die by your hand

or turn if that's what's in your mind. Either way, she don't deserve what ya got planned for her. Never in my life have I seen ya do anything like this, and it has me scared."

Her speech had both fear and fury boiling inside of him. Anger for Jazerra's meddling but fear because on one level, he suspected she could be right. He couldn't be with Mia unless she turned vampire. If she was his, the day would come when that issue would have to be presented to Mia. He clenched his jaw, unable to imagine her reaction to both what he was, what he'd done, and what she'd have to do to be with him.

"You're wrong. I would never hurt her, Jazerra, and I would never turn her against her will." That statement he meant with all his heart.

She planted her hands on her hips and glared at him. "Hope not 'cause it would ruin both of your lives. Ya can be selfish no doubt, but ya ain't cruel. If ya really care about her and keep using her, it will destroy your soul."

He knew that better than Jazerra. Since the night he'd signed that contract with Mia, he'd honored it and had not fed from her again or attempted to mine her thoughts, and it had been the singularly hardest thing he'd ever done in his life. He ached to taste her again, kiss her, to know what she thought of him now that they'd spent personal time together.

His ethics could get a little slippery at times, but when he signed a contract, he always abided by its perimeters.

The woman was smart. She'd known exactly what to put in that addendum to keep him in check.

“One thing I know for certain is I would never hurt her. I would end my own life before that happened. You have no idea the toll it's taken on me to stay away from her since I first fed from her, but I have. You also know our kind can find a lifemate within the human population and how driven we are when we suspect we have. I'm just examining possibilities at this point. I have no solid conclusions.”

Jazerra folded her arms across her chest, the frown on her face creasing into a scowl. “Well, that's even worse than I thought. Say ya go to courtin' her and she does end up fallin' for ya? Whatcha think's gonna happen when she finds out she ain't in love with a human man?”

Nathan faced the counter and sipped his coffee, afraid what his features might reveal. He was afraid period because he knew Jazerra was right. So was Dimitri about the fact he'd backed himself into a corner.

Once Mia's two weeks ended at her restaurant, he would have her in his life every day. Initially, that plan sounded like a good one, but he realized its probable outcome would most likely blow up in his face. If he told her now what he was, she *would* disappear like a puff of smoke. The same outcome would occur if something happened between them, only worse once he revealed what he was, because she'd feel lied to and betrayed.

“Ya want me to fix ya some breakfast?” Her tone had taken on concern.

Nathan faced her. She looked worried. “No, I’m not hungry.” He reached for the coffee pot and refilled his cup. “I have some work I need to tend to. I’ll be in my office.”

“Ya got some thinking to tend to as well, Nathan, but I’m done lecturin’ ya. If ya change your mind about breakfast, let me know.” Jazerra turned and headed out of the kitchen.

Nathan had just finished talking with Dominic about a real estate opportunity adjacent to the sin district of Atlantic City. If he could attain the adjoining properties needed for a reasonable amount, he intended to build a casino/hotel/pleasure palace that would rival any in Monte Carlo or worldwide.

He was hanging up the phone when a knock sounded at his door. He sniffed. “Come in, Julia.”

She opened the door balancing a plate and a glass of iced tea. “I brought you some lunch, cher. Jazerra told me you skipped breakfast.”

Nathan noticed her expression to be very sober as she crossed the room and sat her offerings on his desk. “What’s wrong? Is everything okay with the baby?”

“Yes. I’m fine. We’re fine.” She sat down and crossed her legs. “You however are not. Until last night, I did not realize how strong your feelings were for Mia. Nathan, Mia is far more than an intrigue to you. Dimitri told me you all but admitted to him and Christian that she is your lifemate.”

Nathan grit his teeth, sick and tired of the women in this household lecturing him about his actions regarding Mia. Aside from Dimitri, Julia, and Jazerra, he wouldn't have allowed anyone to lecture him about any matter, personal or business. In general, he gave orders and advice to everyone in his life, but he wasn't too proud to listen to the advice of those in his private, personal circle. Especially now with Mia. He was confused and clueless as hell where she was concerned. Desperate even to discover if she was his.

Desperation was an emotion Nathan hadn't experienced in decades, and he loathed to be a captive of it presently. Maybe talking to Julia would supply him some relief. "You know she intrigues me. How could you think I wouldn't be furious with that doctor of yours for trying to seduce her?"

Julia pursed her lips and gave him one of her chiding motherly looks. "Christian was not trying to seduce her. Perhaps he finds her attractive and wishes for some feminine company. You consort with human females all the time on a casual basis. All unlife-mated vampires do. Christian and Mia have similar backgrounds. Be that as it may, he is an ethical vampire. I hate to say this, Nathan, but he would never compromise her the way you did."

Rage began to hum along his nerve endings. It was all he could do to hold a civil tongue, but he did because she was absolutely right. "And you know damned good and well why I did."

Julia nodded sagely. “Indeed. I am not judging you, cher. I only wish to help. You know Dimitri and I will both do whatever we can to make her feel welcome and happy here. However, you must remember, she is human and does not understand the possessive nature of a vampire male.”

He frowned at the woman, then picked up the sandwich she’d brought him and took a bite. He knew she referred to that scene with Dr. La Mond. When his mouth was clear he said, “Honestly, Julia, I have no idea where things stand with Mia. Yes, I’m attracted to her, but I have no clue whether she could be my lifemate at this point.”

She reached across his desk and patted his hand. “I understand how confused you must feel, my darling. I’m sure you know as well as I do when our males suspect a human to be their lifemate, the vampire almost always recognizes the signs before the human female.”

His eyes rounded because he didn’t know there were specific ways to tell. “How?”

“Well, of course mind speaking over long distances, but she is not vampire, so that method is out.

He knew that. “What else?”

“The sharing of emotions and feelings when you feed from that person. It does not matter if one is still human. If the bond is real, the vampire will feel it. So will the human because of the physic connection during the act of feeding, although the human most likely will not recognize the significance. I remember my own experience with Dimitri

well. I did not understand until I turned. All I knew at the time was I loved him. Trust me, if you have had that same experience with Mia, you have your answer.”

Now that he had not known. A vampire had too much respect for his or her mate to discuss sexual matters. Of course he knew feeding from one’s lifemate was sexual, but he and Dimitri had never spoken about intimate issues between him and his wife. It was taboo.

He thought back to those nights he’d fed from Mia and clearly recalled every delicious detail, her thoughts, his own, their combined lusts, swirling through his gut like twin snakes.

“Oh my god!” He bolted to his feet. No wonder she’d been like a drug to him. He hadn’t realized until this moment, part of what had been so electric between them, had been him feeling her passion skating along the same circuits sparking his own.

When he looked back at Julia, she wore a brilliant smile. “I guess you have your answer, no?”

Yes, he did. Now what he was going to do about it presented a host of questions for which he had no answers.

In the background, he heard the doorbell ring but paid it no mind. Jazerra would get it.

“Be careful, Nathan. Dimitri and I discussed this at length last night. Our situation when I was still human vastly differed from what you face with Mia. I knew instantly you and Dimitri were vampire that day the two of

you saved Anne Marie's and my life. I had no fear because you were American soldiers. Mostly, because the moment I laid eyes on Dimitri, I was in love. Unfortunately, Mia is not in love with you yet, from what I can tell. Also, she is a much more modern woman than I; and it would be my guess she will not only have great difficulties believing what you are, but fear the truth no matter how much she might grow to care for you. And she will, trust me. You know I believe lifemating to be God ordained. She will be yours eventually."

Nathan wished he had Julia's faith in God, but his own had expired over 170 years ago after Isabella stole his soul. She'd been in complete control over him as her fledgling. The sick, horrible things he'd done to please her had condemned his own to hell. At least he saw it that way. Dimitri too had been her fledgling and had hunted and killed humans with her, but Julia's love had restored his soul. Dimitri and his wife believed in eternal redemption. Forgiveness of sins. Presently, he wasn't so inclined.

His musings were cut short when the door to his office flew open. Never had the term "speak of the devil" been more appropriate when the female one he'd been thinking about waltzed inside. His gut knotted with fear and disgust.

"There you are, *Caro*," Isabella crooned, then glanced at Julia, whose eyes had rounded with terror. "Ah, Julia, a pleasure to see you again. How is Dimitri and little Dominic? Well, he is no longer little I'm sure but all

grown-up and I bet as deliciously handsome as his father. I can't wait to see the man he's become."

A vampire warning growl rumbled in Julia's throat and echoed menacingly. "You will never lay eyes on my son again. You will have to go through me first."

"What the hell are you doing here, Isabella?" Nathan growled, furious that she'd somehow tracked him down.

She ignored him and continued to glare at Julia. Loathing sparked between the two women. On Isabella's behalf, because Julia had won a war with her many years ago.

Isabella kidnapped Dominic when he was six years old. After WWII, he and Dimitri settled in New York and became business partners in various real estate ventures. In 1953, Isabella ran into Dimitri and Julia one night at a restaurant in the city. From there, she made it her mission to destroy the couple's lifemate bond, using Dominic as leverage to get Dimitri to leave Julia and become her lover and hunting partner again.

Isabella underestimated the strength of the lifemate union between vampires. He'd been with Dimitri and Julia that day they'd rescued Dominic. Together, they had fought Isabella and won. A true miracle, because Isabella was a born vampire, very old and very skilled telekinetically. Neither were a match for her, but God must have been on their side that day. Dimitri landed a near-kill bite in Isabella's neck. After that, the couple moved to Italy to hide from Isabella.

“That can easily be arranged. But don’t worry, *Cara*. I have no interest in your son or husband.”

Isabella’s flat onyx gaze slid to Nathan, telling both where her interests did lie. Her eyes were dead, without life. Feral vampires lost the brilliance, which made their kind’s eyes shimmer in soft lighting, an evolutionary adaptation for normal vampires in order to beguile human prey. Nathan had no idea why, but he suspected it had to do with the fact ferals weren’t interested in seducing their prey and calming them in order to feed. They thrived on the horror and pain the human experienced during the act and more times than not killed them, just out of pure evil pleasure.

Jazerra walked into the room, her features riddled with fury, and she rubbed some handprints on her neck that were starting to darken. “I tried to keep her out. I can see she’s an evil one of your kind, obviously a worshiper of the Dark One.”

He pinned Isabella with a look that promised retribution as he rounded his desk to face off with her and protect Julia and Jazerra with his life if necessary. “No, Jazerra. Trust me, she’s far worse than that. Satan worships her.”

Isabella laughed, the sound like icicles shattering on concrete and filled his soul with a frigid fear for the twisted reason he knew brought her here today. “Ah, I am glad to see you still possess that sense of humor once so beguiling to me. You always could amuse me, Nathan.”

Nathan had not been joking. However, he knew amusement was the only thing she wanted from any man, human, or vampire. “What do you want, Isabella?”

How in the hell had the witch found him? He’d covered his tracks well. No one knew he owned this home aside from Dimitri and his family because technically, he didn’t. This was his safe house, and he’d used it for many years. He’d deeded it to Jazerra’s mother over a century ago, and it was now in her name.

She snorted delicately. “You know exactly why I’m here. I want an answer to my proposal. And yes is the only reply I will accept. Time is abundant for our kind. Did you really think you could hide from me indefinitely, and I would go away? You owe me your life, Nathan. You would be a pile of dust in a grave had I not made you vampire.”

Nathan almost wished he were, since all of this had started with Isabella. He remained silent for a few moments, calculating a response. Caution was warranted, but he refused to kowtow to her. “I’m a very busy man, Isabella. I have business in New Orleans and no time for your nonsense.”

She tossed a section of her waist-length black hair over her shoulder, walked over to one of the leather chairs in front of his desk, and flounced down. She wore a white pant suit, the top sleeveless and obviously couture. Nathan knew her love of money, excess, and power, and he was now

the source from which she wanted to extract it. The notion made him physically ill.

“I am very angry with you, *Caro*. Hunting you down has not been easy these last few months, then having to traipse halfway across this country to reach you has also been very inconvenient.” Her lips, painted bright red, twisted into a pout.

He had several more inconveniences coming her way. “Julia, go.”

She looked a bit hesitant but obeyed, taking Jazerra with her.

“What have you decided regarding my proposal, Nathan?”

There were so many nasty phrases dancing on the tip of his tongue primed to be unleashed on the bitch, but he held them in check. Isabella was far stronger mentally than him, and if she took the notion to end his life, she could do so before the next beat of his heart. Nevertheless, Nathan refused to sell his soul to this succubus. “I’m not going to marry you, Isabella. Marriage for vampires is reserved for lifemates.”

“You know I don’t want you as my lifemate. I just want the lifestyle and prestige that comes from being the wife of Nathan Davenport. What you’ve accomplished with this life I gave you is astounding. I don’t even care about the sex, *Caro*, although if memory serves me correctly, it would be a delightful benefit.”

“Yeah, you made it abundantly clear in 1856 that you had no interest in me as a lifemate when you abandoned my ass. As far as sex, I’d sooner lose my manhood than share a bed with you again.”

“Well, that was starch, but fine. It will be a marriage of convenience only then.” She waved a hand dismissively. “Feel free to take any sexual partners you desire, and I will do the same.”

Nathan just shook his head and glared at her. He knew there was no reasoning with a feral, but somehow, he had to try and make her understand no threat in the world would convince him to marry her. And he had a feeling she had a litany of them lined up. “Look, Isabella, I understand you’re on the hunt for a new financial source to service your needs because you’ve never worked for a dollar in your life. I’ve spoken to you a number of times through the years, and I know you’ve always married humans to achieve what you want, and that’s worked for you. Try to think rationally for a moment. You can easily manipulate a human, but you’ll never manipulate me or any other mature vampire male. The war that would exist between us will be as ugly for you as me.”

“Be sensible, *Caro*. You know I can easily manipulate you. I will always be able to control your mind and know your thoughts. I made you. No made vampire can escape the sire bond.”

Nathan hated to admit it, but she spoke the truth. She could easily force him to do her bidding. He suspected she refrained because she wanted to play with him. If he had no will of his own, he would be no fun for her.

He racked his brain for another tact. "Save yourself a headache, Isabella. Go get a *Fortune 500* magazine, pick out some human billionaire's life to make a living hell out of. You're a beautiful woman. I know your wiles well. Before the month is out, you could snag some attractive, rich human who would worship at your feet. That will never happen with me because I know intimately the blackness of your heart."

She chuckled darkly and shot him a sultry look from beneath her thick lashes. "Only you, *mi amor*, could weave insults and compliments so beautifully." She frowned. "Nathan, I am tired of human benefactors. They are so boring, and their sexual stamina is dreary."

"Don't give me that crap, Isabella. You collect fledglings like postage stamps. You've never relied on a human for your carnal needs."

She lifted her hand and studied her long nails, painted the color of her lips, which were twisted into a pout. "True, but fledglings are dull too. They have no mind of their own. You however have a brilliant one, and although I realize our union would be fraught with chaos, the notion rather excites me."

Nathan pressed his palms against his temples. Dear god, the woman's insanity knew no boundaries. He also knew when Isabella wanted something, she would stop at nothing to get it. Reasoning was no longer on the table. "I'm not marrying you, Isabella. Take your best shots at me with whatever revenge you have in mind. I'll counter and win. You have nothing to hold over my head, and if you think to use Julia and Dimitri or their children, think again. I didn't rise to the level of power I possess today by leaving loose strings. I have their lives and welfare covered."

Fury danced in her dead eyes as she stood and covered the distance between them. "Everyone has weaknesses, Nathan. When I discover yours, I *will* get what I want."

Nathan watched her stalk out of his office. Minutes later, Dimitri arrived, Julia at his heels, both of their expressions grave.

"What happened?" Dimitri demanded.

"What always happens with Isabella. Threats and ultimatums. She's not going away anytime soon, but I'm not giving in either."

"Of course. You can't. Now more than ever since you've found your lifemate," Julia said.

Scenting Isabella gone and unable to penetrate his thoughts, he allowed Mia back into his. Through their encounter, he'd felt Isabella in his head digging like a coal miner, and he loathed the fact she had the power to do it.

Isabella was correct. He did have a weakness. Mia. God have mercy should Isabella discover that fact. Currently, Julia and Dimitri were unprotected too, but he intended to remedy that fact for all three of them immediately.

6

The doorbell wrangled Mia from a deep sleep. She bolted upright in bed and looked around, blinking, trying to get her bearings. She glanced at her alarm clock, eyes widening with shock. It was nearly eleven. Good gravy! She'd slept the morning away.

Mia hopped out of bed, grabbed her robe off the end, and jogged to her front door while slipping it on. Her caller was Julia. Mia's mouth gaped, and she had no ready reply.

"Hello, my darling. I've woke you. I'm so sorry." She was frowning, apology claiming her beautiful features.

Mia swept a hand across her head and winced, confident her thick curls looked like a rat's nest.

What in the world was Julia doing here?

"It's okay." Mia forced a pleasant smile and stifled a yawn. "I needed to be roused out of bed. Come on in. How the heck did you figure out where I live?"

She stepped inside and glanced around. “Well, that took some investigating; but as I’m sure you know, the Internet can service one with most any information desired.”

Mia nodded and smiled at her. “So what brings you by?”

“I was in the mood to shop today and hoped to find a girlfriend to share the adventure with. I suspect you have to work later, but would you have a couple hours to spare?”

Her expression was sweet and earnest. She’d only spent two evenings with the woman, but already, she’d developed a great affection for her. However, socializing with Julia when she basically held a service roll with her made Mia a little uneasy. “I don’t have a problem with that, but Nathan might.”

She waved her hand in a cavalier way, the diamonds in the many rings she wore glittered from the late morning light filtering through her living room windows. “Nathan has no say with whom I socialize. Other than Nathan and Christian, I have no friends in this city. However, I understand if you are busy.”

Mia felt hard-pressed to tell her no, because she was Nathan’s guest. Besides, so far, Nathan hadn’t treated her like an average employee. He didn’t regard Jazerra that way either, based on his comments. “Okay. Sounds fun, but I have to be at work by three. What are you on the hunt for?” She took a seat on the couch and gestured for Julia to join her.

As Julia sat, her face wreathed with an ear-to-ear grin. “Baby things. I know it’s early for such shopping. I’m only four weeks pregnant, but I can’t help myself. I’m so thrilled.”

Mia grinned back at her, understanding her excitement. When she’d learned she was pregnant with Tiffany, she’d been exactly the same way. The nursery had been complete by the time she was five months along. “I’d love to, but you’re going to have to give me a few to get ready.”

“Take your time.” She glanced around her place again. “You’ve made a very homey atmosphere here. It’s lovely.”

She appreciated the compliment, but she suspected her space like skid row compared to her and Dimitri’s home. The serious bling Julia always wore on her hands, wrists, and ears had flawless carats written all over them. And her wardrobe, dear lord, always so elegant, like the teal dress she wore today made from some material that shimmered almost as brightly as her jewels.

“Thank you,” Mia finally said.

Mia’s furnishings were modest but feminine and eclectic. Shabby chic would probably be the best description. The walls she’d recently painted were a vibrant cherry red, the trim white. There were lots of colorful accent points, wicker chairs, throw pillows, her grandma’s quilts, various bric-a-brac. Several of Danielle’s beautiful landscape paintings graced her walls, plus numerous books and family photos littered tables and shelves. Her plant collection abounded.

An array of flowering ones, herbs, and others were scattered about on tables and stands.

“I have a feeling you are a woman who must have her coffee in the morning. If you’ll show me to your kitchen, I’ll make us some while you ready yourself.”

Mia rolled her eyes and stood, stifling a yawn with her fingers. “You got that right.”

Julia donned a pair of couture sunglasses with very dark tinting as they headed out of her apartment building. Mia prepared to offer to drive until she saw the black limo parked in front of her building. *Had to be Nathan’s*, she thought, shaking her head. Well, she’d never been in one before. She supposed it would be an experience. She wasn’t worried about transportation home. One of her coworkers would give her ride after work.

When she crawled into the back, the space and luxury astounded her. The seats were a buttery black leather and the carpet a rich tan color. There was actually a minibar! *Party on*, she thought, grinning. “This thing is a trip.”

Julia giggled. “Nathan can be an extravagant man, but deep down, he is rather simple and has a dear, kind heart. I’ve known him for a very long time. I assure you he can be trusted.”

Mia slid her a shrewd look. *So her real mission today was damage control*. Night before last in Nathan’s kitchen, she’d cornered Julia on that incident between Nathan and Dr. La Mond. That ungodly growl Nathan produced had

scared the crap out of her. Julia came up with some comical, lame excuse about Nathan having a cold recently. She'd developed no better explanations herself. Whatever the case, Mia knew Nathan's attitude stemmed from jealousy. Dr. La Mond had asked her out, and Nathan had been angry. They were going to have to have a talk. Who she dated was none of Nathan's business.

"So what's this really about, Julia?"

She appeared chagrined but had enough respect for her to shoot straight. "Nathan really admires you. So do I and Dimitri. I know you'll be happy working for him, my darling."

The limo began to move. Julia obviously wanted to make sure Nathan wasn't going to lose her. That irritated her. "Nathan put you up to this, didn't he?"

"No, cher. He has no idea I came here today. I took it upon myself because, well..." She paused there, looking a bit misty. "I like you. You're kind, honest, open, and I suspect fun to be around. I really could use a girlfriend right now."

Mia understood even though she knew her motives were dual. Julia embarked on a beautiful life experience which a woman couldn't help but want to share with another woman. Plus she was so far away from home and any friends or family in Italy. "Well, I'm happy to be your gal pal for as long as you're here, going through whatever you have to go through with your doctor."

"Thank you, Mia. That means a great deal to me."

“For the record, I’m not going anywhere. I won’t lie. Nathan freaked me out the other night, but it was ridiculous for him to feel jealous. I’ve been straight with him from the beginning. I’m an employee. Nothing more. And I aim to keep it that way.”

“Of course. I completely understand. However, the fact you felt it necessary to say that leads me to believe you have sensed some sort of attraction between the two of you, no?”

Her look was sly and frustrated Mia. She rolled her eyes and flopped back into her seat. “I’ve got blood running through my veins, Julia. Of course I find him attractive, but I’m not stupid. I’m sure on many levels, he’s a great guy. He’s been nothing but kind to me. I just have no interest in being his flavor of the month. We have zero in common. And I’m a long haul girl. I don’t do casual hookups.”

“Believe it or not, darling, neither does Nathan. Of course he dates, but he has never had a serious relationship with any woman.”

If Julia thought that statement one to bolster her confidence in Nathan, she’d just bombed big time. “Great. He’s what, thirty-five, maybe a little older? If he’s never had a serious relationship, it’s obvious he has some commitment issues.”

“He has no commitment issues, I assure you. He longs to find his lifemate, and he will not settle for anything less.”

Mia realized Julia loved Nathan, and being his friend, she couldn’t see him in the clear light of the dating arena.

“Well, I’m not his lifemate. Strange term. I guess it must be a French or European. Whatever. I don’t know where all this is coming from on your part, but my convictions are solid. Nathan wouldn’t mean to intentionally hurt me, but dating a man like Nathan is a high risk proposition, and I’m pretty sure I’d wind up on the losing end. Sorry. I just can’t do it because I know full well what it feels like to be used and have your heart stomped into the dust.”

“You speak of your ex-husband?”

“Yeah,” was all she said because she wasn’t about to open that nasty can of worms. She and Daniel had been high school sweethearts, marrying right after graduation when they were both still seventeen. Their life had been simple yet hard running his father’s dairy and cattle farm and raising three girls when they had been kids themselves. She’d cried herself to sleep many nights over the poverty, which had plagued them for so many years. By the time the girls were in high school, financially, things were much better and their marriage too, or so she’d thought until that day she arrived home from work early and discovered him in their bed with Tiffany’s best friend, Reanna.

That summer, Daniel totaled their truck. His arm and several ribs had been broken, and he couldn’t milk. Mia as well as her girls had other jobs. Tiffany suggested they hire Reanna because she’d been on the hunt for summer employment. Apparently, the girl had been on the hunt for more than work. Mia still couldn’t wrap her mind around

how it had happened. She'd asked few questions. It simply had been too sick, and she hadn't wanted to know.

The betrayal had sliced her soul into ribbons, but what it had done to her girls, especially Tiffany, had been catastrophic. Chelsie and Danielle eventually forgave their father, who ended up marrying Reanna, but Tiffany still to this day hadn't forgiven him and refused to see or talk to him.

She'd forgiven Daniel too because as a Christian, she had no choice, but a part of her still resented him for the train wreck he'd made of their children's lives.

"Whatever happened to you, Mia, must have been awful. You appear crushed, cher. If you ever feel inclined to share your past with me, I will listen and not judge. However, take it from a blissful happy woman who has been married for many years. Love does not always fall within logical perimeters. True soul mates might have oodles of things in common or nothing at all. I had very little in common with Dimitri when we met, yet once we fell in love, we made our own world and learned to accept each other for who we each were. You are too beautiful of a person not to find that yourself someday."

"No offense, but I think your pregnancy hormones have sucked the sense out of your brain. I don't believe in soul mates. At one point, I did. Now I'm at a place in life where logic needs to prevail. If I find someone great. If not, I'm going to look forward to the day I become a grandma."

Julia appeared a bit troubled by the comment yet said nothing.

Settling down with someone would be awesome if she could find a faithful man who shared her value system. She'd thought about it, but dating hadn't been a priority. Work and her children had kept her far too busy to seek a relationship over the last five years. Putting three girls through college at the same time had saddled her with seventy plus hour work weeks, at least when Joe had the hours to give her. Working for Nathan would give her much more free time. If God brought a man into her life, fine. She wasn't going to go beat bushes for one.

Maybe she wouldn't have to. She thought of Dr. La Mond. He was gorgeous, plus they had common backgrounds. "Julia? Just out of curiosity, how old is Dr. La Mond?"

Her brows knit, and after a long pause, Julia replied, "Mid to late thirties, I believe. Why?"

Mia would have guessed him a bit younger but probably because of his casual dress that night. "I know you think highly of Dr. La Mond, and you said he was a friend. By any chance, would you know anything about his religious beliefs?" For Mia, spirituality had to be commonality number one.

Julia's eyes widened with what Mia could only describe as horror.

"What? He's not married, is he?"

Julia swallowed hard. “No. I’ve had a few conversations with him over the years regarding his beliefs. He’s not a particularly religious person, but he certainly believes in God.”

Mia smiled. Maybe she would take him up on his offer to go out dancing, if they should ever meet again. If it was meant to be, then they would. She glanced back at Julia, who was now chewing on her lower lip. “Something wrong?”

“No. Christian is a wonderful man. So is Nathan. Just keep on open mind, my darling. Life is full of surprises and miracles.”

Mia didn’t reply, although she agreed this job was a surprise, but as to a miracles? That remained to be seen. For reasons Mia felt certain Julia wouldn’t share, she seemed to be pressing her Nathan’s direction. She didn’t like it. She’d meant it when she’d told Julia they had zero in common. She was attracted to him, but she wasn’t crazy enough to throw caution to the wind and delve into a relationship that had little chance of success.

Moments later, Mia felt the limo come to a halt. She glanced out the heavily tinted windows noticing they were in the parking lot of the Canal Place Mall. Mia knew it to be a trendy retail center and would probably have all the baby delights Julia ached to discover. Indeed it had. Julia nearly filled the trunk of the limo in the very short time they’d shopped.

After their shopping expedition, the limo driver opened the door for her and Julia. Mia started to climb in but paused when she glanced to her left and noticed three men in dark-blue suits getting into an SUV several parking spots over. She recognized them, because earlier, all three had been hovering outside two of the stores she and Julia shopped. She'd found it curious but chalked it up to mall security. No longer. Now it was just plain creepy.

When they settled inside and the limo started moving, she looked through the back window. Her heart lurched in her chest when she noticed the same SUV following them.

"Don't be alarmed, Mia. Those men are security, hired by Nathan to follow us. It's standard procedure with him."

"For what?" She knew her eyes were probably round as saucers.

"Mia, a man like Nathan has many reasons for security, and he provides it for all his friends and close employees. You'll have to accept this as a part of life while working for Nathan."

Mia scowled out the back window at their tail. She didn't like that news one bit. She relished her privacy, because all her life, it had come at a premium. Heck, going to the bathroom without a kid running inside or pounding on the door had been something she'd once considered a luxury.

"I can see this troubles you. Trust me, they won't be intrusive. Just close enough to make sure we aren't bothered."

Mia could tell by her tone and expression she sought to put her at ease. Obviously, Julia felt no discomfort over being guarded, so she said nothing more. A man like Nathan probably had enemies and those closest to him, like Julia, could certainly become pawns. However, Mia knew how to take care of herself. She knew how to hunt, fish and certainly knew how to shoot and protect herself with a gun or knife. If Nathan thought to have his security follow her on her own time, she'd set him straight soon enough. She had no need of a body guard.

As the limo pulled up to the curb of Tavana's, Julia said, "Today was very nice. Thank you."

"Anytime, girl." She meant it. Julia was one of those rare people with a precious heart anyone would be hard-pressed not to take a shine to. She leaned forward, gave her a quick hug, then exited the limo to start her work night.



"I think we're going to have great success with the team I put together, Nathan."

Nathan nodded and stared at Dominic's image on one of the screens bolted to the ceiling in front of his desk. They'd been conferencing about a team of top notch investigators and assassins Dominic secured to hunt down Isabella. Nathan knew she had a lair somewhere in the New Orleans area, and he hoped these men Dominic hired could track her down. Once he found her, she'd be making no more

surprise appearances to wield threats in his life or any other unfortunate vampire she'd created.

"You said two of the men were vampires. Not to question your judgment, but you're certain they have no ties to Isabella?" The human men Dominic hired, Nathan had no concerns with. Dominic would have penetrated their thoughts to discover whether they could be trusted to assassinate a feral female vampire. He couldn't do that with the two of their kind. A vampire could only read the thoughts of another if they were blood bonded or lifemates.

"Positive. They're both born vampires. I had them thoroughly researched. Both are ex-military and have been involved in a number of high security operations. They've located and brought down some of the worse terrorists, drug lords, and international criminals in the world."

"Good." *Dominic was always thorough*, Nathan thought as he paced behind his desk. He was lucky to have him. Dimitri had been disappointed when Dominic chose to leave Chauvenski International to work for him in the states ten years ago, but he'd accepted his son's choice. Dominic's position with Davenport Enterprises was singularly unique and gave him the opportunity to coordinate missions with a nature such as this one, because Nathan's status had garnered him many enemies. However, Nathan had never attempted to employ such violent measures in the past because most of his enemies were human and a threat to

his finances or reputation, not his life or the lives of those he loved.

Generally, Dominic's job was to dig up dirt on a person threatening Nathan's business or holdings. Blackmail was the boy's specialty, and he enjoyed it, loved living on the edge. Nathan knew this work to be a good distraction for his un-lifemated status, just as his own had always been until recently.

"The flight should be arriving shortly after 2:00 p.m.. I've arranged for you to conference with them at the hotel at three so you can brief them on anything I might not have covered."

Nathan glanced back at the screen and nodded. A knock sounded at his office door. He sniffed. "Your parents have just arrived. Come in," he called out.

"I'm talking to Dominic," he told them as they entered.

Julia trotted toward him, turned, and beamed up at the screen. "How are you, my darling? You look a little peaked. Have you been getting enough rest? Feeding and eating properly?"

Dominic leaned back in his chair and raked a hand through his spiky black hair as his green eyes, replica's of his mother's, rolled upward. "Mom, please, you're embarrassing me."

All three of them started laughing. Dominic was seventy-two years old, but Nathan knew that in Julia's eyes, he was still her little boy.

Julia and Dimitri spoke to him for several more minutes. Once he'd disconnected the call, the couple took a seat in front of his desk. Their smiles faded into dual troubled expressions.

"What's wrong?" Nathan demanded.

Julia spared a quick glance at Dimitri and let out a shuddered breath. "Nathan, I have been laboring with the decision to tell you this for the last three days because the information I need to share with you feels like a breach of confidentiality."

Nathan's brows knit. "I'm not following. What's this about?"

"Who and Mia." She swallowed hard. Dimitri took her hand.

Nathan reached up and scratched his jawline. *This did not sound good.* "Continue."

"Mia may have developed an interest in Christian."

The news hit him like a bolt of lightening, and the resounding thunder of curses he bit out had Julia wincing.

"Now, I said *may have*. When we were shopping on Friday, she asked me some pointed questions about him. She was interested in his spirituality, which I suspect to be very important to her."

Nathan released a vampire growl, imagining some creative ways to send La Mond's miserable soul to the Pearly Gates.

“I wouldn’t worry, Nathan. They are not likely to run into one another,” Dimitri said.

Julia added, smiling, “It is not all bad news, my darling. Mia is very much attracted to you. However, she is also determined to keep your relationship a working one.”

He knew that all too well. He began to pace again. When his mind wasn’t swarming with dark thoughts of Isabella, they were centered on Mia and ways to convince her to let down her guard with him. Most of those ideas involved slow ways to gain her trust. With this nauseating news, they needed to all go out the window. He had to up his game and quickly.

He stopped and faced them. “The three of us are going out tonight. Be ready by nine.”

“I assume we are going to dine at Mia’s restaurant?” Julia asked, her eyes bright with intrigue.

“Yes,” he answered as he strode past them toward the door. He added as he opened it, “One way or another, after tonight, I plan to make sure she can’t even remember the name of that damned doctor of yours.”



Joe had such a thriving business. By the time Saturday night service had ended, the only thing on Mia’s mind was a hot, steaming tub sporting some lavender salts and her soaking in it until her skin pruned.

Mia was wiping down the last fridge when Tina walked into the kitchen. “Mia, I have a three top who just arrived.”

Mia bit back a curse because it was ten minutes to close and the kitchen was almost clean and shut down. But should an order come in before ten she still had to execute it. She swung around and glared at the girl. “Seriously? This late ?”

The girl winced and said, “They just want appetizers and drinks. Sorry.” One of the guests is your new employer.”

That got Mia’s attention.

Boing!

Mia smiled at the mousy girl, not especially surprised by the news. She hadn’t talked to Nathan since dinner at his house last Wednesday night. He probably wanted to discuss her start date or something involving her job, which he could have done by text or phone, but she was learning he preferred face-to-face conversations. “Tell them I’ll make an appearance shortly.”

Before she headed to the floor, she shucked her chef’s jacket and stepped into the employee bathroom to spruce up a bit. She wore a faded pair of Levis and a muscle shirt, the attire casual, but normal for a long workday in a baking, hot kitchen.

When Tina referred to Nathan’s table as a three top, she suspected Dimitri and Julia to be with him so she snagged a glass of wine from the bar, figuring socializing to be involved in this visit.

When she arrived at the booth where they'd been seated, with bar menus, Nathan scooted out and stood. "How are you, Mia? Join us please?" He gestured for her to sit and she obliged.

"Not to complain, but tired and hot. Joe believes air conditioning in a restaurant kitchen a waste of money. I consider the lack of it a company benefit. A free sauna of sorts."

Julia giggled. "You are so funny, Mia."

She grinned at her, then scooted into the booth and placed her wine glass on the table. Nathan sat down next to her. His proximity had her immediately sipping her wine for reinforcement. God, he smelled good. Whatever cologne he wore needed to come with a warning label, bearing the skull, crossbones, and whole nine yards of risks.

"Oh my goodness, Mia. Since we shopped the other day, I've been so bad. I've bought so many things for the baby. It's going to cost us a fortune to have them shipped to Italy."

Mia shook her head. "Dear lord, Julia, I think I'm going to write Dr. Phil about your shopping addiction. You need an intervention."

That caused everyone to laugh.

Dimitri said, grinning, "I'll give a testimonial if necessary."

Julia poked him in the ribs and gave him a playful, chiding look.

That made Mia giggle even more. Nathan's friends were a delight. "Do you have any idea how long you two will be staying in New Orleans?"

"Until the baby is born," Julia supplied, sobering. "I have a high-risk pregnancy. Christian wants me close."

She hated to hear that, but she offered her a bolstering smile. "Understandable. That means I'll probably get to meet your little one. I really am excited for you guys."

"Thank you," Julia replied, her expression drenched with love as she stared at her husband. Dimitri leaned in and gave her a steamy kiss.

Mia had been avoiding a glance Nathan's direction, but to afford the couple privacy, she cast one his way.

He shrugged and said, "You'd best get used to those two. Ever since Julia found out she was pregnant, they've been like newlyweds. Let's leave them alone. Want to go for a walk?"

Nathan is right about that, she thought with a bit of envy. Mia felt hard-pressed to refuse. "Sure. She followed him out of the restaurant onto Bourbon Street, which as usual teemed with people and vehicle traffic. Food smells and music from numerous clubs along the block engulfed the night air, inviting people to come inside their establishments, listen and indulge in their cuisine and drink. When she glanced at Nathan, she noticed he stared at a bar across the street, which she knew to be country/western.

He glanced down at her. “Would you like to get a drink or something to eat?”

“Fine. I suspect you have some things you want to talk to me about before I begin working for you.”

“There are many things I’d like to talk with you about, but tonight, they won’t be about business.”

Before she could consider a reply to the ambiguous comment, he grabbed her hand and led her across the street. When they entered the bar, she smiled because one of her favorite country songs played, and the dance floor was packed with couples doing a two-step. She hadn’t gone out dancing in years. Occasionally, she and Daniel had before their once happy life unraveled.

“Want to dance?” Nathan asked and nodded toward the floor.

She blinked at him. “Seriously? You know how to two-step?”

“No. I know nothing about this genre of dancing, but I can see it resembles ones I’ve learned in the past, and I’m a quick study. If you aren’t afraid I’ll embarrass you, let’s give it a try.”

She didn’t know what to make of the man. She was skeptical, but intrigued. She’d been so determined to keep things professional between them, but god have mercy, the way he looked at her now, with those beguiling violet eyes, shimmering with such hope and genuineness, how could she refuse? “Fine. Let’s go for it.”

Three dances later, including a double two-step, they hit an empty table to sit for a spell. He waved over a server. When the girl arrived, Nathan said, "What would you like to drink?"

She hunched a shoulder. "I don't know. A Corona with lime sounds good."

He said to the server, "Make that two, plus two Patron shots and menus, please."

When the girl left, Mia said, "What are you up to, Nathan? Dancing. Now plying me with food and liquor? Sounds to me like you're fixing to breach our contract."

He grinned and took her hand, threading their fingers together on top of the table. "Would that be so bad?"

Mia stared at their fused hands. A ripple of excitement shot through her, followed by a healthy dose of sensibility. "Yes, it would be very bad."

He gave her a rakish smile. "Sometimes bad can be good. Think of it this way, the minute I kiss you, you'll be a millionaire."

Mia couldn't help herself, she laughed, then said, "A million-dollar kiss? Dang. It's almost worth the breach of contract to see how good that could be."

His expression grew ripe with desire, but a bit of amusement still hovered there. "I tell you what, I'll give you a million dollars for every kiss you'll give me tonight."

This was getting dangerous, but their banter excited Mia too. She hadn't flirted with a guy since high school. She

extracted her hand from his. “If I took you up on that offer, which I won’t, you’d be bankrupt by morning.”

That comment seemed to greatly please him. His eyes literally glittered with anticipation and desire. “I’ll suffer the financial consequences.”

Mia bit back a grin. Lord, he was a merciless flirt. “Well, I’m not that cruel. I’ll leave you with your riches.”

“I wish you wouldn’t.” He leaned in, his face inches from hers. “Kiss me, Mia.”

He was serious. Heat smoldered in his eyes, and his expression was pregnant and determined. Normally, she had a constitution of steel, but his look, proximity was like an emotional welding unit, melting her resolve into liquid metal. She gave him his wish, leaned in, and fused her mouth to his.

His mouth devoured, his tongue thrusting inside to both brand and explore. Fiery need exploded through her veins, and her body ached for his touch. The breath she’d been holding shuddered from her throat into his mouth, a groan catching in there somewhere.

Mia thought she knew what passion felt like, but what blazed between them now was like a forest fire no amount of water could extinguish. In the early years with Daniel, when they’d still been kids, that first love had been amazing, but she realized their attraction had been a warm, summer rain shower compared to this tsunami happening between her and Nathan. The lust and need unfurling between them

felt like an uncontrollable force of nature—wild, out of control—and she wanted the waves of it to engulf her.

He pulled back for a second, stood, hauled her off her chair, and plastered her against him. She didn't fuss, but went back to kissing him like a teenager desperate to shuck her virginity. God, he tasted so good. She couldn't get enough. Neither could he, she realized when his hands began to explore her body, one settling on her breast, teasing the nipple into ripeness. The action caused pulses of desire to shoot through her system with such ferociousness it was all she could do to hold back a scream.

Someone, clearing her throat, yanked them out of their crazy mode. Mia looked behind Nathan and saw their server, who had a tray in her hand with drinks. Her expression was bored. No surprise. This was Bourbon Street.

Her face gaining heat, Mia resumed her seat as the girl placed the bottles and glasses on the table. Nathan sat down, glanced over the menu, and gave a food order, confirming it with her first. Once the server disappeared into the crowd, he handed her a shot of Patron and took the other. "Shall we make a toast?"

She frowned, aggravated at herself for caving to him. What was wrong with her? She'd been all about maintaining a professional relationship, then the first time he pulled out the heavy flirting guns, she'd waved her white flag of surrender, like a big, fat sissy. "To what? Insanity? Honestly, Nathan, where can this lead?"

“Who knows, but after that kiss, which just cost me a million dollars, don’t you think it would be worth it for us to find out?” He winked at her and lifted his shot glass.

She knew he teased, and she studied him for a spell. She found nothing duplicitous in his expression. He actually seemed nervous, hanging on her response.

Mia groaned, fully aware she’d made a big mistake allowing that kiss. With it, she’d just opened Pandora’s box. Now she was a victim of its’ contents, and hankered to rifle through and see what other intriguing things it held regarding Nathan. “I don’t know about this, Nathan. I won’t sacrifice my job for a momentary whim on either of our parts. I think we both need to exercise some serious prudence here.”

Her reply didn’t seem to ruffle him in the least. He grinned and said, “I think you’ve exercised enough prudence for a lifetime. You aren’t the prim and proper country girl you’ve always portended. That kiss just proved my point. You don’t strike me as a coward either. Maybe I’m wrong. When’s the last time you crawled out of your comfort zone to take a risk?”

She huffed. “Are you kidding? The day I signed that contract with you.”

He shot her a pointed look. “That was no risk. That was a sure thing. Your job is secure, Mia. You’ll be even more secure if you choose to end it. I like you, and I simply want to get to know you better. I couldn’t pressure you into

something if I wanted to. I've met very few people with a moral constitution as rigid as yours. I admire that about you. I hope you have enough confidence in me to realize I'd never do anything to compromise your value system from this point on."

Mia stared at him. Boy, he had a slick tongue. He seemed to know what to say to either assuage her fears or use her values against her for coercion in a way that was buttery soft and never made her feel pressured. "Then a toast to possibilities, because at this point, I have no clues about you, Nathan."

That comment seemed to please him, based on the fervid look in his eyes. He touched his shot glass to hers, then said, "Better yet, to adventure and surprises because I have a few of both planned for us tonight."

Mia watched him toss back the shot. She knew Tequila had one heck of a slap, but not to be bested, she repeated what he'd just done. It burned a little, but to her surprise, the expensive liquor was actually quite smooth. She squeezed the lime in her beer and took a drink.

She remembered his comment. "What kind of surprises?"

"When's the last time you went out to enjoy the city and all its delights and culture?"

Mia's brows knit because she couldn't remember. She'd lived here nearly five years, but her life had been like a circuit—work, go home, tend to personal matters, sleep, and go back to work again. "What did you have in mind?"

He gave her an enigmatic smile. “You’ll see.”

True to his word, after a dozen or so dances and dinner, he took her for a long walk along the French Quarter, then a carriage ride. The driver, skilled to tell tales of the historical places they passed, kept the journey fun and entertaining. At one point, the carriage passed St. Louis Cemetery No. 1, and the driver began to regale them with stories of Marie Laveau because her grave was here. Mia was enthralled with the information. In all the time she’d lived here, she’d never seen the popular tourist spot.

“Stop,” Nathan said to the driver.

The man looked back at him, curious, but obeyed.

Nathan stepped down from the carriage and extended his hand to her.

“What are you doing?”

“Come on.” He grinned enigmatically.

Committed to adventure, she took his hand and stepped down.

Nathan pulled out his wallet and handed the guy a bill. “Thank you for tonight. We won’t be needing your services any further.”

The man’s gaze narrowed on him. “If you’re thinking to go into the cemetery, it’s closed and locked. There are security measures as well to keep people from getting in at night. Vandalism and such.” He gave Nathan a pointed look.

“Of course. We just wish to walk for awhile.”

He shrugged, slapped the reins on the horse's hindquarters, and the carriage rattled off down the street.

Mia shook her head, curious to the root of mystery in his expression. "What are you up to now?"

"Would it frighten you to see the cemetery at night?"

She glanced at the front gate, then back at him. "The guy just said it was locked, and if you think I'm scaling that concrete wall, you're crazy."

He chuckled. "No need for wall scaling." He took her hand and led them to the entrance.

Mia noticed him stare intently at the gate. He stepped forward, grabbed a rung, and swung it open. She gasped. "It's unlocked! How could you have known that?"

"We just got lucky. Come on." He pulled her inside and closed the gate behind them.

They hadn't gone but a few feet when she broke from his grip. She pinned him with a chastising frown. "We're going to get in so much trouble if we get busted, Nathan. I love your sense of adventure, but I have no desire to spend my night in a holding cell with a bunch of hookers."

He laughed. "Mia, the things that come out of your mouth sometimes, you delight me. Trust me, you'll be meeting no hookers tonight. Come on." He took her hand and began leading her through the isles of above ground monuments.

Occasionally, they paused to look at an interesting or historically significant one, but when they arrived at Marie

Laveau's, a chill of intrigue mixed with a spooky sensation made goose bumps bloom across her skin. People still worshiped her to this day. There were flowers, bottles of liquor in front of the tomb, and a few other weird offerings.

"This is supposedly Marie Laveau the First's resting place, but there is some controversy over that," Nathan commented.

Mia had never been here before, but she'd heard the tales. "I know. Some people have told me she was not only a voodoo priestess but a witch or a vampire." Mia glanced over the bronze placard on the side of the monument. However, it was too dark to read the inscription.

"She was not vampire," Nathan said.

The surety in his tone made her glance up at him. "You're funny. Like there are such things as vampires." His expression squirmed with a look that mimicked guilt. *Weird*, she thought.

"Jazerra comes here."

Mia wasn't all that surprised by the comment. "She's into the voodoo thing, huh?"

"Very much so. I'm just lucky she hasn't put a curse on me. I'm sure she's been tempted over the years. I aggravate her at times."

Mia offered him a mischievous smile. "If I catch her chanting and slaughtering a chicken, I'll give you a heads-up."

Nathan started laughing again. Mia loved their banter, loved this totally unexpected evening. She looked at the tomb and thought, *If this is a first date, it needs to go into the annals of some of the strangest ones ever.* “I’m having fun, Nathan,” she confessed. “You aren’t the stuck-up rich dude I thought you were.”

“I appreciate that insult-laced compliment. I’m having a great time too.” His expression turned solemn. “I want you to know I’m taking what’s happening between us very seriously. I won’t hurt you, Mia. I don’t expect you to fully believe that right now, but I’ll prove it to you in time.”

Mia allowed him to draw her into his arms and rested her head against his shoulder, inhaling his wonderful scent. She believed him, and she was starting to trust him. She couldn’t fathom why he had romantic designs on her. He was so hot, and because of who he was, she knew he could have any woman in the world, far more beautiful and cultured than she.

New exciting feelings were sparking inside her; however, she had no intentions of putting on rose-colored glasses just yet. She’d ride the rails of this thing to see where it took them. In the meantime, she intended to keep her eyes wide open.

7

When Nathan entered his kitchen the next morning for a cup of coffee, he found Julia and Dimitri eating at his breakfast nook in front of the bay window that gave way to the east side of the house.

“Good morning,” Julia chimed, smiling at him.

He didn’t have to smile back because he’d been wearing a permagrin since the moment he’d taken Mia back to her apartment building last night in his limo. She was an amazing woman. Beautiful. Fun. Witty. He was in love. The new experience had him twisted into knots. Good knots and reasonable, he supposed. He’d waited over 170 years to find his mate. He’d finally admitted to himself what he felt for Mia was indeed true love.

He poured himself a cup of coffee and joined them.

The couple studied him for a few moments then looked into each other’s eyes, mind speaking.

Dimitri broke the silence. “Care to tell us about your evening?”

“No. It was good. That’s all I’m going to say.” He sipped on his cup.

“You are no fun, Nathan,” Julia groused, then grinned. “It’s happening between you two as I told you it would, no?”

“It is,” he allowed.

Dimitri’s expression wasn’t quite as boisterous as his wife’s. “You’d better have a plan for telling her, Nathan, and soon. I know you thrive on danger and intrigue, but this situation with your future lifemate hanging in the balance is not one to be trifled with.”

Nathan knew that. Sleep had evaded him most of the night because he’d been mentally scouting numerous ways to reveal the truth to Mia. *How do you tell a human you’re in love with you’re a vampire?* he thought. He’d been so desperate for answers, he’d considered Googling it, but reasoning prevailed. “I’m hoping if she falls in love with me, she’ll accept the truth. I can’t tell her yet. It’s too soon. I’d lose her.”

Julia reached across the table and clamped a hand over his. “You won’t lose her. However, if you aren’t honest with her, your journey together might take a serious detour. Depending on how readily she forgives, you could lose years with her.”

He pulled his hand away and speared them both with a hard look. “How do you expect me to tell her I’m not

a member of the human race? Don't you think I've been wracking my brain for a way to tell her that won't cause her to feel betrayed? Terrified? I'll have to tell her everything. What I did to her." Nathan paused and glanced up. "God, I don't want to even imagine her reaction. Even if she can get over that, I can't see her accepting what she'd have to do to be with me."

Julia pursed her lips and gave him a chiding look. "If humans did not accept the turning when they fell in love with one of our kind, do you not think our people would have become extinct long ago? Our born females are so few. You know that, which is the reason many of our males end up mating with humans. She will accept you, Nathan, but what she won't accept is lies. Something terrible happened to her with her ex-husband. She did not share details, but I know she was horribly wounded. I doubt she could suffer another betrayal. I can tell she is a woman who will have very little tolerance for untruths in a relationship. I wish I had some simple answers for you, my darling, but I don't. The only advice I can give you is don't wait too long."

He gave her a single nod, then went back to nursing his coffee. Their advice was spot on. He'd been thinking the same things. Never in his life had he been so stymied about getting from a point A to a point B. Somehow, he had to find that link because there was no way he would hurt or lose this woman.



Mia was a nervous wreck when she arrived at Nathan's the following Tuesday morning. She embarked on a job with an employer she wanted to assault in a few sexual ways that might be illegal in some states. Not that she would make an attempt to execute any, which was exactly the problem. Their complicated relationship was the epitome of sexual frustration.

She was now all his. Employment wise anyway. They'd been texting and talking by phone all week. The conversations had been light, teasing, some business information weaved in, but she'd refused his offers to see her. She'd needed space, needed time to think about the night that had altered their relationship.

Logically, she knew there was no going back to the pre-kissing era. She wasn't sure she wanted to. She also wasn't sure she wanted to move forward with Nathan. Her job mainly factored into this thinking. If things crashed and burned between them, sure, she had a million-dollar settlement, but her conscience wouldn't allow her to take the money. It was unearned. She'd never cash that check.

She found herself sitting on a very uncomfortable fence. At some point soon, she would have to have to decide which side to plant her feet.

Nathan told her he only wanted her to cover lunch and dinner for the household. Jazerra handled breakfast. It was nice to know she wouldn't be putting in as many consecutive hours a day as she had at Tavania's. She could

come in at ten in the morning and leave by eight or nine and even have a few hours off in the afternoon. For a chef, that was an easy day.

For lunch, she made chicken, pineapple pecan salad sandwiches, along with a cucumber tomato salad and some fried green tomatoes. The Fourth of July was day after tomorrow, and it was the height of produce season in Louisiana. She'd visited a farmers' market early this morning to snag all the produce she'd need for the next few days.

It was twelve thirty, the time he'd requested lunch. She was in the process of setting out the plates in the breakfast nook of the kitchen when Nathan sauntered in.

The look in his eyes when he caught sight of her sizzled with a hunger that had nothing to do with food. He gapped the distance between them and pulled her into his arms. "God, I've missed you, woman."

Without permission, he leaned down and kissed her. Mia couldn't have offered a protest if she'd wanted. Every melting look he gave her, every touch moved the earth beneath her feet, but his kisses siphoned rational thought from her head and purpose from her soul. At the moment, she was merely a passenger on the erotic ride he provided. When he finally pulled back and released her, she teetered on her feet and stumbled backward.

"Sorry," he said, appearing marginally embarrassed but mostly smug.

“You can’t keep doing that if you expect work out of me, Nathan.” She tried for a chiding look but knew she’d failed because she was drunk on lust at the moment.

“I’m so glad you’re finally here,” he said slowly in that sexy, southern drawl of his.

She was glad to be here too, but in no frame of mind to get into a personal relationship conversation. The man was entirely too overwhelming to her senses. “Lunch is ready. Where are Julia and Dimitri?”

“They had a doctor’s appointment this morning. They should be back soon. Eat with me, please.” He gestured for her to take a seat.

Mia sat, and he took one opposite her across the table. He stared at his plate, his expression curious. “Are these fried green tomatoes?”

“Yeah. Try the sauce.” She pointed at the little portion cup she’d sat on the edge of the plate. “It’s a southwestern ranch.”

“I haven’t had these in a very long time.” He indulged, and when he finished the first one, he groaned, his eyes ripe with enjoyment. “Make these for me often.”

“No problem.”

They began eating, and silence ruled for awhile. Eventually, Nathan said, “How was your last week at work?”

Mia smiled wistfully. “My coworkers threw me a going-away party last night. It was awesome, but sad. Joe made some pizzas and provided free liquor, so everyone got wasted. I tried to be good, but I’m still sporting a headache.

Since the Fourth is two days away, we finalized plans for a get together on Thursday at Chris's for a cookout and fireworks. We do it every year. He and his wife have a really nice hobby farm in the country. That is unless you need me on the Fourth. I know I'm suppose to have holidays off, but I'll be here if you need me."

"No. You spend it with your friends. I have nothing planned."

"Thank you. I'm going to miss them all, but Joe assured me if things didn't work out, he'd take me back."

Nathan's gaze narrowed. "Things will work out, Mia. Surely, by now you know I care about you and have no intentions of taking advantage of you in any way."

Mia wanted to believe that. Yet the contract they'd signed had gone up in smoke the minute she'd kissed him. Neither of them had given a care to the consequences at the time. Even now in the light of sound reasoning, she wasn't sorry, but she was nervous.

Whatever sprouted between them was exciting, and Mia loved it to a point. The ever-present fear that he'd grow bored with her remained. They had so little in common. Eventually, he was bound to realize that, and the day he did would unquestionably be the worst of her life.

Nathan had broken through her emotional defenses that night. She liked him so very much, and dear god, the attraction between them was so smoking hot. It was all she could do not to jump across the table and attack his sexy ass.

Still, nothing regarding her concerns for common interests between them had changed. Their worlds were polar. As far as his spiritual convictions? At this point, she hadn't a clue. Then she remembered Julia's comment about having little in common with Dimitri, yet making their own world. Could that happen with her and Nathan? She didn't know, but she was very tempted to take the chance.

Last Saturday night ranked as one of the best evenings she'd ever experienced next to some with her daughters. As far as any intimate encounters with a man, nothing had ever come close. At this point, her intention was to do a job. In time if something serious developed with Nathan, she'd explore it with a healthy seasoning of circumspection.

He sat his fork down, his expression businesslike. "We've never discussed your days off. As you know from our contract, you'll have two. Any preferences?"

"No. Truthfully, Tavania's left me with no social life. All I need is time to do laundry, grocery shop, clean, and sleep. You can be the judge of those days. But there is something I need to tell you, which I didn't think about initially. At some point, this summer, my girls are coming to the city for a visit. They'll be here soon, and I'm suspecting the dates to be sometime late July, early August. They're still trying to work out the details. It's a lot to ask, I know, but I'd really appreciate that week off to spend with them."

Nathan nodded, his expression warm and understanding. "Of course. Take all the time you need with them."

Affection and appreciation flowered inside her heart for his kindness. Joe wouldn't have been that understanding. "Thank you. I'll let you know the dates as soon as I have them."

"May I ask what sort of plans you've made for their visit?"

Mia smiled wistfully, thinking of some of her ideas. "In all the time I've been here, they've never visited me because college and work kept them too busy. We'll spend some days doing the basic tourist thing, maybe a spa day, and we'll probably eat at as many restaurants in the city as I can afford. Of course I'll cook them a few of their favorite meals, but they're anxious to experience everything they can New Orleans."

"They'll be staying with you?"

She nodded. "It'll be fun. I told them to bring their sleeping bags because I only have a one-bedroom apartment. It will be like camping out, minus the bonfire."

"I own a couple five-star hotels in town. I'd be happy to provide them suites. Once you give me the dates, I'll reserve as many as necessary to house all of you in style."

The genuineness in his expression made her take a moment to choose an answer he could both understand and would not sound ungrateful on her part. She didn't need or want high-class accommodations, and to accept his offer would only sprout suspicions in her kids' minds.

Eventually, she'd tell the girls about this job, but she wasn't about to tell them her and Nathan were developing

a thing, when she was still clueless as to what this thing was about.

She attempted a sweet smile. “With the obscene amount you’re paying me, I could afford to put them up in a hotel, and I might a couple of days. Our family grew up in tight quarters. Not only are we used to it, we thrive on it. We’ll be just fine, but thank you for the offer.”

He nodded, then took a bite of his sandwich. Mia wondered what thoughts meandered through his head, because he suddenly seemed a bit dismal. Then she remembered he said he had no plans for the Fourth. Maybe he would spend it with Julia and Dimitri. Then again, maybe they’d want that day to themselves. The two were so happy at the moment, they were probably eager for as much alone time as they could get.

She considered it a long shot that he might want to go slumming with her common folk friends but decided to ask. “Nathan? You mentioned you had no plans for the Fourth. Would you like to come with me to the cookout? I warn you my coworkers are all crazy. It’s hard to work in a restaurant and not have some sort of worm in your brain.”

He shot her a calculated grin. “Really? I hadn’t noticed.”

She threw her napkin at him. “That was mean.”

“I was just teasing. You’re beautifully intelligent and a salt-of-the-earth person, with one minor flaw.”

She pursed her lips. “What’s that?”

“You haven’t yet realized you’re crazy about me, or that I’m even crazier about you.”

His words and the seriousness in his tone and expression took on the effect of a lasso snaring her heart with an anvil attached to it. She swallowed hard and stared at him.

Responses were stolen when a cell began to ring somewhere on his person. He leaned back and pulled a smart phone from a pocket of his gray slacks.

“Son of a bitch,” he spat, glancing at the screen. “Sorry, Mia. Excuse me.”

Mia watched him stalk out of the kitchen, phone in hand. A business call, she reckoned, and apparently not one he relished receiving. She shook her head, then dug into her meal. Mia had no idea what Nathan’s life was truly like. Riches had benefits, no doubt, but she had a feeling such a life wasn’t all a bed of roses.



Once Nathan was inside the privacy of his office, he placed his cell to his ear. “What the hell do you want, Isabella?” How had she gotten his personal cell number? Apparently, she had her own team of investigators since she’d located him in New Orleans so quickly.

His phone chimed with an incoming call. He looked at the screen and saw it was Dominic. His gut told him that Dominic knew this call from Isabella to be forthcoming. He ignored it and put the phone back to his ear.

On the other end of the line, he heard her say, “My patience has expired with you, Nathan. I want an answer to my proposal, and you know there is only one I’ll accept. I’ve drawn up a prenup, which I don’t think you’ll find unfair. I’ll settle for ten years of marriage along with a generous divorce settlement, which I assure you will not completely drain you of your wealth. Of course have Dominic review it. I’m sure you’ll find it mostly generous, considering the alternative option. I’ve already faxed it to little Dominic, whom I videoconferenced with this morning. He was a tad nasty, but it rather excited me. He’s grown into such a handsome vampire man/child. I think he’d make an incredibly delicious fledgling. Don’t you?”

It took all the self-control he possessed not to squeeze the phone in his hands until it shattered into microscopic fragments. He drew in a couple of deep breaths and forced back his rage in order to scrape up a sensible response. Not that it would matter. A feral had no power for sane logic or reasoning. They had one singular purpose, and that was to achieve whatever pleasure they currently hunted.

“Give me an amount, Isabella. I’ll write a check today and have it deposited into any bank account you want as long as you’ll take it and agree to leave me alone.”

Her dark laughter echoed in his ear. “*Caro*, if money was the only issue, I could have had that weeks ago. I told you what I want, a slice of the life I birthed you into. I want to be the richest, most envied woman in the world, the

wife of the most rich, envied man in the world. There isn't another male, human, or vampire who could come close to giving such delights to me. Negotiations are no longer a factor between us, Nathan. You have one week to come to your senses."

Nathan snorted. "I told you to do your best, Isabella. Everyone I care about is covered."

"Oh? Just how many employees work for Davenport Enterprises? When they start dying in plague fashion, how soon before you have no business left, do you suppose? Not to mention the investigation process your human American government will unleash upon you. I know where Dominic resides, and I'm very tempted to pay him a visit. It's been years since I've enjoyed a born vampire lover. They are very skilled, willing or not. You know better than to underestimate me, Nathan. You also know my threats are solid."

Indeed he did, but he couldn't bear another minute speaking to this maniacal witch. "You are not bulletproof, Isabella. This game you're playing will backfire in your face, wait and see." Enraged, he threw the phone across the room. It shattered against the wall, pieces flying everywhere.

He grabbed the receiver of the land line on his desk and immediately called Dominic. He answered on the first ring, obviously awaiting his call.

"Isabella..."

Nathan cut him off. "I know. I just heard from her. She has to die."

Dominic let off a deep sigh. "She will. I'm working on making that happen. Just give me a little more time."

"Neither of us may have much more. Go under, Dominic. She's after you now too."

"Come on, Nathan. You know I can take care of myself. Just take care of my parents. I have no doubt they're next on her list. I've hired a few assassins, but I need more."

Nathan scratched his jaw. "Little good that will do if we can't find her."

"I'm working on that. I will find her. She's clever but not impenetrable."

Nathan snorted. "Yes, she is, or she wouldn't still be alive. Cover your ass, Dominic. I mean it. Go under. I'll do what I can to protect myself and your parents, but from here, I can't protect you."

"I'm not afraid of that witch. Well, maybe a little. I'll take your advice, though. Give me a week. I promise I'll have the manpower resources in place, even if I can't locate Isabella."

Nathan stifled a sigh. He trusted Dominic's abilities, but Isabella seemed to always be a step ahead of them. "Just find her. All I need is her location. From there, I'll do what I should have done long ago."

"I'll be in touch, but you can't do that without resources."

"We'll cross that bridge when we get there." Nathan placed the receiver on the phone's base and let lose the

breath he'd been holding. He knew Dominic would provide him men to take down Isabella. The torture she'd visited upon his life, Dimitri's, and Julia's made him ache to kill her himself, but all that mattered now was stopping her before she destroyed the life of someone he loved or Davenport staff.

He thought of Mia and groaned. Her proximity to him placed her in danger. Until now, he'd been more furious with Isabella than scared, but the notion she might discover Mia to be his lifemate terrified him. The security he'd hired to protect her, Julia, and Dimitri were by no means enough.

Nathan grabbed the phone and redialed Dominic. The men Dominic hired thus far might not be enough for a confrontation with Isabella, but they'd suffice for additional security. He intended to have them here by day's end.

8

The Fourth of July turned out to be a gorgeous hot, sunny day, perfect for the festivities ahead, Mia thought, as she finished pouring the last of the homemade lemonade she'd made into a gallon thermos. Mia grinned as she put on the lid. Excitement for the day and night ahead had her a bit giddy. Joe always closed the restaurant on the Fourth, and for the last four years, the staff celebrated at Chris's place because he had a great little country home in the bayou with no fireworks ordinances.

The doorbell rang and Mia's smile widened, knowing her caller to be Nathan. He'd accepted her offer to celebrate the day with her and her coworkers. She'd told him to dress casual. When she opened the door, she saw he'd taken her advice. He wore some faded jeans, a black wife-beater, and a pair of well-worn cowboy boots. He had his hair pulled back and sported a generic ball cap. She glanced over his tan arms and stifled a sigh. Lord, he had some guns. He was

a huge man and today looked redneck hot with a capital *R* and *H*. She licked her lips, and he gave her a sultry grin.

“Happy Fourth of July, Mia.”

She gave him an appreciative smile. “You too. Come on in. I’m just about ready. I have a cooler that needs to go. I made blackberry cobbler, potato salad, and lemonade as my offerings for the party.”

He walked in and glanced around. “Your place is pretty and earthy just like you.”

She thanked him then pointed to a cooler and blanket on the couch. “If you can grab those, I’ll get the lemonade. It’s in the kitchen. Be right back.” She grabbed her MSU ball cap off the coffee table, shoved it on her head, settling it over her twin braids, bill to the back, then went to retrieve the lemonade.

When she returned, Nathan stared at her, a shadow of a grin on his face. “What?” she prompted.

“You look cute.”

She offered him an appreciative one. Popular fashion hadn’t been her intent today, rather comfort. She chose an old pair of cut-off shorts, a tank top, and running shoes because she knew there would be a softball game at some point.

Nathan donned a pair of dark, tinted sunglasses just before they exited her building. Mia noticed his shiny black limo parked several spots down the street from her Ford diesel. He started toward it. “Hey,” she said, halting him.

“We’re taking my truck. If we show up in that thing”—she nodded toward his stretch—“I’ll be getting crap from everyone for the rest of the day.” She probably would anyway when she arrived with *the* Nathan Davenport on her arm. *Oh well.*

He grinned, then followed her to her truck and loaded their party offerings into the backseat. “I have another cooler. I brought some beer, pop, and water. I’ll be right back.”

Once they were on the road, Mia said, “My friends are cool, Nathan, but they’re going to be wondering about us socializing. I can deal with it. I just wanted to give you a head’s up. They all know who you are. Who doesn’t?”

He glanced across the cab at her with an arched look. “There is much you don’t know about me. My life hasn’t always been one of privilege.”

That statement peaked Mia’s curiosity. “Oh well, what I meant was, expect a few curious looks, maybe some hard questions too.”

“Reasonable. They’ll be wondering about our relationship.”

She slid a quick look his way. “Definitely.” Because she was wondering too. “Care to share about your previously unprosperous days?”

He smiled at her, looking a bit reminiscent. “Well, I grew up in Georgia. My father owned a large tobacco and cotton plantation. Until I was around seventeen, my childhood along with my sister, Elizabeth, ’s was very good. We both

attended private schools, had everything a child could want and desire, including love. Our parents were amazing. Unfortunately, my father fell on some very hard times and lost his fortune. My years afterward were poverty-stricken. In fact, my parents and Elizabeth died far too young from the results. I managed to survive and eventually got lucky with a few successful business ventures, but it took a long time to get to where I am now.”

Mia had no ready response for his sad story and kept her eyes on the road. What had caused his parents and sister to die? She supposed if he'd wanted to tell her, he would have. She understood poverty well and losing loved ones. “I'm sorry about your family, and I can sympathize. I lost both my parents a number of years ago. Natural causes. I was an only child. My mother was never suppose to have children. She was forty-five when she got pregnant with me. She always called me her miracle child because she believed God answered her many years of prayer to have one. I believe He did. I too had awesome parents.”

The look he gave her was filled with understanding. “My parents were Christian too.”

Her eyes widened. Mia spared a glance his way. “Really? And you?”

He hunched a shoulder. “Once, but I guess I'm at a place some would call back slid. I'm not proud of it, and I have no real excuses, I suppose.”

Mia offered him a compassionate smile. “I can’t judge you there, Nathan. I was so angry after my divorce, with my ex mostly, but even God. I just had to work through it. You will too with whatever you’re facing.”

He nodded but didn’t appear convinced. She worried about him because it sounded as if he had no kinfolk left, even extended. However, she was delighted to know he was a believer, be it a troubled one. “If you should ever want to talk about it...” Mia shrugged. She didn’t want to press him, but she felt spiritually compelled to put the offer out there.

He gave her a warm smile. “You’d be the best person for the job, no doubt. You’re very caring and compassionate. However, you’re probably right. I’ll just have to work through it.”

She didn’t like the despondent note in his tone. Mia stared at the highway, considering a response. “But you don’t have to do it alone, Nathan. Even if you don’t feel comfortable talking to another person, you can always talk to God. Nothing is unforgivable. Sometimes the hardest thing we have to do in life is forgive ourselves.”

He snorted and shot her a pointed look. “Your faith is admirable. Maybe God can forgive any sin. But honestly, could you? Could any of us if we were hurt so badly by the consequences of someone’s actions it destroyed our lives?”

Mia glanced at him, trying to get some sort of pulse on those seemingly loaded questions. She could tell by

the irritation in his voice and expression she'd unwittingly picked at an emotional scab.

She chose her next words carefully. "No. Not just anyone could but a true Christian has to if they want to follow God. We don't get to pick and choose who we forgive. Trust me, it doesn't work that way. I don't want to get into the whole dissing the ex thing, but let's just say, eventually, I realized only bitterness could destroy me, and then I was able to let it go. It sucked getting there though."

Mia strongly sensed this conversation was about someone who hurt him. A woman? Julia claimed he'd never had a serious relationship. This hurt or betrayal may have happened before they'd met, which could explain why he'd never married.

Nathan exhaled a long breath, then said, "Indeed it does. I suspect the road to that ambiguous 'there' can be longer and more treacherous for some than others." He turned his head and stared out the window.

Mia said no more. Curiosity ran rampant inside her, but she tamped it down and prayed for Nathan.

A short while later, they arrived at Chris and his wife, Amy's little slice of bayou paradise. At least fifteen cars lined his front yard. She found a spot and parked. They unloaded the coolers from her backseat and headed to the festivities in full swing behind Chris's modest country home.

There were three ten-foot banquet tables, supplied by Joe, in the center of the backyard underneath two pop-up

tents. Food covered them end to end. Mia could barely find room for her lemonade, cobblers, and tater salad. Nathan helped her. She tucked her cooler underneath, then began introductions. She started at the BBQ grill, billowing with smoke and the delightful smell of sizzling burgers and dogs, where the majority of the men gathered, talking and drinking beer.

“Hey, guys! What’s up? Happy Fourth.”

“Hi, Mia,” Chris said and gave her a quick hug. Joe, Michael, Andrew, and a couple spouses of the female staff added their own greetings.

She turned and smiled warmly at Nathan, then the men. “This is Nathan Davenport. I know some of you have encountered him at the restaurant and know I’ll be working for him. He’s cool.”

There were a few brief curious looks shared between them, but they all made genuine efforts to greet him and shook his hand. After that, they made a circuit around the backyard, greeting and talking to the women, gathered into various little groups.

Everyone knew who he was, so some fired a few personal questions his way, about his life, business, them. He took all in stride, answering without hesitation. His answers to the “them” questions relieved her because she didn’t want to explain their relationship, when she was still clueless about it herself. Basically, he’d told the ladies that he considered

her a wonderful, bright person whom he was enjoying getting to know.

Eventually, she and Nathan settled themselves on the blanket beneath the shade of a huge oak with two heaping plates of food and a couple of Coronas.

“You have some great friends, Mia,” he commented, then took a bite of his burger.

“Thanks. They’re all good people. One thing about Tavana’s, being a small, privately owned restaurant, we’ve all grown into an extended dysfunctional family of sorts. I’ll miss them.”

“I can see clearly they care for you too. I’m sure those you’ve made the strongest connections with will always be a part of your life.”

She nodded and offered him a little smile. He was right. Tavana’s would always hold a place in her heart, but her life headed in a new direction, Nathan’s direction, which was entirely too convoluted. Here she sat on a date with her employer. Probably not wise. Every rational brain cell in her head screamed, *Stupid, stupid, stupid*. Yet her heart compelled her to explore a future with him. “What the heck are we doing here, Nathan?”

He sat his plate on the blanket and stared at her. Those black tinted sunglasses of his shielded his eyes from her, but the firm set of his jaw sent a message of serious intent. “I won’t play games with you, Mia. I can’t get you out of my mind. You aren’t a mere passing fancy for me. You’re

beautiful—heart, soul, and body—and I’ve never met anyone like you. I want you in my life and not as my chef.”

Mia swallowed hard. This was the second time he’d referred to something permanent. She was nowhere near ready for that. She knew so little about him. “I have some questions for you, Nathan.”

“Ask away.”

She decided to pluck the most curious question from her quiver of quarries. “Julia told me you’ve never married or basically came close. I find that very strange.”

He hunched his shoulder, his expression thoughtful. “All I can say to that is, when I was looking, it was in the wrong places. Then for a long time I stopped. I spent so many years creating the business I have today, it left me little time to pursue personal relationships. Julia and Dimitri are my closest friends, and even they took a back burner while I did what was necessary to build Davenport Enterprises. Now I have highly skilled people in place who afford me the luxury of exploring other options in life. It just took a long time for me to get there.”

“And there’s never been anyone special in your life?” Mia had to press this issue. Curiosity might kill the cat, but so be it. She couldn’t help herself. She couldn’t believe Nathan had never been in love or in a serious relationship.

He harrumphed and gave a brief shake of his head. “Once I thought I was in love, but I was only nineteen at the time. Suffice it to say, I was far too young to be a

good judge of character. She was older than me and far more world-wise. I was just a temporary diversion for her. Thank God.”

That comment sparked a whole new set of questions. While she considered one, she picked up her burger and took a bite. “I’m not going to press you to talk about her, but it’s obvious she didn’t have a very good impact on your life. I totally get that. My ex dumped me for my daughter’s best friend. Talk about scandalous, especially living in a small town. Moving forward with life after that kind of hurt isn’t easy, but...” She paused and shrugged. “People have to. If I hadn’t let go of the anger, I wouldn’t have the friends I have today.” She gestured toward the people scattered about Chris’s backyard.

“I’m sorry to hear that, Mia. Very sorry. He was an idiot is all I can say.” Nathan took her hand. “I totally agree with you about letting go of the past and making a promising future, which is exactly what I’ve been trying to do with you.”

Mia’s stomach lurched, and the slow, sexy smile he gave her didn’t help. She knew him to be younger than her and childless. If something did happen between them, her ability to give him a child might not be so easy.

Boy, this was not the place and time to talk about such things. Too late now. The worms were already crawling out of the can. Plus, she could tell by the expectant smile on his face he had intimate ideas floating in his head, which

he was bound to execute at some point today. She let out a burdened sigh.

“What’s wrong, Mia? What did I say?”

She shook her head. “Nothing’s wrong, Nathan. I get you now. At least I think so. You’re at a point in life where you want to discover possibilities with someone whom you might find a future with.”

“Absolutely. How much clearer can I make it? That person is you.”

She sucked in a couple of fortifying breaths for what she had to say next. “I like you, Nathan, but let’s put logic on the table here. You must have enough sense to realize I’m older than you. I’ve told you about my children. I suspect you might want kids one day?”

“Yes, but I what I want more is the right woman to share my life with.”

Excellent reply, but Mia wasn’t biting. “Dang. All this time I thought it was me who needed to be examining whatever is happening between us under a microscope. Now I’m seeing it’s actually you who needs to be doing so. The best advice I can give you is to talk to Julia and Dimitri. I guess she’s a little older than me. Point is, look at the trouble she’s gone through to have a baby. She’s lucky. Not every woman our age is so fortunate. I’m sorry. I don’t know how to put it any more delicate than this, but, Nathan, you need to be hunting for a much younger woman.”

Nope. He is not pleased, Mia thought, noticing the firm set of his jaw.

He sat the burger in his hand on his plate and gave her full attention. "I've found the woman I want. I don't give a damn about your age. Children are a benefit of marriage, not a requirement. I need to find my lifemate. I'm exploring that with you, Mia. Don't put the brakes on here, please."

"Man, Nathan, I just don't know about this." If she wasn't half in love with him, maybe she could have scraped up a sensible argument. Trouble was, she teetered on the precipice of falling into the abyss some people called head over heels. Apparently, he recognized the fact she balanced there. He leaned in and abducted her mouth, kissing her with a purpose and passion that had her eyes crossed when he finally released her.

"Now that wasn't fair," she grouched but grinned.

He chuckled. "All's fair in love and war." He reached up, cupped the back of her head, and pulled her in, unleashing a series of smoldering kisses that made her insides go molten like the liquid in a lava lamp.

Wow, he kissed good, she thought, her brain about as fried as a dedicated pothead's. Mia was glad they were in public. Thinking of her coworkers and their kids, she pulled away. He smiled at her in an affectionate, lusty way that made her heart feel like it was being squeezed by a fist.

Crap! She was falling for him and fast, and he wasn't helping matters by being so darned seductive.

She picked up her plate and started eating, and so did Nathan.

The afternoon was iconic. In between some socializing with her coworkers and their significant others, they spent the next couple hours under the oak sharing about their lives. Around three, after everyone had time to digest their lunch, the softball game started. The group divided into teams. She and Chris were the chosen captains. Chris's first pick was his wife. Her first pick was Nathan and would have been no matter what, but her choice won their team the game.

It was the ninth inning, and the bases were loaded when he went to bat. She was on second. He socked a home run ball so far into the trees beyond their makeshift diamond; silence reigned over the entire gathering for several moments. Then all four batters started running for home. They'd won by a landslide. It had been so much fun.

About thirty minutes after the sun set, the fireworks began. She and Nathan moved her blanket to a private section of backyard to watch. Everyone donated for the display, but Chris spent the most money because he was the master of ceremony for this event and took great pride in it.

Nathan had settled his beer cooler at the side of their blanket. He pulled two out, popped the tops, and handed her one. She took the bottle and blinked at him because Coronas didn't have twist off caps. His strength had

amazed her more than once. She was still grooving over that home run.

“I’ve really enjoyed today,” he said.

There was desire-laced honesty in his eyes, and Mia’s tummy made a little summersault move. “Me too.”

“Come here.” He scooted back then guided her body between his legs so she could rest her back against his chest. As his arms wrapped around her waist, a brilliant display of fireworks splashed across the night sky, seconds before the resounding boom echoed.

She turned so she could look into his eyes, which were filled with affection. God, he was awesome. She couldn’t help herself. Holding her beer off to the side, she leaned up and kissed him. For the next hour, fireworks exploded overhead while she and Nathan created a whole bunch of their own.

9

The next morning, Mia had her head in the refrigerator digging out supplies for lunch when she heard footsteps behind her. She straightened and turned. Nathan entered the kitchen, a coffee cup in hand. He headed directly toward her, passion-filled purpose glimmered in his eyes. He sat his cup on the counter, pulled her into his arms and kissed her with as much ferocity and crazy as the explosive ones they'd shared under the stars and fireworks last night.

When he released her, he grinned and said, "Morning, beautiful. I missed you."

His kisses were dizzying, this thing happening between them even more so. "I missed you too." Last night, he'd succeeded in his mission to seduce her into exploring a future with him. Like a cocklebur, he'd lodged himself in her heart, her mind too. She couldn't stop thinking about him, wanting him.

She trailed a hand across his chest. He was dressed in casual business mode—a tan pair of slacks and a short-sleeved, light-green button-up shirt. Feeling ornery and more than a little heated, she flipped open a button and slid her hand inside to investigate the skin and muscles beneath, which did not disappoint. She hummed her approval and had apparently lit a fire in the process. He muttered a curse, then hauled her onto the countertop taking advantage of her neck, teasing a very sensitive spot with soft nibbles and kisses.

Mia shivered and let out a little moan. His touch, his lips and kisses—all of it was as addictive as a drug when he touched her, kissed her. He was fast becoming a habit she had no intentions of breaking anytime soon.

A soft rumbling growl usher from his throat, similar to the one he'd scared her with that second night cooking for him. She felt his teeth scrape her neck. *Wow, they were sharp!* She felt a bit of pain, but the attention his hands gave her breasts and the delicious throbbing ache in her lower belly absorbed the discomfort.

“Nathan!”

In a series of movements so quick, it made her head spin, Nathan pulled her off the counter and placed her on the floor, then positioned his body between her and the person who had just spoken. It was Jazerra, Mia realized with a good deal of embarrassment when the lust fog cleared, and she could focus.

Oh boy. She glared at Nathan, seriously pissed.

“Don’t start, old woman,” Nathan warned. Mia couldn’t see his face, but his tone brooked no argument.

Jazerra’s hands were propped on her hips, and she shook her head, her expression filled with disgust. “Shame on you! That there’s gotta end, and you know it. I’m a warnin’ ya, Nathan. If ya don’t do what ya need to do today, I will.” With that, she stormed out the door.

Mia wasn’t stupid. Nathan was hiding something from her. When he finally turned, his troubled expression bore proof of her suspicions. “What is she talking about Nathan? And don’t you lie to me. I know something’s up.”

He swallowed hard then glanced at the floor. “It’s true. I have been hiding something from you, Mia.”

All the happiness bubbling within her the last few days flushed out of her system, and fear swamped her heart, so sudden so fierce, her knees nearly buckled. This couldn’t happen again. No more lies. Her life had been decimated with them by Daniel. She’d loved her husband but nowhere near the way she loved Nathan.

Oh god! She palmed her face. She suspected it, thought she felt it, but she hadn’t admitted to herself fully until now that she loved him. And she did. Wildly. The admission terrified her. If he broke her heart, she didn’t think she had enough mental glue within her to restore the pieces.

“Mia, it’s not what you’re thinking.” He pulled her hands from her cheeks and held them. “This has nothing to

do with another woman or past relationships. I have never felt about any woman the way I feel about you. I swear. This issue has to do with me physically.”

The news calmed the pounding of her heart. His latter comment started a whole new series of shakes across her body. “You’re ill? Oh god, Nathan, no!”

He squeezed her hands and smiled. “No, honey, I’m as healthy as a horse. It’s very complicated, and I’m going to need a good chunk of time and privacy to talk to you about it. You can finish lunch, but I don’t want you to cook tonight. I want us to go out to a nice restaurant, relax, let you sample some amazing cuisine that might inspire you. Afterwards, I promise I’ll explain everything. The only think I ask, rather beg of you, is to keep an open mind.”

Her emotions were running high gear, and she was curious as heck, but to put up an argument or demand answers now wouldn’t be wise, given her frame of mind. She nodded briskly.

He leaned down and kissed her. “Please don’t be afraid. I love you, and maybe I’ve done some things I shouldn’t have, but I swear to you I would never intentionally hurt you.”

“Okay.”

He looked a bit dubious as he stared at her for several more moments. No wonder. She knew her expression had to be terror-ridden and shocked. Too much information fired in her head at once.

My lord, he’d just said he loved her!

“I mean it, Mia. I’m in love with you.”

She shook her head, overwhelmed. Lord! Sometimes she felt as if he could read her mind. “I love you too, but you’re scaring me, Nathan. What did you do?”

He sighed, then reached out and caressed her cheek. A very sad smile played at the corners of his mouth. “We’ll talk about it tonight. I have a Skype meeting with Dominic in about ten minutes, and I’m going to be tied up most of the day with business.” He gave her a soft kiss then pulled back. “Do you really love me?”

The look on his face was almost painful. Mia blinked at him a couple times trying to get a pulse on his sudden weird mood. “Falling in love with you was the last thing I wanted, but yes, I love you. I’ll admit I’m a little more than scared considering this secret or whatever it is I don’t know about you.”

He swallowed hard and exhaled another long breath. “I hated keeping this from you, but, Mia, I had no choice. I probably fell in love with you the minute I laid eyes on you, but I knew until you felt the same way, I couldn’t share this aspect of my life with you. It would have been too hard for you to understand. I’m trusting that your love for me will help you accept this difficulty in my life and some of the things I’ve done because of it, which I’m not very proud of.”

Mia stared at him, fairly certain her expression mirrored the confusion and fear swirling in her head. Numerous scenarios filtered through her thoughts, from something

criminal, he may have done; shady business dealings. Given who he was, there was no telling. However, she was completely certain of one thing—Nathan was a good man. Troubled obviously, but everyone had their demons. She just hoped she could accept and help him with whatever ones ruled his life.

“I have to go, love, but please don’t worry. We’ll work this out. I promise.”

“Okay.”

He nodded, gave her hand another squeeze, then released her. “Mia, I’m not letting you out of my life. Get that straight. I’ll see you soon.”

She watched him leave, rubbing her fingers across her lower lip that still tingled from his kisses. Her heart beat so hard and fast, she felt like she’d just finished an emotional triathlon. What in the world could this be about? She snapped her fingers. *Bet Julia would know.* She ran to her purse, dug out her cell, and texted her.

Minutes later, Julia entered the kitchen. “Hello, my darling. You wanted to see me? Oh, how was your Fourth of July? Nathan told me the two of you were going to spend it together with some of your friends.”

Her smile was brilliant and knowing but faded when Mia couldn’t muster a similar one. “It was great, Julia, but I have to talk to you about Nathan.” She walked over to the breakfast nook and took a seat. Julia followed, her expression ripe with concern.

“What is it, cher?”

“Nathan just told me he’s been hiding something from me. We’re going to talk about it tonight. The only clue he gave me has something to do with him physically, but he said he’s not sick. I’m so worried. Is there anything you could tell me? I have a feeling I’m going to need to be prepared for this conversation.”

Mia could tell Julia knew precisely what Nathan hid, because guilt flashed across her face like a neon billboard. She swallowed hard, then said, “If I could tell you, my darling, I would, but it is not my story to tell. It will likely be shocking to you, but the fact Nathan has chosen to reveal this means he’s grown to trust you. My advice, from my heart of hearts, is to realize how much he cares for you. Try to listen with *your* heart and be understanding. Please don’t hurt him.”

“I would never hurt him. I love him.” Why would Julia say that? What was the nature of this mystery surrounding him?

She smiled brightly. “That news blesses me. He loves you too, Mia. He is your lifemate. I can promise you that.”

Mia frowned. This was the second time she’d used that term, and Nathan had used it himself yesterday. “What do you mean by lifemate?”

“The one God designed specifically for you. Dimitri is mine. There can be no other ever for those blessed with a true lifemate. Nathan is yours. You will understand what I

mean in time. For now just enjoy the unfurling of your love for one another.”

Her ambiguity was as bad as Nathan’s. However, Mia was pleased to see her new friend a woman of faith, but did God really design a person specifically for another? People married and divorced every day and went on to the next relationship. She wasn’t okay with that at all, but in this day and age it was par for the course. She wanted what Julia and Dimitri had. She wanted happily ever after. Her body and soul ached to have it with Nathan.

She let out a little groan of frustration. “I’m so freaked out, Julia. He wants to take me out tonight to some fancy restaurant. He said afterwards he’d tell me whatever it is he feels I need to know. I’m so nervous, I doubt I could eat plus I don’t have a thing to wear.”

Julia’s face wreathed with a calculating grin. “Well, I can help you with the latter dilemma. We are going shopping, cher.”

Mia rolled her eyes and giggled. “Fine. I could certainly use your help in that regard.”

She figured shopping with Julia would be a good distraction, and it was. They traipsed around malls and specialty shops most of the afternoon for the perfect dress, shoes, and bling. However, Julia had other ideas as well. She took them to a trendy spa and forced Mia to do the works—a facial, manicure, pedicure, and some crazy

seaweed body wrap, mixed with mud that reminded her of a hog swallow. It smelled just as bad.

At first, Mia protested, fearing the toll it would take on her debit card. She'd been saving money like crazy for this visit with her kids and didn't want to spend too much on herself. She'd argued with the woman until she was blue in the face, but Julia won and paid for both their spa indulgences. Mia figured another paycheck from Nathan, and she could refund her.

Julia went with her to her apartment to help her get ready for her night with Nathan. By the time Mia was dressed, she had to say Julia knew her stuff. She'd insisted on doing her hair and make-up.

Now standing in front of the mirror in her bedroom, viewing the results, Mia realized the woman had missed her calling in life. She could have been a stylist or make-up artist for the stars. "Oh my god, Julia. Thank you. I actually look...good."

"No, my darling, you look ravishing. Nathan will not be able to keep his eyes off you tonight, which was exactly my purpose. Red is definitely your color. That dress is divine."

Indeed it was. The little, slinky number with spaghetti straps and a deep cleavage line hit her midthigh. She sported a pair of four-inch red stilettos with straps that wrapped around her ankles. They were couture and sexy as hell. Mia felt femme fatal and loved it.

The doorbell rang, and her gaze slashed toward Julia. “Oh lord, am I ready for this, Julia? I’m scared.”

Julia squeezed her hand. “You are, cher. If you’re patient and understanding, it may be one of the best nights of your life. Just remember, Nathan loves you.” She gave her another once over. “And I assure you, he won’t devour you, although I’m sure he’ll be thinking about it.”

She left to get the door, leaving Mia wondering about the rather odd comment.

As soon as the driver closed the door of Nathan’s limo, they were on each other like two pieces of flypaper stuck together. He hauled her onto his lap and captured her mouth, kissing her like he hadn’t seen her in months. She was just as bad. His hair was loose, and her hands were busy playing with the inky softness while she languished in the delight of their intimacy. His hands got even busier than hers. He snaked one beneath her dress and slid his palm up her outer thigh and hip. When he started tugging at the waistband of her panties, a measure of sanity made her break the kiss.

“Stop that, Nathan.” She pushed his hands off of her and settled herself on the seat next to him. She tried for a sexy smile because she didn’t want to act prudish, yet she wanted him to know she wasn’t quite ready for the ex-rated ideas filtering through his head.

His gaze raped over her, and he growled. “You are utterly vexing tonight. I don’t even know if I’m going to be able to eat, food anyway.”

Mia didn’t know what to make of him. Sometimes his southern drawl and that strange sexy growling noise he made sucked rational thought from her mind. “Well, you can blame Julia for your misery. She was the catalyst to this result.” She waved a hand in front of her body. “Hope you like it?”

He snorted, his eyes still blazing with lust. “That has to be a rhetorical question.”

“Behave, Nathan. Where are you taking me by the way?”

He released a heavy breath and shook his head, obviously trying to clear it. “The restaurant is fairly new. It’s Mediterranean. I tried it once several weeks ago and was very impressed. I think you will be too.”

Nathan had been spot on regarding this restaurant. Mia watched all the cooking network shows and didn’t realize, until they arrived, that the owner of this restaurant was Eddie Penn, one of the most popular up and coming chefs in the country right now. How Nathan even managed a reservation astounded her, then again, he was Nathan Davenport.

When they entered the richly appointed place, filled with all things Greek and Mediterranean gracing the entrance and adjoining dining rooms, the host sporting a

tux immediately seated them. The place was packed, but they didn't wait five minutes for a server.

"Can I help you select a wine, sir?" the male server asked.

Nathan studied the wine list for a minute then looked at her. "What kind do you like? Or would you prefer a cocktail?"

"I like most any wines, but a oaky cabernet preferably with a pepper, vanilla, or coffee accent if they have such."

As a chef, Mia knew much about wine but suspected Nathan knew more and was correct when he ordered an Opus One, an older year. The server smiled, complimenting his selection. Mia bit her lower lip because Joe carried Opus. The bottle probably cost more than her next month's rent.

"What do you like to do for fun, Mia?" Nathan asked as he reached across the table and held out his hand.

She took it and glanced upward, then attempted a sexy smile. "Hang with you. Make out with you. Just anything with you." *Correct response*, she thought when his eyes lit with appreciation and desire.

"Well, every free moment I have for the rest of my life is yours if you want it."

Man, she wanted to snag that line like a fat trout on a shiny new lure, but forever with Nathan? Until he revealed this secret of his, no forevers were in her man fishing forecast. "We shall see, Nathan. I want to be with you forever more than anything, but I realize this evening is going to end

with some news I might or might not be exactly partial to. Honestly, I'm more than a little worried."

His expression mimicked her latter comment. "I'm sure you'll be shocked. In fact, you'll probably have a hard time believing me, but it's not bad." He shrugged. "Well, not in my opinion anyway, but you may feel differently. I just hope you'll judge this issue in light of the fact I love you. As I said, I did some things I shouldn't have, but I'm hoping once I explain what"—he paused and swallowed hard—"ails me, you'll understand why I did."

His response prompted a mountain of questions she of course couldn't ask here. She really wanted to believe he loved her because she was madly in love with him. Mia didn't believe herself to be a judgmental person, so she felt confident whatever he exposed to her, she would take in stride. "Well, all I can say is once we cross this mystery hurdle, we'll see if something permanent lurks in our futures. In the meantime, let's have fun."

She picked up her menu and started scoping the culinary delights. Together, they were extraordinarily bad. They ordered three entrees each and four appetizers between them. She'd requested to-go boxes before she handed her menu to the server.

They feasted. The wine Nathan ordered was surely the best she'd ever tasted. She frowned at the bottle as she poured the last lonely drop into her glass.

Nathan chuckled, waved over their server, and ordered another.

“You’re spoiling me tonight, Nathan. Lord, I’m full. I’ll need a wheelbarrow to get me out of here.”

He started laughing and looked about. “I see none, but I’ll be happy to ask the server if they have one in the back.”

“You are so much fun, Nathan. When I first met you, I would have never imagined you could be so down-to-earth. You impress me.”

“Then I’ve succeeded with my intent. I swear to you, Mia, I’ll spend the rest of my life doing whatever it takes to impress and please you.” He swallowed hard and looked into her eyes with purpose. “Don’t ever leave me, Mia. I swear to God, I couldn’t handle it.”

That comment freaked her out. His expression, his tone, and the mystery hanging in the balance tonight sparked another round of fear in her heart. She wanted to be with him forever, but what was this big secret? “What are you hiding from me, Nathan? You said it was something physical.” A crazy notion took root. “Oh my god. Please tell me you haven’t had a sex-change operation!”

He started laughing so hard, he put his linen napkin to his mouth to stifle the sound. Thankfully, the server returned just then, presented proper wine service, giving them reinforcements for their laughing fit. Mia took a sip. “You didn’t answer me,” she chided.

He grinned. “You’ve got to be kidding?”

“Well, with the mystery surrounding tonight, what’s a girl gonna think?” She took a healthy sip of the decadent wine and winked at him. Of course she knew better. She just needed to lighten the mood.

“Seriously, honey, just enjoy for now. We’ll get into it later. The only thing I ask is that you remember everything we’ve shared and most importantly, that I am the person you’ve grown to know.”

She forced a smile but didn’t reply. The festivities of the evening were fading for her at this point. She wanted answers. Nathan obviously sensed her mood and waved over the server for their check.

A short time later, they were back at his home. His territory. His ground. Mia was scared. She knew Nathan would never intentionally hurt her and understood he wanted privacy for this talk. Still, she felt a bit vulnerable as he guided her into his living room because she had no idea how this mystery might affect their relationship.

She’d passed by this room a number of times but hadn’t been inside. It was beautiful. A throwback to an era where ladies sipped mint juleps in the afternoon and wore corsets that gave them the vapors. She was fixing to have a fit of them herself at the moment as Nathan led her to a red velvet Victorian couch with the most intricately designed wood edging across the back and arms she’d ever seen.

She sat and glanced about. Antiques abounded. The fireplace situated between two tall windows with lovely

forest green, velvet curtains, sported a mantel that must have been some carver's most prized work of art. There were old tin-type photos along the top. She couldn't view them properly from this distance to see the people within, but she swore a couple strongly resembled Nathan.

Nathan sat next to her and took her hand. His expression was riddled with fear, and it fueled her own. "Just spit it out, Nathan. It can't be that bad. I've seen your heart. It's good."

He shook his head. "No, actually you haven't, not completely, but I'm going to show it to you now along with some other things. I'm about to put everything on the table between us. Complete honesty. Please don't be frightened."

Mia frowned. "I know you love me, and I love you. This can't be an insurmountable issue."

She could have sworn tears welled in his eyes, but then, he glanced at his lap and blinked a few times. When he looked back at her, his beautiful eyes were dry, but so sad.

"I do love you, Mia, more than I've ever loved anyone. I made some very bad choices that involved you when we first met. Please don't judge me too harshly."

Mia blinked at him. "Nathan, you're scaring me. I can't promise you anything until I know what I'm dealing with. What happened? What did you do?"

"Close your eyes, Mia."

Aggravated and confused but needing answers, she obeyed. Moments later, images of her and Nathan began to roll through her head. The point of view was all his at first.

She could see herself through his eyes—him looking at her and she wore work clothes. They sat face to face in his limo. He leaned in, took her in his arms, and began to kiss her. She heard him mutter delicious sexual phrases that made her blush they were so stark. The words weren't verbal but inside her mind. The oddity of it didn't register because she was caught up in the passion blazing from him to her. She began to feel it soak into her own mind and body, lighting a fire that stole rationale.

His mouth left hers to nuzzle her throat, and then he pulled back slightly. A moment later, she felt his teeth sink into her neck. She experienced a moment of pain, then her body went limp. She couldn't move. He held her in his grip, and she could hear him swallowing and knew he was drinking blood from her neck. She offered no protest because there wasn't strength in her to do so, plus desire swam through her system like salmon working their way upstream to spawn. At that moment in time, she wanted the sick thing he was doing to her maybe more than he.

Her eyes flew wide open, and she slapped her hand over her mouth. Guilt engulfed his features. Somehow, somehow, Mia knew he'd put those thoughts into her head, and they were real. They were actual memories hidden until now, and she remembered them clearly along with the time frame, which had been the night she'd met him and several thereafter. More of the same memories started filing through her thoughts again. Different incidents in

his limo. Conversations about her life, her kids, and many life experiences she'd never shared with anyone. Then more kissing episodes and him biting her neck and drinking her blood. Dear god! How many times had he done this abhorrent thing to her?

She bolted to her feet because she was going to be sick, and she wasn't going to make it to a bathroom. She ran from the room and into the yard, fell to her knees, vomiting violently. When she finished, her body was trembling so hard she couldn't even muster protest as Nathan silently pulled her off the ground and into his arms.

"God, I am so sorry, Mia. So sorry," he muttered as he settled her back onto the couch beside to him. "I never meant to hurt you or lie to you, but after it happened, I couldn't find a way to tell you the truth because I was afraid I'd lose you. Please tell me I haven't, and that you still love me. That you can forgive me."

For minutes, she just sucked in air and looked straight ahead at the wall, numb. Were those actual memories? If so, how on God's green earth had she not remembered them?

"You saw. Do you understand what I am now?"

It took her a few moments to make her head turn his direction. Pain and guilt filled his eyes. It moved her to a degree, but too many questions remained. "No, Nathan. If what I just saw in my mind was real, it was fiercely ungodly. Please tell me you did not do those horrible things to me."

She remembered the marks on her neck now, which she'd thought were bug bites. *Oh dear god. It had been real!*

He reached toward her, to caress her face. She slapped his hand away and stood. "Don't you touch me. What are you?"

"Vampire."

Mia could tell by his expression, drenched with pain and sorrow, the spoken word to be the hardest he'd uttered in his life. She could scrounge up no compassion. In her mind, that term meant someone who worshiped the devil. She knew the hollywood stuff all nonsense. However, there were people who believed themselves to be vampires, who drank blood and did all manner of sick, disgusting things for perverse, evil purposes. Mia knew Scripture. Ingesting blood was an abomination to God. Unwittingly, she'd been party to it. How he'd managed to do this to her, she didn't know; but God as her witness, he would never touch her again.

"Please, Mia, let me explain."

She stood. "You've explained enough. I have no idea what sort of sick thing you're into, but I want no part of it or you." She stalked off, headed for the door, ready to walk halfway across the city in these heels to get home and away from him.

"Mia, stop!" His voice was riddled with terror, and when she glanced back, his eyes mirrored the emotion; however, they weren't focused on her but some point beyond.

She turned her head. A woman strode into the room. She was striking, tall, dark-skinned with long black hair and eyes, wearing a short dress of the same color. She looked exotic, Spanish, maybe Italian, and probably the most beautiful woman she'd ever seen second to Julia. A bit older though. Mia guessed her to be late forties.

The woman's gaze slid between her and Nathan. A grin slowly wreathed her face but didn't reach her eyes. "*Caro*, my apologies. I've interrupted your dinner. Care to share?" She stepped toward Mia and sniffed. "Oh. She is far more than your dinner. I can scent you all over her."

The woman reached out to touch her. Mia heard a whooshing noise, then out the corner of her eye, Nathan just appeared and grabbed the woman's wrist before she could make contact. She yanked free, her dark eyes pinning Nathan with a vicious look that promised fierce consequences.

"Don't, Isabella. I mean it. Don't even consider it."

Threat laced his tone, and Mia's mind began to absorb the danger the woman presented. She thought herself to be a vampire too, she suspected. "You people are crazy." She shared a disgusted look between Nathan and the woman he'd called Isabella. "I'm outta here." She started to leave, but the woman grabbed her forearm.

"Not so fast, *Cara*. You intrigue me. Who are you to Nathan?"

She tried to jerk free of her hold, but it was like iron. "Nothing more than an ex-employee." She tried again to

free herself but couldn't. Mia was getting pissed. Long ago, Daniel had taught her and their girls a number of self-defense moves. Mia was a hairsbreadth from executing some on the woman.

"Let her go, Isabella. She's correct. She's my chef or was. Nothing more."

Mia looked at Nathan. His expression was hard, unyielding, but she sensed fear in him. Obviously, Isabella held something over his head. Hatred for the woman literally rolled off him in waves throughout this encounter. This had to be the older woman he'd been involved with when he was nineteen. Maybe he hated her. Maybe not. Nathan had proved himself to be a skilled liar. Mia was curious but not enough to deal with any more of this nonsense.

"I don't believe you, *Caro*. Even as rich as you are, I cannot imagine what she wears to be kitchen dress code. Let's see what her thoughts reveal."

Mia watched her open her mouth in yawn fashion. Seconds later, her canines extended to sharp points. Mia gasped, astounded yet mortified by the sight. *What crazy-assed world had she just landed into?*

"Don't you dare, you sick, warped, bitch," Nathan snarled.

Mia saw him grab for her neck. Isabella glared at him, and the next instant, his body come off the floor and flew backward. He hit the brick hearth of the fireplace with such force it surely must have broken every bone in his body. She screamed, terrified for Nathan. To her astonishment,

he was on his feet and next to her before her vision could capture the full course of his movements.

“If you don’t let her go, Isabella, you’ll not get what you want from me. If you hurt her, and you know what I mean, just to spite you, I’ll end my own life.”

That got her attention. She released Mia and studied her, then slid her dark, dead gaze Nathan’s direction. “So she is yours? Only a lifemated vampire or one on the verge would make such a comment. It appears I’ve found your weakness, *Caro*.”

The smile that spread across her face was pure evil. Mia shuddered. Too much insanity encircled her. She raced toward the door, but somehow, the woman appeared at the entrance, blocking her. Mia had had enough. She shoved the butt of her palm straight into the woman’s nose, knowing instantly she’d broken it, when blood sprayed, and she howled with rage.

“Oh god no, Mia!” she heard Nathan holler.

She didn’t bother with a backward glance, rushed the exit, knowing this to be her one and only chance for freedom. It wasn’t to be. The woman grabbed her by her hair, snatched her backward, and buried those horrific fangs deep in the side of her neck and ripped. Mia screamed from the ungodly pain, but she couldn’t fight. Her body had gone numb and she couldn’t move a muscle.

Isabella growled and hissed, and Mia could hear her swallowing her blood. The wound had to be very bad because

she could feel her life force gush out of her body with every labored beat of her heart, into the female demon's mouth, and she felt some trickling down her neck and chest.

Her vision started to cloud, and her gaze focused toward the ceiling, fixed and dazed. In the background, she could hear Julia screaming and Dimitri and Nathan shouting and cursing. There were sounds of furniture crashing, and she could feel vibrations of whatever forces decimated them. Most poignantly, she knew she was on the verge of death. There was fear, not for her soul but her daughters' lives and future without their mother.

Her last words were a prayer, a hoarse, barely audible whisper. "Jesus, save me please. Save us all and protect my girls."

10

When Isabella finished with Mia, she tossed her on the floor like a discarded hamburger wrapper. “Feisty little bitch. That will teach her,” she snarled, wiping the back of her hand beneath her bloodied nose.

Nathan’s heart shattered at the sight of Mia crumpled on the floor, bleeding to death. He shook with rage and fear because he knew her wound was mortal, and that feral succubus refused to let him save her.

Throughout Isabella’s assault on Mia, she continued to mentally slam him, Dimitri, and Julia across the room as they’d each fought to save Mia. Even the three of them together didn’t possess the telekinetic abilities of a feral as old as Isabella.

Blood spurted out of the tear in Mia’s neck and pooled around her head and upper body. Mia was dying. He had to get to her, and he didn’t care how many times Isabella tossed him across the room. For whatever self-serving

purpose, she didn't prevent him from rushing to her side the next time he tried. Nathan dropped to his knees, ripped off his suit jacket, balled it up, and put stern pressure against her wound.

"Relax, *Caro*. She will not die as long as you do what you must to save her. When you can think logically, you will see I did you a favor. As you know, I was in her head and yours too. She had no idea you were one of our kind, and was none too happy to learn the truth. You were a fool to think her your lifemate. Her mind revealed to me that you disgust her. At least you'll gain a fledgling. They may be boring, but the sex can be delightful for awhile as long as you maintain proper mind control."

Nathan was too focused on Mia to have sported a reply. She bled profusely, and her color grew ashen. He was losing her. With his free hand, which shook profusely, he stroked her cheek. Normally, the scent of her blood would have enthralled him. Now, he was just horrified and physically ill. Isabella was right about what he needed to do to save her, but he had to get control of his emotions first.

"Go to hell, Isabella," Dimitri ground out, his gray eyes blazing. "And get out. You're not going to accomplish what you came here for tonight after what you've just done."

Julia extended her fangs and hissed at her. "Heed my husband. You've done enough damage tonight, Isabella. If you mean what you say, then let us tend to the human."

Isabella rolled her eyes and waved a hand dismissively at them. “Fine. I will leave you to the turning process. I don’t know how the little tripe managed what she did.” She delicately fingered her nose and winced. “Nathan, I’m being extremely generous, as I’m sure you realize, by giving you this human for a fledgling after what she did. I expect you to reciprocate my kindness. If you refuse to exercise your stubbornness and give me what I want, the next time we meet, expect no mercy on my part.” She stalked from the room. The slamming of his front door echoed through the house.

Julia glanced at Mia and cringed. “I will call Christian. He will save her, Nathan, but stay strong and do what you must in the meantime to keep her alive.” She rushed from the room with preternatural speed.

“Let me hold pressure on her wound,” Dimitri said, placing his hand over Nathan’s bloody one. “You know what you have to do, but we have to rouse her. She can’t swallow if she isn’t conscious.”

Nathan nodded, then began to gently shake her and pat her cheek. She groaned and batted glassy eyes at him. She was in shock from loss of blood, and Nathan felt himself on the verge of a different kind. He knew he’d be lucky to have mere moments to get his blood into her system. It had been a long time since he’d asked God for anything, but he prayed now for the life of this woman, like he’d never prayed in his life.

He extended his fangs and slit his left wrist, placing it against her mouth. She began to squirm, trying to jerk free. Dimitri aided him, holding her head steady while using his other hand to keep the needed pressure on her neck. His suit jacket was soaked with her blood, and there was a large puddle around her upper body. He now knelt in it as did Dimitri.

Nathan loathed what he forced her to do, but he wasn't going to let her die. Eventually, natural preservation took over, and she began to swallow. Had she not, she would have drowned, and her body instinctively knew it. The hatred in her eyes when she blinked up at him sliced through his soul like a double-edged sword. He forced himself to look away. He couldn't bear it.

Eventually, she lost consciousness. Nathan stopped feeding her and flicked his tongue across the gash. Vampire saliva had an agent that stopped bleeding in small wounds.

Julia returned with towels. She helped Dimitri replace Nathan's jacket with them. "Christian is on his way. Fortunately, he was at his city clinic, delivering a baby earlier. He should be here shortly any time. Unless there's something else I can do, I will go watch for him."

"Just get him here." He shot Julia a look to tell her he felt his lifemate clinging to her own life by a thread.

Minutes later, he heard the doctor's voice, and both he and Julia rushed to Mia's side. Dr. La Mond gave the scene a cursory glance, sat a large box on the floor, and started

digging inside with speed born of their kind, laying out all sorts of medical supplies and some various surgical instruments on a large blue thing that looked part cloth, part paper.

Dr. La Mond glanced up at Dimitri with a worried expression no one wanted to see a doctor sport when a loved one was in such a critical situation. “Start an IV on her. Julia, you keep pressure on her neck until I’m ready.” His gaze cut to Nathan. “Julia said you gave her your blood orally. She’ll need more IV. Dimitri, start an IV on him when you’re finished with Mia and draw two units.” He nodded toward the kit he’d brought indicating to Dimitri the necessary supplies were inside.

Dimitri was quick and efficient, having started thousands of IVs on his children when they were young. It was the norm for their kind’s offspring since the advent of blood transfusions. When Dimitri finished with Mia, he inserted one in him and began to draw blood.

Meanwhile, Dr. La Mond gloved up and began what Nathan could only refer to as a field surgery. No anesthetic. He made a slight incision and started stitching her vein or whatever was bleeding. It roused her enough for her to let out a weak cry, then she passed out again.

Nathan couldn’t watch anymore. He turned his back on the god awful scene.

“I’m going to kill Isabella. If it’s the last thing I do, I’m going to make it my mission and pleasure in life to send her black soul to hell.”

Dimtri said from behind him, “I’ll be by your side to assist, my friend. Both of us should have pooled our resources and done so long ago.”

Nathan said no more. If it were easy to kill a feral as mature as Isabella, someone would have done it already. She was a master at survival. There were modern methods to take down ferals. Weaponry one of them, if en masse, and he had the resources to buy them and the manpower to take her down. If he could just find her maleficent ass.

He cursed himself for not having more security on hand tonight. It hadn’t been an oversight. Dominic had sent him the men he’d hired thus far, most humans and a couple young vampires, but obviously, Isabella had discovered them outside and enchanted or overpowered them.

Julia told him how adversely Mia had reacted to his men that day, so Nathan had instructed his guards to stay out of sight when he arrived home with Mia. Foolishly, he thought the eight to be enough. He was an idiot. He should have had a small army in place before he ever hired Mia. Even that probably would have done no good.

Whenever you least expected Isabella, there she was, he thought. He couldn’t spend any more mental energy on her. Mia was all that mattered now. She would live. She had to. But she would be vampire if she did survive. Although

when she realized what she'd become because of his lies, his lusts, his determination to have her at any cost...He couldn't finish the thought.

He'd been so selfish. He knew anyone around him right now was in danger of becoming victim to Isabella. And he'd led Mia straight into the feral bitch's hands.

If Mia hated him now, she would abhor him when she woke up as the vile thing that had taken her life. The vile thing he was.



“How much longer until she wakes?” Nathan asked Dr. La Mond, who stood on the other side of Mia's hospital bed, messing with some valve on her IV line.

The doctor's gold gaze slid his way, where Nathan sat in a chair on the opposite side of Mia's bed. It had been his permanent spot for the last three days, except for the few times the doctor shooed him, Julia, and Dimitri out when episodes of her turning got nasty and violent. Dr. La Mond assured them she probably wouldn't remember much if anything regarding her turning, due to the drugs he'd given her.

“The morphine should be wearing off soon.”

“Are you sure she'll be okay?” His tone sounded a little desperate, but he couldn't help it. The terror which had taken root in his soul the night Isabella ripped out Mia's throat hadn't abated since.

He remembered bits and pieces of his own ungodly turning. Isabella had been with him the entire time, forcing him to drink blood from her wrist, then feeding from his neck when the mood struck her. He hadn't had the luxury of painkillers to counteract the agony he'd suffered. At the time, he'd prayed for death, but God had not been so generous.

"Physically, she'll be fine. Mentally?" He hunched a shoulder. "The turning is complete, but the healing process will take a few more weeks. Some of the physical changes and physic abilities maybe years. You're a turned vampire. You know she'll have to get used to her new body, her heightened senses. She'll get there in her own time. I've been party to hundreds of turnings. Humans always adjust. However, the ones I've attended where the human going through it did not give their permission always involved ugly waking episodes."

Reproof flickered in the doctor's gold eyes. Nathan said nothing, just looked back at Mia, hooked up to all sorts of medical devices. He knew the man judged him. Rightfully so. Isabella may have caused Mia's misfortune, but he had guilt to bear as well.

He'd waited too long to tell her. It probably would have made little difference, given her reaction. His timing had been a stroke of really bad luck. Had he told her sooner, he would have lost her no doubt, but at least she wouldn't have encountered Isabella.

Nathan was a master at calculating risks and variables in business dealings, but he sucked in the romantic arena. The most important variable he'd failed to take into consideration was Mia's spirituality. He'd known she had strong Christian values, but stupidly, he'd thought their burgeoning love would get her past the shock and fear of what he was and what he'd done to her.

In the end, the love that had been growing between them made no difference. Mia saw him as Satan's spawn now. He'd viewed the heartbreaking reality in her thoughts, which he'd stayed out of until their relationship fired romantically. Another selfish violation.

To her, he was a sick, devious person who ingested blood for a dark, evil purpose. He couldn't fault her based on everything he'd done to her. He'd used her. That's what vampires did, but it didn't make it right. His actions were unforgivable. Dr. La Mond had been right. He'd been living in a fantasy world thinking Mia would ignore his sins once she realized the truth.

"How do I get her through this?" he asked, meaning her upbringing in their ways. He'd lost her trust; therefore, he couldn't imagine her allowing him to teach her about her new body, the world of her new species. Plus as an unmated female of their kind, she would need a protector from feral males. Should she have the misfortune of crossing paths with one, her life would be over. Perhaps not physically, but if one captured her, she'd surely wish to die.

“I don’t know her, but judging from what each of you have said, it would be my guess she wouldn’t let you help her. Maybe Julia, but I doubt it. As I said, I suspect her awakening to the truth to be a vile one. She probably won’t want anything to do with any of our kind.”

Nathan stared at her, knowing in his heart, the man’s comments to be correct. The reality terrified him, but he understood. He too had once hated his kind. For many years in fact.

The beginning of his fledgling life had been demonically slave-like. His only reason for living had been to please Isabella. He’d been under her power and control in every way. His mind and body had belonged to her. Whether she required sex, his blood or the murder of human lives, he’d only been too happy to give her all she requested. As her fledgling, he’d been powerless to refuse, until she finally mentally released him, and he’d been able to regain rational thinking.

For many years afterward, he’d viewed himself as a sick spawn of hell, until other vampires came into his life and explained the basis of their disease and the unmitigated power a feral held over a fledgling. Logically, he knew Isabella had stolen his choice making abilities, yet even to this day, he condemned himself for the things he’d done.

Mia would certainly condemn him. Be that as it may, he couldn’t lose her. Somehow, he had to find a way to

make her forgive him. To make her understand what being vampire truly meant.

Nathan heard the door creak open and looked up. Julia and Dimitri entered, glanced at Mia, then him.

“How is she?” Julia asked Dr. La Mond.

“Close to waking.” He shared a warning look between the three of them. “Based on everything you’ve told me, I expect her frame of mind and emotions to be fragile when she remembers. We all have to be very careful what we say to her, but she needs to know the truth. I plan to dose it to her as gently as I can. Basically, I will be doing the talking when she wakes up.”

Julia nodded, her expression grim. “She’s going to be terrified when she learns what she has become.”

“I have everything medically in place I can provide, should her actions warrant them.”

Nathan heard a soft moan. His gaze slashed to the bed, and his heart stuttered in his chest as he watched Mia’s eyelids flutter. She sucked in a deep breath, then glanced about the room, taking in all of the occupants as well as her surroundings, the IV pole holding a saline solution bag and a unit of human blood, the beeping heart monitor displaying her vital signs.

Her new eyes were a brilliant, shiny shade of rich amber, beautiful but at the moment full of fear and confusion. The shimmering color and enlarged irises were a result of her turning. Her thick auburn curls were a disaster, matted with

blood, but her features were rosy and robust like that of any healthy vampire. The turning had also induced a measure of youth. She had actually “un-aged” a few years, another result of her turning.

She shared a glare between him and Dr. La Mond. “Where am I?”

Dr. La Mond answered, “Mia, do you remember me? I’m Dr. La Mond.”

She frowned at him then nodded. “Yes.” She looked at Julia and Dimitri standing at the end of her bed, then her gaze honed on him with loathing.

She remembered. His heart sank.

She scrambled upright in the bed. “What you said. What you showed me. I don’t understand any of it. And that horrible woman! What kind of crazy cult are you people into?”

Dr. La Mond supplied the answer. “Mia, I need you to calm down, or I’ll have no choice but to give you something that will relax you. Every answer you need will be provided when you’re stable enough to hear it. Okay?”

She stared at the doctor for several minutes, a myriad of troubled emotions skating across her features. Eventually, the rapid beeping of the heart monitor settled down as well as her breathing. “Explain,” she demanded.

“I’ve spoken to Nathan, Julia, and Dimitri at length about what happened to you. I understand Nathan explained to you he’s vampire.”

Her eyes narrowed to slits. “That’s nonsense. You know as well as I do there are no such things as vampires, just people who want to play vampire because it’s a weird pulp fiction trend these days.”

He took her hand and offered her a kind doctorly sort of smile. “I’m sure it seems that way, but you’re wrong. If you want to understand the truth, you’re going to have to divorce from your mind what you believe vampires to be because they are real people, but they aren’t human, and they aren’t evil.”

She reached up and fingered the bandage on her neck, covering the vicious wound Isabella inflicted. “How can you expect me to believe that? Whether that awful woman thinks she’s a vampire or not, she’s clearly evil. I remember what that she-spawn of Satan did to me.”

The doctor offered her a compassionate smile. “She’s an evil one of our kind, and I can’t tell you how sorry I am you encountered her, but she doesn’t represent our race anymore than serial killers represent the whole of the human race.”

She yanked her hand from his. “Are you saying you’re a part of this cult too?”

“Simmer down, Mia, and listen. None of us are a part of an evil cult. If you don’t feel up to this discussion now, we can table it for later.”

She shook her head. “No. I need answers.” She sported a condemning look Nathan’s way, then Julia and Dimitri’s. “They’ve been in short supply of late.”

Julia and Dimitri's expressions filled with guilt and hurt. Of course Nathan felt a healthy dose of those emotions himself. He realized she felt betrayed by them too for their lies of omission.

Dr. La Mond crossed his arms over his chest. "Vampires are physical beings. Mammals, a subspecies of humans. We evolved from them. Unfortunately, due to a blood disease, which hinders our kind from properly reproducing our own blood cells, we need human blood to aid us in making that happen. The reason is a bit complicated, but basically, our two species are so entwined, our people would not exist without yours. My point is this, we are a race of people with a blood disease, not monsters, not evil."

Mia shook her head, appearing confused. "But you people drink blood. It's an abomination. A sin."

The doctor frowned. "I'm not a particularly religious man, but I do believe in God. I suppose it would be wrong for a human to consume blood because there's no need for them to do so. If you believe in creation, Mia, can you condemn a wolf or lion for killing prey to eat? Our kind must survive, but we don't kill to do it. We've developed evolutionary methods to take what we need from human donors without causing harm and without them ever remembering the incident."

She gasped and stared at him as if his head had just spun around in a circle. "Survival or not, that's just plain wrong!"

“Look here.” He pointed to the nearly drained unit of blood on the IV pole. “This is how I survive as well as a great majority of our kind. Some of our people, especially males”—the doctor’s gaze slid toward him, then Dimitri—“choose to hunt because it’s instinctual. I place no judgment on those who do, but because I’m a doctor who sees not only vampire patients but humans, ethically, I can’t feed from them.”

“What?” She shook her head and glared at him. “I don’t even know where to begin. What sort of doctor are you?”

He gave her an understanding smile. “An OB/GYN for our kind and a plastic surgeon for humans. I’ll explain more in time. For now, you need to rest and heal. Point is, you’ll never have to orally ingest blood in your life if you don’t want to.”

“What do you mean I’ll never have to ingest blood?” Sick horror engulfed her features as she stared at the doctor, then her gaze honed on Nathan.

“I couldn’t let you die, Mia. At the time, I had only one option to save you.”

For several moments, she just glared at him, then she exploded, screaming the word no over and over again and tried to bolt off the bed. Both he and the doctor grabbed her arms and shoulders, Dimitri her ankles, and together, they held her down. She fought and cursed them viciously. She didn’t realize it, but she now had vampire strength; and even as a newborn female of their kind, mixed with fear

and rage, the magnitude of that strength was incredible. It took all three of them to keep her on the bed.

At some point during the fray, Dr. La Mond shouted for some woman named Betty. A nurse he realized, when an older human woman ran inside wearing blue scrubs.

“Get me the sedative I have ordered for her. Now!”

She took off at a run. Minutes later, the nurse returned with a hypodermic syringe. She injected the needle into a rubber-capped joint on the IV line. Shortly, Mia’s struggles ceased. She sucked in sharp ragged breaths, and her eyelids grew a bit droopy; but obviously, her mind still fully functioned based on what she said next.

“I hate you, Nathan. You are a twisted, lying freak! Get away from me.” Her gaze slashed to Julia. “I thought you were my friend. You’re as bad if not worse than him, because you set me up to be bait for his sick ass. I hate you too. Get out. All of you!” She made a lame attempt to lift her arm, but it fell onto the bed with a little thump. Moments later, her head turned to the side, and the medicine the nurse gave her took over.

Julia clamped a hand over her mouth and started weeping. Dimitri folded her into his arms and stroked her head. “Oh god, I never imagined this could end so badly. I thought her love for Nathan would prevail.” She pulled away from her husband and faced him. “Nathan, I am so sorry. I tried. I only wanted happiness for you both.”

Dr La Mond said, “It’s not your fault, Julia. It’s no one’s fault except for that feral female who caused this. Although she could have been spared this had she not been a part of your world.” His gaze raked over Nathan with disdain, then he walked over to Julia and took her hand. “I promise you, darlin’, I’ll do whatever I can. She’s furious now and feeling seriously betrayed, but maybe I can get through to her. I’ll give it my best. Okay?”

“Bless you, Christian. I know if anyone could help her through this, it would be you.”

“Thank you,” Nathan added.

La Mond faced him, his expression fierce, condemning. “Don’t thank me yet. Based on her reaction just now, I doubt she’ll want anything to do with you anytime soon, if ever. Whether she’s your lifemate or not, I don’t know, but what I do know is this, you could have been honest with her before you hired her and long before you started courting her. On top of that, you knew this feral woman posed a danger to you and everyone around you. Julia is my patient, and you placed her in danger. I have very little respect for you. This poor woman”—he glanced at Mia—“has been thrust into a life she wants no part of because of her association with you. I may not have a lifemate myself, but I suspect many of the reasons you procrastinated with honesty were self-serving.”

He snarled at the man, pissed at his high and mighty attitude. Had Mia not been the main issue here, he would have received far worse.

Dimitri said, “That is unfair, Christian. Nathan came to New Orleans to hide from Isabella. He has a safe house here, yet somehow she found him. That’s not his fault. We arrived at his home long before Nathan came to the city. You know he is like a brother to me. We share our residences whenever necessary. None of us imagined Isabella finding him. Now that she has, it will not matter where Julia and I reside. If she found Nathan, she will find us should she choose to use us as pawns in this game of hers. However, Nathan provided security for Julia and Mia, which was on hand that night. Unfortunately, she enchanted the men. What could anyone do against a feral as old as Isabella?”

Nathan added, “As you said, you have no lifemate. Easy to judge for someone who has nothing to lose by being forthright. You saw how she reacted. When would there have ever been a good time to tell her I was a member of our kind when she views us all as devil worshipers?”

Dimitri said, “He is right. Mia is a Christian woman. She would have never abided the news. None of us understood the depth of her moral compass until now. We all miscalculated her response to the truth. Julia and I believed she loved Nathan and would accept him as her lifemate. Apparently, we calculated incorrectly.”

The doctor remained silent, glancing between them all. Finally, he sighed. “You have a point. My nurse, Betty, is a human, and I know she goes to church occasionally. She or I will stay by her side. However, none of you need to be near her for a good long while. Go home. I’ll keep you updated on her condition, but the information will be scant. I won’t violate patient/physician confidentiality.”

Leaving Mia felt akin to his heart being ripped from his chest, but after her outburst, Nathan knew the doctor’s advice correct. The ride home in the limo was a miserable, dark silence between the three of them. His heart labored in his chest from the impending likelihood he would lose his lifemate forever due to his lies.

11

When Mia woke, her mind and body felt groggy, weighted. She fluttered her eyes, struggling to open them. A loud steady beeping sound yanked her memories back to the moments prior to her terrifying slide into unconsciousness. She glanced to her left and spotted a heart monitor, then she remembered every horrid detail that had happened to her that awful night at Nathan's.

Fear speared through her chest. Her gaze scoured the room for crazy-assed vampires. Thankfully, the deceitful, evil ones who had ruined her life were absent, but that nurse who had injected some drug into her IV, now sat in a chair to the right of her bed, smiling at her, a book in her hands.

"I'm glad to see you're awake. How are you feeling, Ms. Peebles?"

Mia scowled at her. "I guess you're one too?"

She gave Mia a compassionate look, stood, closed her book, and placed it on her seat. "No. I'm human. I realize

you're scared, but let me assure you, you're in a safe place. No one will harm you while you're here."

Mia wanted to believe that, but she'd been lied to so much, she dared not trust anyone associated with these people who thought themselves vampires.

She thought back to Dr. La Mond's explanation for why these nutty people drank blood. A disease, he'd said. If he'd been honest, then she had the disease too because she clearly remembered Nathan forcing his wrist to her mouth, Dimitri holding her down. She shuddered, recalling Nathan's blood pooling in her mouth. She'd swallowed; otherwise, she would have choked to death.

If what Dr. La Mond said was true, she wished she'd choked to death.

"I bet you're thirsty," the nurse said and poured some water from one of those generic hospital pitchers into a plastic cup. She extended it toward her. "I'm Betty."

Mia sat up, took it, and drank greedily. Her mouth was so dry it felt like the eye of a sandstorm. Finished, she handed the glass back to the nurse and studied her. The woman was older, maybe midfifties, early sixties. She had a short style of salt and pepper hair and brown eyes that were warm and kind. She seemed centered. However, Mia was nowhere near ready to trust anyone yet.

"Why would you work for a doctor who thinks he's a vampire?" she demanded.

She chuckled, refilled the water glass, and handed it to her. "It's a little bit of a long story, but I'll be happy to share it if you want."

"Share away. Anything that will help me make sense of this crap is welcome." Mia drank.

Betty nodded. "I've been a nurse now for thirty-five years. The majority of my career I spent working in nursing homes. I enjoyed taking care of elderly people and dementia patients, but I finally came to a point I just couldn't stand watching people I'd come to love die. I needed a change.

"About twelve years ago, I ran across an AD Dr. La Mond placed for an OB/GYN nurse. I'd never worked in that field and figured it to be a long shot but applied anyway. During the interview, he told me the nature of his practice and explained the illness that plagues their species. I didn't know what to think at first, then as I thought about it, I realized a disease is a disease. If the people he treated were afflicted with one I'd never heard about, then I was simply uneducated but willing to learn how to treat these people. So I accepted the job, and I've never been sorry."

Was she crazy? Mia thought. "But what if you'd refused? Freaked out?"

She smiled and glanced upward briefly, her expression contemplative. "Well, I suppose I would have never remembered the interview. I'm sure you realize by now, vampires can erase a human's memory, control their

thoughts. Maybe he sensed my love for my work and took a chance with me. Whatever the case, I'm glad for it."

Mia struggled to find the logic but failed. "I remember what Dr. La Mond told me. Plus the memories of what happened to me are branded in my brain. They consume blood. That's wrong."

Betty offered her an understanding smile. "These people who call themselves vampires because they need blood to survive, via transfusions or otherwise, are just people. Different in many ways from humans yet possessing traits and personalities that make them each as unique and individual as any person on earth. I've never met a bad one yet. I'm sorry you did. However, where Dr. La Mond is concerned, trust me, he is hands down one of the best doctors I've ever worked with in my life. I promise you, hon, he will take good care of you while you're here."

There should have been an audience present to applaud that speech, but Mia wasn't handing out any Oscars just yet. "Obviously, the general public is unaware of this blood disease these people have. How is that possible? Especially in this day and age?" And how in the world had a man like Nathan hidden this from the public eye? Generally, media and paparazzi followed him everywhere he went from what she knew of him. Why they hadn't in New Orleans was a mystery.

Betty gave her a sage smile. "The lives of these people are very difficult, steeped in secrecy because of what they

must do to survive. As I said, they can control the mind of humans and erase their memories. Of course some of them have failed in that regard, which is why there are endless theories regarding the existence of vampires. Until I met Dr. La Mond, I too thought vampires were the stuff of myths and legends. So to sum up your question, I would have to say humans have witnessed vampires feeding, a very fearful thing, which has colored them evil. But I assure you, by nature, the majority of them are just as moral and decent as humans.”

Mia stifled the urge to stick her finger in her mouth and gag. She had one thing right though. These vampires could control a person’s mind, and obviously, one of them controlled hers if she thought for a second someone who seduced a human with mind control and drank blood from them to be moral and decent.

She was done playing vampire jeopardy with the woman. Mia wanted to go home. “Where am I? I suspect I’m not in a regular hospital.”

“No. This is Dr. La Mond’s private clinic. It’s a country lodge, which houses mothers ready to birth. It’s a very large place. He lives here also. The third story has a nursery and eight maternity suites for moms and babies. The second story is his. The lower portion, which we’re in now, is a small hospital that functions in all capacities necessary to take care of his kind.”

“Where is he? I want to talk to him. I want to go home.”

Her expression was understanding but firm. “Like any hospital, you will go home when your doctor releases you. Right now, he’s in delivery. As soon as he’s free, I assure you he’ll be in here to consult with you. In the meantime, would you like to eat or take a shower?”

Mia’s most prominent need was the bathroom. A shower would be nice too. She reached up and fingered her hair which was matted and crisp. She suspected blood, then shivered. “I need to pee, and yes, I would like to bathe. I feel slimy.”

The nurse smiled. “Then let’s get you to the bathroom, dear.”

The clock on the wall across the room to the left of the TV read a bit after five in the afternoon. Mia had waited most of the day to see this blasted doctor. He might be a vampire, but he was no different than any other doctor she’d ever encountered. *They all kept you waiting until you were ready to pull your hair out*, she thought. Remote in hand, she flipped through channels on the TV like a bored teenager. It was fruitless. She punched the off button. Nothing could hold her attention.

Prior to her bath, Betty unhooked her from all her devices, including her IV line, but left the needle in her vein. She’d used the freedom to pace around her room today. She decided to do so again.

One blessing beyond her bath had occurred. She’d been provided with some real clothes to wear, not one of those

awful hospital gowns that left one's rear flapping in the breeze. Several pair of decent jeans, shirts, shoes, and under things had been placed in the dresser beneath the TV. Betty had been vague about their origin but assured her they weren't from Nathan, Julia, or Dimitri. She hoped that to be true. If she discovered otherwise, she'd wrap her sheet around her like a toga before she'd wear anything brought to her from those people.

There were no windows to look out, because Betty told her the hospital was underground. She shuddered. All of this was frickin' creepy. She felt like she starred in a bad remake of *The Rocky Horror Picture Show*. And like the song "Hotel California," she feared she might never check out of this godforsaken hospital.

She heard footsteps in the hall, heavy ones. Mia turned and faced the door, heart pounding. Seconds later, it opened and Dr. La Mond walked in, wearing a lab coat and some blue scrub pants. His long blond hair was tied back, and there was no way to describe him other than hot. It was merely an observation, not intrigue. She'd found him attractive before she'd known he was a vampire, but now there was only one thing she wanted from the man—her freedom.

He smiled. "You're looking good. Betty told me you're feeling better."

"I'm about to tear my hair out. I'm so insanely bored. When can I go home?"

His expression sobered. “You aren’t quite ready for that, Mia. You’re going to need some physical therapy before you’ll be fit to face the world again.”

Mia’s patience had expired hours ago, aided by him taking his own sweet time getting here. “I don’t need physical therapy. I feel just fine. In fact, better than fine. Whatever you’ve been dosing me up with through that IV did the trick. I’m so antsy, I think I could run a ten-mile marathon.”

He smiled. “Pretty soon you probably could but one step at a time. I have some treatments planned for you, but don’t worry, they won’t hurt, and they will be very relaxed and informal. Give me about thirty minutes, and I’ll be back to get you. I have a feeling you’ll enjoy the first one I have planned for you.”

Her gaze narrowed with the brunt of her impatience. “Listen, I’ve had it up to here”—she slashed a hand over the top of her head—“with people feeding me innuendos and lies. Shoot straight, damn it.”

He chuckled, the last thing she would have expected given her mood and attitude. “Fine. You’re going to have your evening meal outside with me. The purpose is sensory training. All of your senses are much more intense than before. You’ll need time to adjust to them. In here, you’ve been in a vacuum so to speak. The real world will be much different, and you’ll need time to get used to your new body. It’ll start to make more sense once you’re exposed. I know

you're frustrated, confused, and well, just plain pissed off. Who could blame you? Let me help you get through this. I know I've kept you waiting a long time, but I'll be back shortly, I promise. Okay?"

She huffed. "Like I have a choice?"

He chuckled, then sauntered out the door.

True to his word, about thirty minutes later, the doctor returned. He'd taken a shower. His hair was pulled back in a ponytail again but a little damp, and he smelled great, like apples and sandalwood, albeit a bit overpowering. *Far better than all these hospital smells that had been assaulting her nose since she woke up*, Mia thought.

He was correct about one thing. Her senses were on steroids. She could smell everything, down to the polyurethane on the dresser, which was by no means a new piece judging from its slightly used condition. Oh, and that blasted heart monitor had nearly driven her batty prior to Betty unhooking it from her. The beeping sound had been so annoyingly loud, she'd wanted to take a sledgehammer to it.

The doctor had changed into jeans, cowboy boots, and a T-shirt with a country/western band logo across the front that reminded her of one Tiffany or Chelsie might wear because they both loved country music. Dannie abhorred it. She had a passion for pop and classical music and played one or the other so loud when she painted, neighbors would pound on the walls of her apartment.

They took an elevator one floor up. When they exited into a hallway, she felt teleported into an entirely different world. The walls were oak color, rough hewn logs, decorated with prints of various hunting scenes, some with pointer and brittany dogs holding foul at bay, others with hunters shooting at quail or pheasant. She followed him through a large kitchen, not as big as Nathan's yet a well-appointed chef's one.

He paused to open a drawer on a little oak curio table next to a door, pulled out two pairs of sunglasses, and handed her one. "You'll need to wear these while outdoors in daylight. Don't take them off for any reason."

She took them, then stared at him, not sure what to make of the stern edict. "Why?"

"Throughout your physical therapy, I'll be teaching you how your five senses differ from before your accident. Your eyes will never be able to endure direct sunlight again. Failure to do so will feel like someone's poured acid in them. You'll always need to wear sunglasses specifically designed to protect our kind's eyes."

Mia swallowed hard. The information scared her, but she appreciated the honesty and placed them on her face. She followed him out the door onto a wide covered porch that ran the length of the building, a good 250 feet she estimated, end to end. The exterior wall was log siding, much like she'd witnessed in the hallway, but weathered. Four wood-slatted porch swings hung from the rough beam

rafters. Six sets of wrought iron patio table and chairs with comfy-looking southwestern-designed cushions dotted the long space in between the swings. Beyond the porch was a nicely landscaped backyard then acres and acres of bayou heaven.

He led her to one of the tables where two plates of food and ice teas had been placed and pulled a chair out for her. “Have a seat, darlin’.”

She obeyed, then nearly sprung out of it when the sound of bullfrogs croaking nearby made her ears ring. Added to that was some noisy bird creating all sorts of racket in a nearby tree. “Why is everything so loud?”

The doctor sat down across from her and smiled. “Your hearing will be a little difficult for you to control at first. Everything will seem amplified, but you’ll quickly learn to concentrate on the specific sound, voice, or noise you want to hear, then tune out the rest. Right now, I want you to focus on me, my voice, and our conversation. Do your best to ignore the other sounds. If you can’t, if they become too intense, we’ll go back inside.”

Mia squeezed her eyes closed for a moment and tried to displace the sounds. Although they were aggravating, the scent of fried chicken, baked beans, and pickled cucumbers perked up her nose and took her mind away from the noise and slight pounding in her ears.

She looked at her plate, and her tummy rumbled. Betty brought her lunch shortly after her bath, but she’d just

pushed the food around her the plate, too anxious to eat. When she looked up, Dr. La Mond shoved a forkful of beans into his mouth.

He swallowed, then said, “Eat, darlin’. What are you waiting for?”

Generally, she said grace. Would it even matter? How did God view her now? She wanted to believe she simply had a disease, but the memories Nathan revealed to her that night were never far from her mind. She knew he’d done something to make her compliant when he bit her and drank her blood, but she remembered her own actions, and they shamed her greatly. The thoughts robbed her appetite, but she sighed, then took a bite of the cucumber dish, knowing her body needed the nutrition.

The flavors of vinegar, pickling spices, and cucumber exploded in her mouth, and she groaned. She took a bite of the beans next. Same result. As a chef, she could tell the ingredients in both dishes to be rather generic, but either hunger or something to do with this vampire thing made the food taste like ambrosia.

“Good?” he asked.

“Incredible. I guess I’m hungrier than I thought.”

“Certainly. Betty told me you haven’t eaten much. However, it’s not just hunger. Your taste buds have enhanced. Your sense of smell too. In fact, it will be your most prominent sense. In time, it will serve you well in many ways. I know you’re a chef. Take both as a career

benefit if you will.” He grinned, then dug into his piece of chicken.

He had a point. A keen palate was critical to culinary creativity, and she knew smell and taste were entwined when it came to enjoying food. However, Mia would have rather lost every taste bud in her mouth than to have this cursed existence. She was not grateful in the least Nathan had saved her life. If what she had really was life.

Mia had so many questions. “Can I ask you something?”

“Of course,” Dr. La Mond replied and wiped his hands on his napkin.

“What will happen to me if I don’t have human blood?”

His face took on a combined air of compassion and earnest. “You will die. You can’t survive without blood any more than you could survive without air. However, as I already told you, it can be taken IV.”

“If that’s true, why would anyone want to drink it?” Her appetite began to wane, thinking about such an abhorrent act, specifically the one Nathan had executed on her. She shuddered recalling those moments he’d forced her to drink his blood, which had been equally disgusting.

“It’s instinctual for our kind, and the taste is not unpleasant to us, quite the opposite. Think of it like this, a prey animal such as a cow eats grass, right?”

Mia nodded. She understood what he was driving at, having worked on a farm most of her life. “So what you’re

saying is a cow enjoys the taste of grass or grain, because it's their necessary food source."

"Exactly. We wouldn't exist if we didn't enjoy the taste of blood. Blood transfusions, as I'm sure you realize, haven't been around that long. Our species is almost as old as the human one. Every creature on the planet has evolutionary adaptations to equip them for survival, right?"

"Yes. I get your point," she replied in a dismal tone, then picked up her fork and began eating. She didn't want to talk about this anymore. This blood issue seriously depressed her.

Dr. La Mond returned to his meal, and they were silent for some time. He finally broke it. "That dinner you made the other night was amazing. How long have you been a chef?"

"Only four years. Although, I've always wanted to open my own restaurant someday or maybe a catering business," she confessed, glad for the innocuous subject change.

"Why haven't you?"

"Money and a divorce. Prior to that, kids." She shrugged. "Plus the desire to do it came late in life." She took a sip of iced tea, then began picking at her chicken breast, popping little pieces in her mouth.

"How many kids do you have?"

"Three." She expounded on each of them and their merits and life achievements. By the time she was done, their plates were clean. He asked questions intermittently about them and seemed interested, but Mia felt bad

hogging the whole conversation. “Your turn. Dish on your past.” She stared at him and took a drink of tea.

He nodded once. “I’m a born vampire. I guess you realize there are both born ones and those turned like you?”

Mia had too much on her mind to give thought to that, but remembering Julia was pregnant and had grown children and he an OB/GYN—well of course. “Okay. Go ahead.”

“I was born in 1917. My father is a doctor for our kind too. My mother, well, just an amazing woman. She wanted more children, but I was all she got. She spoiled me rotten.”

“Oh my god. I must have heard you wrong. What year?”

He smiled. “Sorry. I haven’t explained vampire lifespan yet. We live approximately seven times longer than humans. We get old and die. It just takes about five or six hundred years longer.”

“Seriously? Why?” *My god, Mia thought, what would it be like to live that long? Would I even want to?* Her life hadn’t always been an excellent adventure, and this new one terrified her.

“The answer to that is theoretical. None of our scientists know exactly why our bodies are stronger than humans. It’s believed humans once lived as long as us. If you believe in the Bible, you’ve probably read of humans who lived seven, eight hundred years, or better. I’m not saying I believe that because there is no scientific proof.”

Mia nodded. “Perhaps not, but I most definitely believe the Bible and I believe people did live that long once. Supposedly, God shortened our lifespan due to sin.”

He shrugged. “Well, if that’s true, He didn’t shorten ours. Maybe He didn’t consider it necessary because there’s approximately one born vampire to every 94,000 born humans.”

“Wow.” Mia was intrigued. She didn’t wish to be, but this was her life now. As much as she hated it, sticking her head in the sand wouldn’t make all of this go away.

“Anyway, back to your question. The most prominent theory is based on our reproductive difficulties. Our females have roughly three hundred reproductive years yet great difficulty conceiving. The average lifemated couple will have two to three children in a lifetime.

“The good news is, you have a long life ahead of you, and our kind don’t suffer the diseases of humans, nor can we contract any of their blood transmitted illnesses. We do have a few diseases of our own, and of course we have mortal bodies so we can die from injuries. But physically, we are much stronger than humans in most every way.”

“How so?”

“Speed. Agility. Strength. All of which are about ten times that of a human.” He paused to give attention to his glass of tea.

Mia thought back to that horrific night that had altered her life forever. Now it made sense why both Nathan and

that witch Isabella seemed to appear out of nowhere and why she didn't have the physical strength to fight her off. She winced.

"I suspect from that scared look on your face, you're remembering something. If you want to talk about anything that happened to you, I'll do my best to help you understand and deal with concerns."

He seemed very kind and honest, but knowing what he was, she was loathe to trust him. Mia knew if she wanted answers and a ticket out of this place, she would have to place some trust in the man. He was her key and portal to freedom. "I can't understand how that vampire woman was able to just look at Nathan, and he went flying across the room. Does that make sense?"

"Yes," he replied, his expression terse. "Julia and Dimitri told me about Isabella a long time ago. I've never met her, thank God, but she's bad news. When their son, Dominic, was around six, she kidnapped him to blackmail Dimitri into leaving Julia to become her fledgling again. What that term means is either a newly made vampire, like yourself, or one completely under the control of a more mature one. It's our guess Isabella is about four hundred years old, and she's what we call a feral vampire. Very powerful and evil and insane."

"Well, that last part is certainly no news flash. How can she be stronger than a man Nathan's size?"

“Physically, she’s not, but our kind possesses physic and telekinetic abilities due to a gland in the brain housed between the thalamus and hypothalamus. It’s responsible for all these abilities I’m telling you about and more which I’ll explain eventually. Basically, she has extremely honed telekinetic abilities, which we all develop through time. Let me show you.” He sat his glass down and stared at the next table set down the porch. One of the chairs started scooting across the wood slat porch floor, stopping between them.

Mia gasped. “Oh my god!”

He chuckled. “You can’t do that yet, but someday, you will if you choose to exercise those abilities. It’s like anything else regarding your body and mind. Practice makes perfect.”

For a few moments, Mia just blinked at him, overwhelmed yet curious. “What do you mean by physic abilities? Betty told me vampires can control a person’s mind.”

He nodded. “Yes and read their thoughts. It’s a necessary adaptation, which enables us to feed without causing the human donor distress. With our own kind, it’s different. We can’t control the minds of our kind unless the person is a vampire who’s made a fledgling. Isabella made both Nathan and Dimitri. When they were new like you, she would have had complete control over them. From what I’ve gleaned from Julia and Dimitri, it was beyond ugly for both Dimitri and Nathan.”

“Oh god, no!” She clamped a hand over her mouth.

He obviously guessed her thoughts, reached across the table, and took her other hand. “Relax. Isabella did not make you. Nathan did because he gave you his blood. Although because both of them drank from you, they can read your thoughts when they’re around. They could anyway when you were human. Now that you’re vampire, it’s different. When a vampire drinks from either a human or a vampire, we call it blood-bonding. As you mature, you’ll learn to block a mental penetration to a point. The more mature the vampire who drank from you, the harder that is to accomplish. Currently, you wouldn’t be able to block either of them. Maybe Nathan eventually but never Isabella, not just because of her age, but because she’s feral.”

“Lovely.” This was just getting sicker and sicker. Mia balled both her hands into fists and glared at him. “Trust me, if I have to dig a bunker in the desert and live there the rest of my life to hide from those two, I will. Forever won’t be long enough to keep me happy from never seeing either of them again.”

He pursed his lips and frowned. “I agree with you regarding Isabella. Nathan on the other hand is not a feral vampire. I know presently you look at what he did to you as evil, but you’ll discover in time, he meant you no harm. He didn’t realize when he first met you that you were his lifemate. After he figured it out, he assured me he never fed from you again.”

“Don’t dare defend him!” Mia backed her chair up and squeezed the arms. “He lied to me. So did Julia and Dimitri. There’s no excuse for any of them. And he isn’t my frickin’ lifemate. I can’t stand the man. What is it with you people and that term?”

Christian lifted his hands in a defensive gesture. “I’m not making excuses for any of them. I’m just here to give you the information I’ve been fed and the facts regarding your new life. If you never want to see any of them again, that’s your choice. As far as lifemating, that’s complicated, and I’m not saying he’s your lifemate. I would have no way to know that. It’s personal between the two people. However, I can explain the terminology and what it entails theoretically. But I have no personal experience.”

Mia didn’t care about the semantics of this vampire lifemate thing, but if it would provide understanding, she’d listen. “Go for it.”

Christian gave her a slight nod, then continued, “Our kind mate once for life, period. I’m around couples of our kind every day, and I can assure you, the bond is the most amazing thing any of us can ever experience in our lifetimes. What causes people of our kind to come together like that?” He paused and shook his head. “I haven’t a clue. Some of us think it’s a God thing.”

Mia was shocked. “You people believe in God? Like for real, not in theory.” She recalled her conversation with Nathan regarding his spiritual background, but in light of

everything he'd done to her, she suspected what he'd shared to be lies, like everything else that came out of his mouth.

He nodded and smiled. "Many of us do. Like humans, we adhere to different faiths. As I told you, we're people, creatures of God, I believe. I grew up in a time where most everyone went to church. I guess my philosophies lean toward Christianity. Julia and Dimitri are Catholic."

Mia's mind began to spin with the overload of information. This was good news, but she had much soul searching ahead of her before she could feel right in her heart about her faith. She remembered clearly how she'd reacted to Nathan when he fed from her those nights in his limo. Maybe he'd controlled her mind, but her reactions to him, to every revolting thing he'd coerced her into, she'd actually enjoyed. She felt her face warm with shame.

A long silence ensued as Mia sipped her tea and mentally chewed the information Dr. La Mond had given her. Finally, she said, "Year 1917, huh? So you're really that old?" Mia knew she gawked at him, but she couldn't help herself. He looked maybe thirty-five, and that pushed it.

"Yep. At some point, I'll give you a tour of my house. I have lots of family photos to prove it."

His comment alluded to her being here awhile. She didn't like it. "So give me some sort of ETA as to when I can go home."

He leaned back in his chair and crossed his arms, his expression firm, thoughtful. “A week, maybe two. Even then, you’ll still need out-patient care.”

“No!” She shoved to her feet and glared at him. “Please, Dr. La Mond, you have to let me go home before that.” Her girls would be coming to NOLA in a week or two.

“Calm down, Mia. And for heaven’s sakes, call me Christian. I’ve told you before I don’t stand on ceremony. If I let you go home now, you wouldn’t survive. You have a lot to learn before you can get back to life.”

She rubbed a hand across her forehead and sat. “Can’t you give me a crash course?”

He heaved a long breath, then stood. “Your therapy and training will be PRN, darlin’, meaning as much as you want and can take. I’ll be the judge of when and how much though, based on how you react. We can take it up a notch if you want. Come on.” He hitched his head toward the yard, and she followed him into it, then toward a tree line.

“Where are we going?”

He glanced down at her and smiled. “For a walk in the woods. You’re a country girl. I figured you’d enjoy it.”

“I suppose.” There seemed to be a little mystery behind his smile, and she suspected she was fixing to learn something about her new body or life. That was fine. The faster she learned, the quicker she could return to pre-Nathan era. Priority one when she returned home would be contacting her kids. It had been several days since she’d called them,

and her phone was in her purse. She'd left it at Nathan's that horrible night he and Isabella had wrecked her life. At some point, she intended to ask Christian to help her retrieve it. Priority two would be to contact Joe and ask for her job back.

Dusk was about to steal the last of the day as they entered the trees. Christian paused and took off his glasses, then told her to do the same. When she did so, she gasped because the wooded scenery was alight with a host of shimmering colors she'd never seen before. Everything was so bright. If she hadn't known it to be nightfall, she would have sworn they were standing in the woods midday.

The greens of the leaves and underbrush were iridescent and shiny. The night sky above glittered like a light-blue diamond, and the stars held the brightness of some of those Fourth of July fireworks she'd enjoyed with Nathan. The thought of him made her frown.

"You okay?" Christian asked.

She forced a grateful smile, which she didn't feel at all. She was so angry and confused. If Nathan were here right now or Julia and Dimitri, Mia knew she'd go apeshit on them and try to scratch their eyes out. She hated all of them, but Christian had no culpability in what had happened to her. Trusting any vampire right now terrified her, but Mia knew she needed help, and Christian was her only resource. "It's beautiful. Why is everything so bright?"

“Your eyes have changed. Have you seen yourself in a mirror yet?”

She shook her head. “Why?” Betty stayed with her in the bathroom while she’d bathed. She hadn’t liked it but figured Christian ordered her to do so after her freak out episode. Modest by nature, she’d been in a hurry to get out and dressed.

“Your eyes aren’t brown any longer. They’re gold.”

“What? Seriously?”

He nodded. “Our kind bear only two visible physical differences than humans. Our eyes and our size. All turned vampires gain height no matter their age or sex, males more so. Over the next year or two, you’ll grow a few inches and develop more muscle mass. Your heart will enlarge too. The vampire heart is about a third larger than a human’s, which partially accounts for our physical strength. If you were male, you’d gain up to six or eight inches of height and at least a hundred more pounds of muscle mass. As a female, maybe three inches and fifty pounds. Every person is different. Again, this is an evolutionary adaptation for the purpose of hunting and feeding.”

She snorted. “Believe me I won’t need those adaptations. I’d sooner slit my wrists than drink blood.”

Christian frowned at her. “Your moral convictions will only last so long, Mia. Imagine your favorite food and how wonderful it tastes and smells, then multiply that thought by a thousand. That’s how human blood will be to your

senses in time, whether you take transfusions or not. You'll learn to control the urge, but it will never go away. Desire for human blood is a primal need, which keeps us alive. It's like sex but more powerful. We lust for the opposite sex because the need to procreate is wired into every creature on earth. For a vampire, the need to feed is hardwired in him or her too for the purpose of survival."

Mia groaned and rubbed the side of her head. As much as she appreciated Christian's honesty, all his efforts to educate her, she felt utterly miserable. God forgive her, but she wished she'd died that horrible night at Nathan's home. "What can I do to overcome this...uhm lust?"

"Take care of your body, and be very regimented with your transfusions. Eat and sleep properly, but the best remedy for the affliction is to drink from one of our kind. Vampire blood tastes nothing like human blood, but when you're lifemated, you'll desire the blood of your mate more than a human's."

Mia clenched her teeth. She didn't want a vampire lifemate, and she certainly didn't appreciate Christian implying she needed to take one. Specifically Nathan, if that's what he meant. Had the jerk been talking to Christian behind her back?

"I don't want to be lifemated to anyone of your kind. I'm sorry, Christian, but I find this new life Nathan foisted upon me disgusting, and I hate it. I hate him. I'm not liking you too much at the moment either. I know you're trying to

help me, but the news you keep feeding me just gets worse and worse.”

He took hold of her hand and squeezed, his expression compassionate. “Would you prefer I lie?”

Her eyes rolled skyward. “No. I may not like the truth, but I suppose I need to hear it.” She didn’t want to think about bloodlust anymore. However, she was curious about this eye thing. “Can you explain why my eyes changed color?”

He nodded once. “When a human turns vampire, their eyes almost always lighten within the same color spectrum. You had brown eyes previously. Now they’re gold. Julia told me she had hazel eyes. Hers are emerald.”

“That’s bizarre. Why?”

“Hunting purposes. All vampires have beautiful eyes, and humans are naturally intrigued by them. Our eyes shimmer in soft lighting, which is meant to beguile our prey, get their attention long enough so we can enchant them. Also as I’m sure you can already tell, we see far better in dim lighting or moonlight. Another evolutionary adaptation. We’re nocturnal creatures by nature but not so much in this modern age. Actually, the advent of sunglasses, something that simple, turned the majority of our kind into day dwellers. We sleep approximately eight hours a night just like humans. Many of us still hunt. Those who do generally hunt at night because we’re better equipped to do so.”

Mia shivered. “Yuck. Skulking around at night, hunting humans? Never in a million.”

Christian smiled at her and said, “You have no need to be concerned about your survival as a vampire, darlin’. You can take transfusions for the rest of your life. Soon you’ll only need two to three a week.” He began to lead her down a wood-chipped trail meandering through the woods.

The news held no reassurance. “What if I can’t afford them? Currently, I’m jobless. I left a four-year position to work for Nathan, which obviously I’m not going to do now. How much will this cost me per month?”

He stopped and faced her. “Nothing, Mia. What happened to you was a crime perpetrated by an evil one of our kind. I wouldn’t take a dime from you. To do so would feel like a crime on my behalf. Humans who turn vampire generally do so because they fall in love with a vampire, and they want to be with that person. Their turning is a choice. Your choice was ripped from you, and you have no one of our kind to care for you. You’re like a baby right now. New, inexperienced, and uneducated for survival. I’d have to be ethically bankrupt to charge you for your care here or turn you out because you couldn’t afford it. Your payment to me will be to survive.”

“That’s very kind, Christian, but what am I going to do once I leave? I seriously doubt I can just walk into a blood bank and purchase my week’s supply.”

“Actually, you can with a prescription. Let me clarify that. All vampires who take transfusions have a doctor, and our clinics supply them units. It’s so easy these days. You can actually place your order online, and they’ll be shipped to you. The cost is minimal. We don’t charge what human facilities do for blood. Plus, as a vampire, any blood will do. There is no need for type and crossmatching like a human requiring a transfusion. Your body will accept any type of blood. In time, I’ll teach you how to start an IV on yourself.”

They began to walk again in silence. Mia offered no argument because she had no choice but to accept his charity. At some point, she’d find a way to repay him, but she would need a working body in order to do so. The body she now inhabited remained a mystery, and she needed this man to help her solve the enigma.

The serpentine path through the timber eventually led them back to the point they entered the tree line. Along the way, Christian told her he’d created the walking trail as exercise for his maternity patients, which expanded much farther than the path they’d traversed. She suspected the short trip had to do with other patients within the house he needed to tend.

When they were inside again waiting for the elevator, Mia expected the night to end with her back in the room she’d inhabited for the last couple of days. This evening’s physical therapy had been very daunting yet educational,

and she appreciated the doctor's time and efforts. "Thank you for tonight, Christian."

"Your welcome, darlin'." He gave her an encouraging smile and punched the button on the wall to bring the elevator to their level. "Can I trust you to stay put here until I decide you're ready to go home?"

"Yes. I won't bolt. I promise." She meant it. Where would she go? From what she'd learned tonight, she'd be a danger to the human population. Eventually, she'd have to reenter it, but she needed Christian to get her there so she wouldn't be a threat to her coworkers and friends.

He nodded as they entered the elevator. Moments later, the doors opened into a hallway with plush white carpet and walls sporting hundreds of baby pictures. She remembered Betty telling her about the top floor maternity ward and suspected that's where he'd taken her.

Christian led her to a closed door just right of the elevator. "You'll find this suite far more comfortable than the one you've been staying in." He opened the door and walked inside.

Mia followed. The first thing she spied was a king bed with a yellow comforter sporting playful pink bunnies and blue kittens. The wallpaper and other decor mimicked the bedspread. It was sweet and lovely, but she worried about displacing one of his patients. "Are you sure about this? I don't need anything this fancy, and I wouldn't want to take up space if you have patients needing this room."

He gave her a warm smile. “No worries, darlin’. I only have two patients here currently, and both will be going home first thing in the morning. The house is yours to explore on this level and the next one down. Make yourself at home. You know where the kitchen is located. If you get hungry or need something to drink, you’ll find all you need there. Betty or I will check on you periodically throughout the night, and I have another blood transfusion ordered for you at 10:00 p.m.”

Mia cringed at the thought because she realized her life would be fraught with them forever. “Okay. Thank you.”

He gave her a reassuring smile and said, “Get some rest. I’ll see you soon.”

Mia walked him to the door, then closed it behind him, and sighed. She’d learned much today, and it wasn’t all bad news. However, many questions remained. On a hunch, she walked to the bedside table and opened the top drawer. What she sought was there. She picked up the Gideon Bible inside, sat on the bed, and began to read.

12

“Why the hell hasn’t he called today?” Nathan growled. Julia and Dimitri were in his kitchen with him, eating their evening meal, watching him pace. Their expressions bore concern over his antsy behavior, yet they said nothing. Wise. His mood was so foul, Nathan feared what might come out of his mouth.

Six days had passed since Mia awoke from her turning. Except for today, her doctor had called Julia to report on her. For her privacy, he’d provided little information beyond that she fared well, but Nathan suspected her frame of mind wasn’t progressing at the same pace as her new body.

Nathan was dying to know more. He realized vampire doctors didn’t adhere to all the HIPPA regulations of human ones, but privacy for one’s patient still prevailed. The doctor wouldn’t share anything that might violate Mia’s trust in him. Nathan couldn’t blame him there, but god help him, he needed answers.

Julia sighed resolutely. “If Christian has nothing to report regarding Mia, he probably feels no need to call. You know she’s fine, Nathan. Physically.”

Nathan’s gaze slashed her way. “I know that, but what I don’t know is how she’s adapting to her turning. Poorly, I would suspect, given her disgust for me and our entire species. I’m surprised she’s even allowing that doctor of yours within her same zip code.” Worry for her was driving him insane. His gut felt as if it were infested with a legion of writhing snakes and had since the night he’d left Mia. “And what will happen to her once Dr. La Mond releases her?” he muttered.

“Oh dear, that is a conundrum,” Julia said, then sat down her fork and nibbled at her lower lip.

Dimitri looked troubled too but didn’t comment.

A big one, Nathan thought. Imagining her life as an unmated female without vampire protection was his greatest fear for her now. He knew all too well what feral males were capable of doing to a fledgling female. If they were lucky enough to capture one, or unlucky in the case of the female, they force mated them. It wasn’t just a matter of physical rape, which was bad enough, but the feral male marked the female against her will.

Marking was marriage for their kind, and although he’d never experienced it, Nathan understood it to be a beautiful act between two vampires who loved each other. If the act was perpetrated on a woman of their kind by a feral, it was

the single most horrid thing that could happen to a female of their race. She'd be bonded to that insane vampire forever. Even if the feral male died, she'd never have another chance to lifemate. The horror she'd suffer under the male's mind control would drive her insane, and eventually, she'd turn feral too. If, god forbid, they had children, it was an even worse nightmare, resulting in feral children.

"Christian will explain this to her if he hasn't already," Dimitri finally said.

Julia added, "Don't worry, my darling. She will be protected. Christian would never release her to live on her own without a plan in place. I'm sure he has methods arranged for her safety until her mind heals, and she's ready to accept you as her lifemate."

He raked a hand through his hair and stared at them, finally offering a nod. The couple had great confidence in the man, and Nathan assumed as a doctor, La Mond would be attentive to her aftercare.

If she allowed it.

"I know you are worried, Nathan, but there is nothing you can do presently. She is being cared for. Try to take comfort in that. Come and eat," Dimitri said, then gestured toward the untouched dinner plate Julia had prepared for him. "You're neglecting both your hungers. When have you last fed? You look like the poster child for what humans consider our kind to look like."

Nathan said nothing. He'd taken inventory of himself in the mirror this morning after his shower. He looked like death warmed over, compounded by the fact he'd done a hack job shaving, but he didn't care. He hadn't fed in nearly a week and had eaten little to nothing. His face was gaunt, pale, and he looked almost as bad as he felt. Nathan knew he needed to hunt. His body craved blood, and he'd developed vampire DTs. He shook so badly. He knew that partially explained the sick, worried expressions on his friends' faces.

He didn't want to feed. Hunting made him think of Mia, and the notion brought great shame and guilt. The woman he now loved had started out as nothing more than a meal to him and an attempt at a sexual dalliance.

No wonder he disgusted her.

"Let me give you a transfusion," Dimitri offered.

Nathan hated them. He'd had a transfusion a time or two but considered them a vegetarian diet. He just grunted and walked across the kitchen to a microwave. Mia's purse sat beside it. He'd placed it there the morning he'd returned home. For the last six days, he'd periodically camped at this same spot and stared at the little red handbag, dotted with gold studs and strips of ribbon, wanting to use it as an excuse to go see her. He'd heard her phone inside ding several times and eventually took it out and charged it, but he hadn't snooped as much as he'd wanted to. However, he had noticed text messages pop up from her children a time or two while it charged.

He smiled faintly. Her daughter Tiffany had a colorful tongue. The last message she'd sent her mother said, "WTF, Mom? Did ya fall in a hole and die or what? We're freaking out here. Better answer soon or we're sending out the f'ing national guard. Seriously."

Had she contacted them? Nathan wondered. These days, most people didn't have phone numbers memorized because they were so dependent on their smart phones. He didn't know that to be the case with Mia, but realizing how desperate her children were to hear from her, it gave him a very good excuse to go see her.

He snatched the handbag, spun, and headed for the back door, intending to drive himself to that doctor's house. Julia had him blocked before he could reach for the door handle. "Out of my way, Julia."

She scowled at him. "Oh, no you don't, Nathan. If you go over there, you're only going to make matters worse between the two of you. She is not ready to see you yet. If she were, she would have contacted you."

He loved Julia, but his emotions were so foamed up at the moment he couldn't tame his tongue. "How can it get any worse than it is? I want to see her, and I don't care if she tells me to go to hell. Believe me, if it would get her back, I'd stay in the worst pit of it as long as she required. Now get out of my way, woman!"

Dimitri joined his wife at the back door, wrapped an arm around her waist, and gently pulled her back. "He has to do

this, love. It probably will end very badly, but I understand how he feels. Sometimes not knowing something is worse.”

Julia blinked up at Dimitri for several moments then nodded. “Be careful what you say, Nathan. She’s bound to be very fragile still. I seriously doubt Christian will even let you see her, but Dimitri and I will pray for you both.”

He gave them a single nod of appreciation, then exited.

It was dusk when Nathan arrived at the doctor’s country home, probably one of the largest log cabin style structures he’d ever seen. He parked outside the closed four-car garage, then wasted no time heading for the front doors. He rang the bell and waited.

Several minutes later, one opened and the same older human nurse from the night he’d brought Mia here smiled up at him.

“Good evening, Mr. Davenport. How can I help you?”

“I want to see Mia. I have something for her.” He held up the little red purse, feeling foolish sporting the feminine frippery; but at the moment, the thing was a talisman and his only hope to garner an audience with her.

The nurse nodded once and stepped aside. Nathan entered and glanced around the great room. He hadn’t viewed this room before. The night they’d taken her here, they’d entered through a side entrance, which led to the hospital level of the building. The doctor obviously hunted. The room’s style was Adirondack with a combination of

nearly two dozen deer, elk, and mooseheads decorating the walls of the enormous space.

“If you’ll wait here, Mr. Davenport, I’ll tell her and Dr. La Mond you’re here.”

“How is she?”

The nurse smiled at him again. “Doing very well and pestering us all as to when she can go home. I’ll see if Dr. La Mond will allow her visitors. Excuse me.”

He nodded and watched her exit an archway at the rear of the room. Nervous and impatient, he studied the decor and furnishings also sporting a southwestern flavor. As a hunter himself, Nathan appreciated the surroundings. The sixteen-point whitetail mount on the wall right of the river rock hearth was especially impressive. It was an irregular rack. Nine points on one side and seven on the other. It had to have been a record buck. If his mind hadn’t been singularly focused on Mia, he would have enjoyed talking to the doctor about where he’d harvested the thing.

He continued to putter around the room, settling his attention on a huge walnut gun cabinet with a glass face, housing a good two dozen arms from the civil war era to present. The wall adjacent, held various bows, recurves, and modern compounds, and a very nice medieval crossbow. Beneath there was another large glass-faced cabinet with a good bevy of arrowheads, ranging from flint to modern broad heads.

He scented Mia before he heard her footsteps coming down the hallway the nurse had disappeared into earlier. She wasn't alone. Her doctor was with her. Moments later, they entered together holding hands. He didn't like that at all, but he suspected the man a support line for her currently, and in her mind, he was the enemy.

She glared at him, her pretty amber eyes swimming with disdain and mistrust. He wasn't surprised by her reaction, but it still hurt.

She looked great though. Beautiful. Her cheeks were rosy beneath her golden features, and her thick curls loose around her shoulders. She wore tight jeans and a tank top that fit just right. His body literally pulsed with the need to touch her, comfort her, kiss her. He had a despondent feeling executing such notions would be a long time coming, if ever.

She swallowed hard and looked up at her doctor. It was a gesture for protection, and he instantly provided it.

"Mia agreed to see you against my advice. So what do you want?" he demanded, stepping in front of her.

Nathan didn't answer readily, because he didn't know what to make of the man's possessive nature. He reasoned his attitude was a doctor thing, but the vampire in Nathan fired with jealousy. Mia had been interested in Dr. La Mond before she knew he was one of their kind but after how poorly she'd taken the news of her turning, surely not anymore.

Doubt caused anger to trail his jealousy. However, anger was not an emotion he could afford at the moment. He tamped down his ire and said, “Mia, I brought your purse. I apologize. I did get into it to charge your phone numerous times. I thought you’d want it because I heard your cell ring over the last few days. Your children are trying to get ahold of you.”

He’d scored there. She immediately approached him, took her purse from his hand, and dug out her cell. She stood between him and the doctor, scrolling through the phone, oblivious to the fact he and Dr. La Mond glared at each other with dual expressions of territorial attitude.

His stemmed from his need to be with his lifemate. Nathan wasn’t sure what prompted the doctor’s attitude, but he had a few ideas. Mia was disgusted with him. She’d probably been telling this man she wanted nothing to do with him. That being the case, Dr. La Mond could very easily be viewing Mia as a potential lifemate because she was an unmated female.

Nathan’s vampire carnal nature began to hum along his nerve endings. He couldn’t suppress the growl that rose to his throat as he stared down the man. The doctor returned one just as savage, and Nathan knew his instincts had been on point. La Mond wanted Mia or wanted to explore things with her, one of the two.

Wasn’t going to happen.

Everything became tunnel vision at that point because he faced off with another male of their kind. When it came to lifemating, vampires were nothing like human males. They were instinct driven, like a wild animal. If things didn't work out, a vampire didn't just waltz down the road and look for another woman. It was all or nothing once a male chose his female, and regard for life or limb did not exist, nor rationale. If it came to a fight, it would be to the death. Only one thing mattered, and that was the sanctity of the lifemate union.

Nathan glanced her way, not surprised to see terror riddling her features as her gaze darted back and forth between the two of them. His love for her gave him a thread of sound reasoning, even though every cell in his body wanted to attack his competition.

He glowered at La Mond and said through clenched teeth, "I want to thank you for taking care of Mia. Do you plan to release her soon?" He knew the doctor would understand what he meant.

"I'm taking care of Mia for her benefit, not yours. She'll be discharged when she's fit to face the world as a new one of our kind, and I'll see she's taken care of thereafter."

And how would that be? And where? He had a pretty good idea. "Have you given any thought to how she's to survive as an unmated female?" He had to ask the question. Had the doctor bothered to tell her about that yet? Her

next words confirmed La Mond had been negligent in that regard.

“What are you talking about, Nathan?”

Dr. La Mond looked down at her and frowned. “You’ve had so much to deal with this week. I didn’t want to add this just yet, but it appears I have no choice.” The doctor’s gaze met his and swarmed with fury before he continued. “You understand the term *feral*. We discussed it regarding Isabella. However, there are feral males of our kind, and they are very different than female ones.”

Mia’s narrowed gaze slashed back and forth between them, then honed on La Mond. “How?”

“Males turn feral when they believe they have no chance to lifemate. Scientifically, what happens is this, the gland I told you about which creates our venom and houses our physic and telekinetic center also produces a second kind of testosterone in males of our species. Occasionally, when serotonin and dopamine levels are off kilter in certain males, paired with an extreme rush of this secondary male hormone, insanity results. Their goal is to force mate at that point. An unmated female of our kind is their first pick, but I’ve known some to get so desperate they turn a human female and force mate them.”

She shook her head and rubbed her temple. “What do you mean, force mate?”

The doctor looked at him with an expression promising retribution. He returned one he hoped matched it because she should have known this by now.

Nathan understood this was a dicey topic, but Mia would need protection when she returned to life. He wasn't foolish enough to believe she would accept it from him, and knowing her stubborn streak, she wouldn't accept assistance from La Mond or any vampire for that matter. That notion terrified him, because she had no idea the danger she faced as an unmated female of their kind.

Finally, Dr. La Mond said, "We've talked about lifemating."

"Yes, and as I told you, I consider it nonsense." She folded her arms across her chest and glared at the man.

"Mia, it's not. The way we lifemate is a physical consummation that goes beyond the act of sex. We marry differently. When a couple of our kind make their life commitment, the male bites his mate, typically in the shoulder. The venom released is paired with the testosterone hormone I spoke of and basically creates a new scent shared by the two vampires when mated ones of our kind drink from each other. Other vampires instantly know that person has a lifemate. Even a feral male would never breach that union. Lifemating is complicated on many levels, but as far as marking, it's an intimate thing. A sexual thing. I can tell by the nauseated look on your face this was something you weren't ready to hear, but you"—he broke off and shot

Nathan a scathing look—“had to get it out there, and I’m sure your reasons were self-serving as they’ve always been with Mia. Do you seriously think she’ll ever want anything to do with you again? Your lies were the stone-worked path that led her to this life she wanted no part of. Leave her be. You aren’t her lifemate. As far as her protection against ferals, I’ll provide it.”

Not her lifemate, huh? For him to say that after Nathan told him he had claimed her as his mate meant he’d become far too emotionally attached to Mia. Granted, Mia had probably convinced her doctor that she loathed him. Deserved as that loathing might be, as a doctor, La Mond should know Mia wasn’t thinking straight. He’d said himself that a human turned against their will would have great difficulties accepting the transition into vampire life.

Nathan was livid and so close to attacking the man, his fangs extended without initiation. He clamped his mouth shut to keep from frightening Mia and squeezed his hands into fists, wanting to plow both of them into the man’s face.

“Stop it, Christian. I can speak for myself.”

Oh, so they were on a first name basis now? No surprise after what he’d witnessed thus far. If Mia weren’t present, her doctor would be witnessing him ripping out his throat.

Miserable bastard.

Mia glared at Nathan, then continued, “He’s right. I don’t want anything to do with you. And you should be thanking Christian. He’s worked his tail off trying to get

me to understand why you...you”—she swallowed hard, then continued—“you treated me like a midnight snack. He’s actually defended you, whether you want to believe that or not.”

“Oh, I’m sure he did,” Nathan snarled, shooting the man another vicious look. “Mia, I never meant to hurt you. I know right now you can’t believe that, but I swear it’s true.”

She let out a brief caustic laugh. “No, I can’t believe that. I’ll never believe anything that comes out of your lying mouth, ever again. Thanks to Christian, I now get what vampires do to survive theoretically, even though I find it disgusting. Your lies I’ll never be able to wrap my mind around. At some point, Christian and I will talk about this feral vampire thing, but you have no part in my life or future, Nathan. I’ve witnessed firsthand the casualties of war being around you brings.” She fingered the bandage on her neck, spun, and headed toward the exit, her purse and cell in hand. Just before she stepped into the archway dividing the great room and hall, she turned and said, “I’m going to the kitchen to call my girls, Christian. As for you, Nathan, lose my number.” With that, she stalked off.

The doctor snorted derisively. “Did you accomplish what you came here for tonight?”

Nathan was seriously pissed and just plain miserable. He may have lost his lifemate, and this man had her trust and maybe even her affection. “Perhaps the better question is, have you accomplished what you want from Mia? She’ll

never be yours, if that's what's going on in your head. You of all people, a doctor, should understand the lifemate bond. She's mine, and I know it with every cell in my body, whether she does or not."

Dr. La Mond snarled and stepped toward Nathan, posturing. "She isn't yours or anyone's at this point. Get the hell out. You've done nothing but upset her tonight."

The man equalled him in size and weight. He could have been twice his size, and Nathan wouldn't have cared. He itched for a fight, but enough logic remained in his head to realize as much as he hated the man, Mia needed him. He had no choice but to leave her in his care. That choice might cause him to lose her, but La Mond's protection would save her.

Nathan knew if he lost Mia, he probably would not survive, but he loved her enough to sacrifice his own life for hers. He fixed La Mond with a serious, deadpan glare. "She is mine. I guarantee that. You're the only one of our kind she trusts at the moment. If you use it to take advantage of her, I'll end your miserable life, and it won't be quick. I've lived far longer than you and have witnessed many means of torture. I'll spend my last dime and breath executing as many as I can on you before you draw your last."

His gold gaze burned with fury. "Save your threats. If you care about Mia, then yes, you will have to trust me. She's my patient, and I don't expect you to believe I have her best interests at heart, but I do."

Nathan let out a sharp, derisive laugh. “Now that’s a lie if I ever heard one. You accused me of being duplicitous with Mia, but it’s obvious there’s some shady thoughts going on in your head where she’s concerned. It kills me to admit it, but there’s not a damned thing I can do about it. Mia trusts you, and as you said yourself, she’s emotionally vulnerable right now. If you use that fact to your advantage, I will kill you.” Nathan gave him one last look of warning, then turned and left.

Julia and Dimitri were still up when he arrived home, awaiting him in his parlor when he entered. Their expressions were twin studies in worry.

“Yes, it was an unmitigated disaster. She hates my guts,” he said as he strode across the room and plopped down on a Chippendale chair catty-corner from the Victorian couch where they resided.

“Nathan, my darling, she doesn’t hate you. She’s scared and angry. Mia needs time and distance right now. I tried to warn you.” Julia approached him and laid a hand on his shoulder.

Nathan recognized her efforts to reassure him, but he was furious at the moment and couldn’t appreciate the kindness. He scored her with a steely look. “That damned doctor of yours is trying to sink his hooks into her.” He cast a matching one Dimitri’s way. “You’d better find your wife a new doctor because I’m going to kill the one she has.”

“What happened?” Dimitri asked, his features creased with concern.

Nathan’s gaze cut between Dimitri and Julia. “He’s all over protecting her and not from some physician standpoint. I’m not sure she even realizes what’s on his mind. But she’s drinking it up, seeing him as the only person she can trust at the moment. He’s using her vulnerability to his advantage and I suspect convincing her I’m the devil incarnate, while weaseling his way into her life.”

“Christian wouldn’t do that,” Julia stated adamantly.

“Well, he is!” Nathan snapped.

She shared a troubled look with her husband, then said, “I assure you he would never stand in the way of lifemates.”

Nathan’s rage exploded. “She does not see me as her lifemate, Julia! And he’s only too ready to convince her I’m not. If I lose her...”

He didn’t finish. They knew what would happen. He would die or turn feral. Their kind did not survive if they lost their mate unless minor children were involved. If he lost Mia to La Mond, he would die a slow miserable death. Eating and hunting would be impossible. If he turned feral, someone of their kind would likely end up killing him in his weakened state. The thought that he could hurt Mia, force mate her, should that insanity overcome him, scared him more than death by starvation.

The mating bond of their species was so deep and complex, beyond what any human couple could ever

experience; but for all its upsides, the downside was death when it didn't work out. Should he lose Mia, he would starve himself to death, not out of self-pity. He wasn't one for that at all. Nathan's life had always been one of aloneness. He knew how to be solitary. He'd gladly die before he reached that point of no return, because he would not, could not hurt Mia.

"Nathan, you must not give up," Julia said.

He spared her a weary look but said nothing.

"I can't imagine how you must feel, my darling, but you haven't lost Mia yet. I realize it has been many years, but if possible, try to think like a human. Consider how she must have felt when you revealed the truth to her that awful night. Dimitri and I understand the attraction you felt for her when you yet had no concept she was your lifemate. You merely acted in a way quite natural for a male vampire. However, Mia can't see those actions as normal because she is viewing them through a human filter. Everything she feels for you is buried beneath that thought process currently."

Dimitri added, "The bond between you will win, my friend. The last thing anyone wishes to hear in a situation such as this is to exercise patience, but you must. Recall your own turning and how long it took you to come to terms. Give her time to become vampire. When she does, she will view things differently, just as we all did in our own way and time."

Both of their speeches bore wisdom and settled him considerably. “Thank you both. I know I don’t say it enough, but I couldn’t ask for better friends. I’m going to accept your advice and go do some serious thinking.”

Nathan walked away from them and headed up the stairs to a bed he would merely roll around in tonight. He paused halfway up the staircase. On second thought, maybe he would hunt. His body ached for both blood and food. Once revived, maybe his thinking would too.

Bourbon Street rose to the forefront of his mind. The popular place was littered with memories of Mia—bitter ones and sweet, but they were the only possessions he had left of her.

13

“I’m sorry you had to deal with that,” Christian said as he entered the kitchen.

Mia glanced up from her cell and frowned at him. She was irritated with Christian. He had been just as culpable as Nathan in that awful scene, but she had a bigger irritation at the moment.

For the past few days, her kids had blown up her phone with messages and calls, but currently, they weren’t returning any of hers. They’d been worried sick about her and hopped a flight due to arrive in New Orleans in a little over two hours. That fact paired with Nathan’s impromptu visit had her stomach rolling like a butter churn.

She had to get home before they arrived at her apartment. Mia knew Christian would take her. She’d told him her girls would be coming for a visit soon, and he’d promised to release her before they came to New Orleans. She intended to hold him to that oath.

“Christian, don’t try to rescue me from Nathan. It’s not your responsibility. I have a feeling he’s going to be a pest for awhile, but I’ll handle him. Despite all he’s done to me, I don’t sense him to be dangerous. I know he was furious just now, but the situation could have been much worse, the way you were egging him on like that.”

Christian appeared properly chastised and joined her at the harvest table where she sat, holding her cell phone. “I’m sorry. It’s a male vampire thing. I know that’s no excuse.”

“It certainly isn’t. You’ve given me a little history as to the baser instincts male vampires possess, but both you and Nathan are mature, educated men, yet both of you were acting like a couple of bucks in rut.” She shook her head and huffed. “I know you were just trying to protect me as my doctor. Like most everything about this life, it will probably take me time to understand. I just hope my instincts are correct regarding Nathan.”

Christian stared at her, his expression frustrated and angry. “I don’t like him, Mia. I don’t like the fact he kept the truth from you while you were in his employ and especially afterward when he tried to court you.”

“Well, that makes two of us. On an ethics scale of one to ten, he ranks at a minus three in my opinion.”

Christian studied her for a few moments with a troubled frown Mia couldn’t interpret. Finally, he sighed, then said, “I agree. On an ethics level, I rate him lower than pond scum, but I’m certain he has no intention of harming you,

Mia. Quite the contrary. He wants you for his lifemate. I know you have reservations regarding this part of vampire life, but it is an integral part of our world, a key factor to what makes us the unique people we are. Rarely does a true lifemated couple not recognize the signs, but we can make mistakes. Let me say, it's catastrophic for both people if they aren't able to work things out. One or both might be able to move forward and lifemate with another, but that union will be a shadow of what they could have had with the person they were destined to mate with."

Mia knew what Christian implied and didn't like it. She was sick and tired of everyone telling her Nathan was her lifemate. Besides, she had way too much to deal with currently, and she didn't need the "Nathan thing" complicating matters. Like it or not, he had and not just today. He'd been ruling her thoughts far too much lately.

When Betty interrupted her and Christian's dinner to announce Nathan's arrival, excitement and anger shot up inside of her like twin geysers. The carnal part of her wanted Betty to go tell him to get lost. Yet she'd yielded to the part of her that just wanted to lay eyes on him. Her choice hadn't resolved a thing. She was still as confused, angry, and scared as she'd been the day she'd awoke to this new body.

She hated asking Christian this, but she was at a point she had to. "Do you really think Nathan could be my lifemate?"

He glanced up and sucked in a long breath. “Honestly, I hope to hell not for your sake, but I couldn’t answer that if I wanted to. He thinks you’re his lifemate. Nathan is a very mature vampire. The signs are easier for him to see, and he obviously sensed something when he drank from you. Perhaps you did too. True lifemates can feel each other’s emotions prior to mating when a blood bond is created.”

His words prompted memories she’d fought valiantly to keep at bay. At the moment, she was in no frame of mind to examine those shameful experiences that had occurred when he’d had her under enchantment. “I told you the only thing I feel for him is disgust and loathing.”

Christian offered her a sympathetic smile. “I can understand that based on what he did to you. As to your question, unfortunately, I have no way to advise you as to whether he is or isn’t yours. I told you before, knowing if someone is your lifemate is personal and instinctual. At the moment, the issue isn’t paramount because you have more important things to concentrate on.”

She sat her phone on the table top and gave him her full attention. “You’re right about that. Christian, I’m so confused right now and trying hard to make sense of this new life, so help me out here. We’ve talked about me getting back to my life. Honestly, I’m pissed at you for not telling me about this feral thing because if it’s going to cause more babysitting by you, I can’t have that.”

His gaze cut away briefly, then centered on hers with earnest. “I told you I would never lie to you, Mia. However, there’s only so much information anyone could digest in such a short period of time. That aspect of vampire life I didn’t feel to be the most prevalent one you needed to learn when you were still struggling to understand your body and come to terms with this attack that changed your life. Case in point. Look how you’re reacting now. Had I told you this in the beginning, it would have done nothing but upset you and impede your recovery.” He hunched a shoulder. “Maybe I was wrong. Yours was not a normal turning. Anyway, I suppose it’s best it came out. You’re very close to being ready to go home. Trouble is, you can’t do so without a chaperone. Feral male vampires are a very real and present threat to an unmated female as yourself.”

She snorted, growing even more aggravated with him. “Then what did you anticipate happening when you allowed me to go home if it’s so necessary I have a chaperone?”

Guilt squirmed across his face. He cleared his throat and said, “If you chose not to allow Nathan to help you in that regard, I’d planned to do so until you took a mate.”

She blinked at him, trying to make sense of this protection thing and why he would take on such a responsibility, yet coming up empty. “And what if I never did?”

“Trust me, you will and probably soon. Right now, you feel more human than vampire, but one day, that will change. And when it does, you’ll be just as driven as the

rest of us to lifemate. I told you before, we are far more instinctual beings than humans. They can remain celibate for life if their drive and determination is strong enough. We can't and I'm not referring to mere sex. Our need to life bond and procreate is as strong as our need to feed. Plus our females almost always lifemate more quickly because it's easier for them to find their male. Statistically, there are ten born males to every one female of our kind, then add to that males like Nathan and Dimitri who were changed by a feral female, which are many. So just imagine the vampire dating pool. Totally in a girl's favor." He grinned.

She sneered at him, not even remotely amused. "Well, I have no desire to go swimming in that pool anytime soon. The only thing I care about right now is my kids."

He sighed. "I understand, and I hate to point this out, but Isabella is also a threat to you. Even more reason for you to be under a mature vampire's protection, although few could thwart a feral like her, but at least Nathan or I could try to hide you from her."

Mia grit her teeth and fought the urge to scream. Was there no good news to be had regarding this horrible life these people led? "I still have some confusion about this feral vampire thing. Is Isabella trying to force mate Nathan?"

"No. Apparently, she just wants to marry him for his money and social status. Strange as this may sound, when a female turns feral, they have absolutely no interest in

lifemating or having children. Actually, they can't get enough sexual partners."

"Wow. Well, what if the feral woman gets pregnant?"

Christian blew out a sharp breath and rolled his eyes. "Generally, they have abortions or kill the baby when it's born. Occasionally, one might develop a twisted maternal instinct. Let me just say, when that happens, the child is better off being aborted or killed at birth."

Mia grimaced. Just thinking about a woman like Isabella raising a child gave her the shivers. "So I guess Isabella wants to make Nathan her personal sex slave too, huh?" The notion caused a pang of jealousy, but she chalked it up to residual feelings for him she hadn't managed to exorcize from her mind yet.

Mia had witnessed Nathan's loathing for the woman that night, but she'd also witnessed her control over him. Her disgust for Nathan aside, it troubled her to imagine the fresh hell he would suffer if Isabella got ahold of him.

Christian quirked a brow. "Undoubtedly. I despise the guy, but as morally bankrupt as his is, even he doesn't deserve to be a prisoner of a feral female. They're just as nasty if not worse than males. Basically, they're on a power trip. They use humans or vampires for sex, money, whatever they want. They also create a lot of male fledglings for sexual purposes and to use their superior strength for protection. Worse, when they feed, they usually kill their human donors because fear heightens the experience for

them. Unless they're desperate, they almost always feed on males. Rest assured you aren't at risk from feral females. Isabella is another story because you hurt her."

Mia hung her head and shook it. "I can't be saddled with a chaperone, Christian." Frustrated, she picked up her phone and shook it at him. "My girls are flying here right now as we speak. I've been texting and calling them since Nathan brought me this thing, and I've received no answers from any of them. They're obviously still in flight. They'll be at my apartment in a couple hours based on the time they told me they left. From there, I haven't a clue what to tell them for why I've been SOL this last week."

He offered her an understanding look. "They obviously love you very much. I get that. Keep in mind, mothers have lives too. Your girls are all grown. Should it be so unusual for you to be unavailable for several days?"

Mia pursed her lips. "You're over a hundred years old, Christian, and a man. If your mother didn't hear from you but a couple times a month, would she be overly worried?"

"No. You have a point."

"I text and call all my kids at least several times a week. Had Nathan not brought my phone tonight, I'd planned to ask you to go get it from him tomorrow. I can't imagine how worried they've been. That's why they're flying here now, to track me down. They weren't suppose to arrive for another week. I'm wracking my brain for excuses to give

them for why I haven't answered any of their texts or calls, but they're in short supply."

He nodded, his expression thoughtful. "How about the ol' dropping the cell in the toilet scenario?" He chuckled.

That caught her off guard. Mia started laughing. Maybe it wasn't all that funny, but she was glad for the emotional diversion.

All in all, Christian was an amazing man—a very dedicated doctor and a wonderful, generous-hearted person. This last week with him had tempered her view on his kind. As much as she hated this new life and the vampires responsible for thrusting her into it, Christian had shown her that decent, honorable vampires existed. It gave her hope she too could lead a decent, honorable life.

"Cute, Christian, but it doesn't take a week to replace a ruined cell. I need a better excuse. Oh, and my phone is about two minutes from dying. I don't have my charger."

He glanced at her device, an iPhone. "I can't help you with that. I have an Android. I can take you to your apartment if you want."

"Yes, please and as soon as possible. Once my phone dies, I'll have no way to contact them. They might try the restaurant, but if they can't find me either place, they'll be so freaked out."

"You don't know their numbers by heart?"

"I'm a victim of modern technology. No."

“Do this. Write their numbers down and use my phone on the way if you need to.”

Mia offered him an appreciative smile, then took off to execute his advice. A short time later, they were on the road in his huge Hummer, obviously not a factory model because the paint job was camouflage, and so were the leather seats inside. “Tiffany would be drooling if she saw this thing.”

“Which of your daughters?” he asked, glancing away from the road briefly with a curious look.

“My oldest. She loves to hunt.”

“Sounds like we’ll get along, then.” He gave her a winsome smile.

Mia released a heavy breath and rubbed her cheek. “I rather doubt that. Tiffany doesn’t take a shine to many people and men least of all. If you’re there when the girls arrive, it’s going to stir up a major pot of crap, Christian. They’re going to suspect something is going on between us, and that will be compounded by the fact I haven’t called them in nearly a week. Plus if you have to babysit me while they’re here because of this feral vampire thing”—she lowered her gaze to her lap and groaned—“how can I possibly explain that to them?”

Christian remained silent for a while, staring at the dark country highway stretching out in front of them. Finally, he said, “Then why not let them think there is something going on between us? It might be the perfect excuse you need to explain why you’ve been negligent in contacting

them. I'm sure when they had boyfriends, they must have been a bit recalcitrant in keeping in touch with you."

"Believe it or not, none of them except for Chelsie has ever had a serious boyfriend. She recently broke up with him. Long story and not important at the moment." Mia glanced at him, contemplating the idea. It had merit. However, there was one major flaw in the plan, if it involved her staying with him. "Christian, will I be able to stay at my apartment with them alone? Maybe you could just stop by and check on us every day?"

He shot a frown her way. "No, Mia. You wouldn't be safe there and neither would your girls with Isabella still after Nathan. I'm glad you broke the bitch's nose, but you made an enemy for life. A woman like her thrives on revenge. You will encounter her again. Tomorrow, maybe twenty years from now, but she isn't going to forget about you. Plus, if she thinks you mean something to Nathan, which I suspect she does—"

"Yeah, yeah, I get it. She'll come after me so she can use me to blackmail him."

Christian glanced at her and nodded. "I'm sorry, darlin'. Sorry for everything that caused you to end up a part of our world. It will get easier in time. I promise."

Mia turned her head and stared out the window. Christian was right. She'd lived long enough to know change often sucked, but the resilient survived.

“Anyway, you still need daily transfusions, but I have plenty of room for all three of your girls. I have no patients ready to house this week. I have a number of appointments at the city clinic, but they’re just routine checkups. If necessary, my partner, Asa, will cover for me.”

What a mess. She sucked in a fortifying breath and stared out the windshield. The bright city lights of New Orleans glowed in the sky a good distance ahead. Time ran out and with it ideas. “Look, if I’m staying with you, they’re going to assume we’re intimate. As crazy as this might sound in this day and age, I raised them all in church with the belief sex is reserved for marriage. They all adhere to that philosophy, and so do I. Tiffany is a little rough around the edges, but deep down, she’s very moral. All of them are. If they think I’m shacking up with some guy, everything I’ve ever stood for, everything I taught them would be a sham. I can’t do that. We need a plan B.”

“Why not tell them we’re married?”

She glared at him, certain her expression mirrored the shock she felt. “They’ll be furious to think I eloped and never bothered to tell them I was involved with someone or invite them to my wedding.”

Christian hunched a shoulder. “Not necessarily. Given your principles, tell them in some fashion it happened quickly, and you didn’t want to wait. But that a big wedding is coming in the future, when both our families can be present.”

Mia shook her head. “That would be serious subterfuge, Christian. When the lie is exposed in the future, it might be worse than them thinking I’m shacking up with you.”

“The truth is the only other logical option I can see. Are you ready to tell them you’re vampire? I’ll help you every step of the way if that’s the decision you choose.”

Mia remained silent, contemplating the alternatives. She recalled vividly how abhorrently she’d reacted when she learned herself to no longer be a member of the human race. She was in no frame of mind to explain this new life of hers to her children, because she didn’t even understand it all herself. Given time, maybe she would have come up with some better excuse. She simply didn’t have time.

The marriage scenario seemed the lesser of the two evils. “Okay, Christian, let’s pretend to be hitched. I don’t know how the heck we’re going to pull this off, but I hope you’re as good an actor as you are a doctor.”

He offered her a confident grin. “I’m a fairly good actor. However, we’re going to need some props for this improv.”

Mia stared at him, unsure what he meant, until they entered the city and he pulled up in front of a jewelry store. A short time later, they were sporting gold wedding bands.

She’d thought they’d be able to beat her kids home, but unfortunately, the detour cost them more time than she’d anticipated. When they arrived at her apartment, the door was ajar, and she heard all three of her girls inside chattering with worry to her whereabouts. She walked in, Christian by

her side. Ms. Penley, her landlady, stood in the midst of her girls wearing a tattered, blue, terry cloth robe, holding her favorite cat, a tom named Buttons.

All gazes riveted on her and Christian. Silence reigned but moments, then questions began to fire from them like a major military assault. Mia lifted her hands and shouted, “Enough, girls! I know you all have concerns, and I’ll address them one by one. Now settle down and take a seat. I’d like to introduce you to someone very special to me.” She smiled up at Christian, then said to Ms. Penley, “Thank you for letting my daughters in. I’m sorry for the disturbance.”

“Of course, dear. Your children were worried sick, and so was I. I heard them pounding on your door and came to investigate. I let them in because I haven’t seen you for over a week, and that’s not like you. You’re all right, I hope?” She glanced curiously at Christian, then stroked the feline in her arms, which hissed at the two of them. Apparently, their scent, different from a human’s, disturbed the animal.

“Fit as a fiddle, Ms. Penley. Now if you’ll excuse me, I have much to discuss with my girls.”

The old lady left, and Dannie and Chelsie seated themselves on the couch, their expressions curious. Tiffany still stood, her gaze locked on Christian with hard suspicion.

She sucked in a deep breath to center herself and glanced over them. Dannie, her middle daughter, had a new becoming hairstyle, straightened and highlighted with gold and red. Tiffany, her oldest, looked the same as usual,

sporting her worn ropers, Levis, and a black tank top. Her long auburn hair, thick and curly like her own, was pulled back in a ponytail. Chelsie wore a cute yellow sundress and sandals. Her hair, also auburn but thick and wavy, was braided; the tail hit the curve of her waist.

“I like your contacts, Mom,” Chelsie commented, smiling.

“Thanks. It was time for some,” she lied and forced a smile of her own. “It’s the forties thing. The eyes go and everything after that.”

Christian chuckled. “You aren’t over the hill yet, darlin’.” He leaned down and kissed her cheek.

“Who the hell are you?” Tiffany demanded.

Christian glanced at Mia with a look that said, *I’ll field this if you want*. But she had to handle this herself. Christian would be getting enough backlash once their lie came out.

“Listen, I’m sorry I’ve been out of touch this week, but I have good reason. I’ve been on my honeymoon.” She smiled up at Christian, then added, “This is Dr. Christian La Mond, my husband.” She took his hand and threaded their fingers together. Finishing introductions ground to a halt due to her girls’ reactions.

Dannie and Chelsie gasped then bolted to their feet. Their expressions bore shock and a bit of betrayal. Tiffany just shook her head and let out a derisive snort.

“How long have you known each other?” Chelsie asked, then took her forefinger and pushed the brim of her glasses up her nose.

Mia glanced at Christian and affected a misty smile. “A while. The marriage was sort of a whirlwind thing, but we’re very happy, and I hope you’ll be happy for us. I apologize for not discussing this with you, but when Christian asked me to marry him”—she shrugged—“we didn’t want to wait. We eloped last week. It was never my intention to leave any of you in the dark. I just didn’t want to say anything before I knew something definitive. However, we have plans for a big wedding later when we can arrange it around your schedules and his family.”

“Why the big hurry?” Tiffany asked, giving Christian a sneer and thorough once over. “Did he knock you up?”

“Tiffany Jane! You know me better than that. Shame on you!”

Christian let out a muffled chuckle. Mia poked him in the ribs with her elbow, and he gave her an apologetic look. All in all, he fared quite well under her prickly daughter’s interrogation, and there would be far more to come from all of them, she was sure.

Tiffany snorted and continued to glare at Christian. “Never would I have guessed you to be a cougar, Mom, but right on, provided he’s okay. So what’s your stake in this, dude? Can’t be money, so it sure as hell better be love. If

not, if you do my mom wrong, I'll make you sorry. Trust me, that's no idle threat."

Christian grinned at her. "Not a problem, darlin'. I would expect no less."

"What happened to your neck, Mom?" Chelsie asked, frowning at the gauze bandage.

Mia swallowed hard, thinking. Then it came to her. "A horrible burn. Stupidly, I got in a hurry and tossed some frozen fish into a hot pan, and the grease exploded."

"Ouch. I'm so sorry," Chelsie said.

"Do you think it will scar?" Dannie asked.

Although Mia had never seen the wound, she knew from the pain it had to be very bad. "Most likely," she allowed.

"You're lucky it wasn't any worse," Tiffany added, her expression concerned.

Mia drug in a ragged breath and considered the irony of how much worse things really were. Someday she would have to share the truth with her girls. She could only pray when that day came, they wouldn't view her as a freak, and that she could convince them she was still the same person, just in a slightly altered body.

"How did you two meet?" Danielle asked, suspicion simmering in her dark-brown eyes.

Mia bit her lower lip, cruising her thoughts for an answer. She hadn't had enough time to field these simple very normal questions. Luckily, Christian picked that one up.

“I met her at my clinic, here in New Orleans. She’s a patient of my partner, Asa Bradley. She came in one day for a routine checkup, and we ran into one another.” He shrugged but said no more, apparently allowing them to fill in what they may.

Good one, Mia thought. She hadn’t met his partner yet, but Christian had spoken of him several times fondly. They had been best buddies since childhood.

“What sort of medicine do you practice?” Chelsie asked, smiling. Her big brown eyes behind her thick glasses blinked curiously at him. Her expression was the warmest of all her daughters, Mia noticed. One reason being, Christian was a doctor, and Chelsie’s life goal was to be one too, an OB/GYN just like Christian. Mia knew the two of them would definitely hit it off. Plus she possessed such a sweet, gentle soul, unlike Tiffany and her fresh mouth, which would scathe anyone for any reason when the mood struck her. She had good reason after her father betrayed all of them by jumping the fence with Tiffany’s best friend. That mess had been a double whammy for the poor girl, and Mia didn’t know what to do for her. Time had not fixed a thing. The girl was so sour, especially toward men. Mia feared she’d wind up like Ms. Penley, a seventy-year-old spinster with thirteen cats.

“I’m an OB/GYN.”

Chelsie’s eyes widened with interest, and she stepped toward him and held out her hand, which he shook. “I’m

Chelsie Peebles. This is Dannie or Danielle.” She glanced back at her sister who offered him a nod and a smile, which didn’t quite make it to her eyes. Then she turned to Tiffany and said, “This is Tiffany or TJ, and my apologies for her mouth just now, which I’m sorry to say will likely only be a taste of what you’ll endure from her in the future. She’s horrible, but we love her anyway.” She shot a wicked grin her way.

Tiffany stuck her tongue out at her.

Christian started laughing. “I like her already. All of you.” He winked at Tiffany, a friendly gesture, yet it gained him another hateful look, which didn’t seem to ruffle him in the least. “You girls have a great mother, and I look forward to getting to know all of you.”

“You don’t talk or look like any doctor I’ve ever met,” Tiffany said, studying his black T-shirt with white elongated skulls on both sides running from the shoulders to the waistband. “Where you from?”

“Texas. San Antonio originally. I settled in New Orleans a number of years ago and opened a practice here with my partner, Asa, whom I mentioned.” He glanced at Mia. “I know your girls must be hungry after their flight. Wanna go get a bite to eat?”

Mia smiled at him and nodded. Good thinking on his part. The outing would give them all time to simmer down, talk, and transition her three children into the news they would be staying at Christian’s place during this visit.

“I know you guys have to be hungry.” She shared a smile between the three. Chelsie nodded, and Dannie and Tiffany added their own verbal agreements.

Mia knew exactly where she wanted to take them for their first outing in the city. A short time later, they were at Tavana’s. Delanie greeted her with a big hug and a few questions about her new job, which Mia skated, then Delanie seated them at a large table near the front of the restaurant.

“I’d think this would be the last place you’d want to eat, Mom,” Tiffany said, glancing around. “And what’s this about a new job?”

“Don’t worry about me. You knew I’d want all of you to try the food here. I’ve been telling you about it for four years. As far as your question, it’s true. I’m not working here any longer. Hopefully I will again soon.”

Whats and whys followed that statement, but Mia merely held up her hand to silence them. She’d known before she’d arrived, staff would be questioning her about her job with Nathan. She was okay with that. Mia had many outings planned for her kids this week, and knowing Nathan, at some point, she’d be running into him or he’d be back pounding on Christian’s door. She would need a reason as to why for her girls. In this particular instance, the truth was perfect.

She placed her menu on the table and tried for a focused smile. “I took a job as a private chef recently. The pay was

amazing, but long story short, it just didn't work out with the man who hired me. Joe, my ex-boss, will probably take me back. After dinner, I'll need to go to the back to speak with him, but I promise I won't be long."

"Darn. I'm sorry to hear that, Mom," Dannie said, her expression troubled.

Tiffany scowled at her. "Some rich dude, I suppose? You ought to know better than that. All rich people are bad news." Her gaze slid toward Christian. "I reckon as a doctor, you probably aren't starving. Seems Mom has been making a few impulsive choices lately. I hope to hell you ain't one of them."

Christian sat his own menu on the table and stared at the girl, his expression patient but firm. "Look, Tiffany, I understand you're concerned about your mother, but I promise you, I would never hurt her. I don't have to tell you what an amazing person she is or the wisdom and intelligence she possesses. You've known her far longer than I have. She made an unfortunate choice regarding a job, yes, but we've known each other for some time. She didn't jump into this marriage with blinders on anymore than I did."

Dang! He was a good actor, Mia thought blinking at him. She wouldn't have been able to sport such a clever answer on the fly. It worked because Tiffany shut up, picked up her menu, and perused the contents. Chelsie and Dannie did the same.

Minutes later, Brittany arrived to take their order. When she saw Mia, she gasped. “Oh my god, Mia! Look at you. Rocking contacts and you’ve had some work done. Microdermabrasion? Botox?”

“Something like that,” Mia answered evasively, then shared a smile between Christian and her girls. “I told you my girls were coming for a visit.” She introduced them, then Christian last. “This is Dr. Christian La Mond, my husband.”

Brittany’s jaw dropped, and her pen and guest checkbook hit the floor. Once she retrieved them, she said, “Well, congratulations, I guess, but what happened with you and Nathan Davenport? After the Fourth, I thought it was totally on between you two.”

“Who the heck is Nathan Davenport?” Tiffany demanded.

Dannie said, “Surely, not *the* Nathan Davenport?”

Chelsie just stared at her wide-eyed, her mouth in fly-catching mode.

Mia glanced at Christian who didn’t appear prepared to field this disaster, then grit her teeth. *Leave it to Brittany.* If the girl even possessed a dictionary, the word *subtle* had surely been expunged from it. “Yes, the man who hired me was *the* Nathan Davenport,” she told them, then frowned at Brittany.

She stared at her with a squeamish expression. “Mia, I hate to tell you this, but he’s here tonight. Alone.”

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Just great, Mia thought, glancing around for him. She was in no mood for another confrontation with Nathan, especially with her girls present.

Brittany offered her a half-hearted smile. “If you don’t want to run into him, I can move you to the private dining room. There’s no party in there tonight. I’m sure Joe wouldn’t mind.”

Mia swallowed hard and squeezed her eyes closed to settle her nerves. She’d known she’d be running into Nathan, she just hadn’t expected it to be this soon.

She felt Christian take hold of her right hand resting on her thigh beneath the table. He fused their fingers together. She looked up at him, noting his concern, and she tried for an appreciative smile.

He leaned in and whispered in her ear. “I’m sorry. It’s my fault. I should have scented him, but the food smells and the fact I’m hungry kind of, uhm, tied up my nose.”

She squeezed his hand. “Not your fault.” Both of them had been preoccupied. Mia knew moving to a different location would do no good because Nathan would have already scented her. Now that she knew he was here, she inhaled and picked up his delicious familiar scent, which started a movie of sweet painful memories rolling through her head.

No. She could not do this. She had to get out of here now.

“Thanks, Brittany, but I think it’s best we leave.” She said to her girls, “I’m sorry, but we’re going to have to find someplace else to eat tonight.” She backed up her chair and stood.

“Hang on,” Tiffany said, scowling at her. “You’re obviously scared of this guy. What did he do to you?” She paused and glanced at Brittany. “From what she just said, sounds like he was a hell of a lot more than your employer.”

Tiffany was really starting to chafe her hide with her attitude and unending suspicions. “Tiffany, that’s just about enough. I’m trying very hard here to have a nice dinner with you and your sisters. I simply don’t want to run into my ex-employer.”

“Pssht! Figured you wouldn’t shoot straight. I’m beginning to wonder if I even know who you are anymore.”

That hurt Mia’s feelings, but the harsh statement rang true. Mia didn’t even know herself, who she was anymore.

Tiffany glanced around the restaurant with a fierce scowl. “And where is this asshole?” she asked Brittany. “If

I find out he hurt Mom, when I get done with him, he'll be sucking his meals through a straw for the next month."

Christian grinned, stood, and wrapped his arm around Mia's waist. "Tiffany, darlin', trust me the man hasn't harmed your mother. If it did come to protecting her, I'd be right beside you, and we were done with him, I'd wire his jaw so tight, he'd be lucky to get a straw in his mouth."

Tiffany let out a wicked laugh. "I say, let's git-r-done."

Christian shook his head and chuckled. "Lord, you're vicious, but let's not end this night in a holding cell, darlin'. There are plenty of other places to eat in this town. What's your thoughts on Cajun, girls?" He glanced over the three of them.

"We don't know," Chelsie said. "We all want to try the local cuisine. After all, this is New Orleans."

They agreed to the idea, then headed for the door, but the quiet exit Mia hoped for was not to be. Nathan stepped in front of them, just feet from the front door, quietly glancing over her and her children. His expression was settled, but she noticed a tick start in his jaw when he spied her and Christian's fused hands. The tick turned into a teeth grinding episode when his gaze honed on the wedding rings each of their hands bore.

Mia knew this could get seriously ugly. She looked at Nathan in a way she hoped conveyed for him to speak to her mind to mind. If she'd possessed the maturity to do so

herself, she would have initiated the conversation, but she didn't have that vampire skill yet.

He got it. Mind to mind, he said, *I assume these are your children because they are replicas of you. They're beautiful, like you, but don't worry. I won't make a scene. I wouldn't embarrass you that way, Mia.*

Thank you. That being the case, get lost. I don't need to be explaining you to my girls.

Understood. But I would like an explanation to those gold bands you and that doctor of yours are wearing.

Now is not the time, Nathan. Back off.

He did not appear pleased but nodded once, then smiled kindly at her three girls.

Dannie said, "So you're Nathan Davenport. Mom said you hired her, but she didn't say why she quit, and she probably won't. She's loyal to a fault. Something must have happened. Do you have the guts to explain what you did to run her off?"

Tiffany snorted. "Yeah, right, Dannie. You think he's going to come up with anything close to the truth?" She glared at her mother. "Mom, I don't know what worm crawled into your brain, but it must be a midlife thing, taking a job with a man like him." She speared Christian with a scowl. "The jury is still out on your new husband there, but as for this guy"—she paused and glanced over Nathan with a sneer—"he obviously has a thing for you, based on the way he's staring at you. You're wasting your

time, dude. Mom is married, and she doesn't take an oath lightly, so back off. I don't care how rich you are. You ain't immune to an ass kicking."

Mia could tell Nathan held back a grin. Christian too. Tiffany probably appeared to be all bravado to them. Little did they know, if pushed, she'd attempt to make good on her threats. Nevertheless, she didn't need her daughter defending her. "Tiffany Jane, button it. I've had just about enough of your mouth tonight. I'm more than capable of taking care of myself." To Nathan, "We were just leaving. Excuse us."

He nodded and glanced over her three daughters again with a despondent look.

Mia heaved a sigh. There was no sense in being rude. It would only fuel the girl's suspicions where he was concerned. "Girls, Nathan did nothing inappropriate," she lied. "The job just wasn't the right fit for me." She faced Nathan, then said, "Nathan, this is Danielle."

"The artist." He smiled at her, and she returned a strained one.

"And this is Chelsie." She gestured toward her.

"Your mother told me you've been accepted to Harvard. Congratulations."

She smiled shyly and adjusted her glasses. "Thank you."

Mia turned and frowned at Tiffany. "This is my oldest, Tiffany Jane. She has a mouth like a sewer rat, and I haven't

been able to hold her down to wash it out with soap since she was thirteen. So I apologize for her fresh talk.”

That lightened the mood. Everyone laughed except Tiffany.

“It was good meeting all of you,” Nathan finally said.

Mia stared at him, and her heart did a little uneven skip. He looked so sad and hurt. Lonely. The notion seemed crazy, but she wanted to hug him. She wanted to reach up and rub away the worry lines creasing his forehead. Her perusal brought to her attention his pale coloring and the swathes of gray under his eyes. He didn’t look healthy, and he was shaking, which really worried her. She’d noticed that earlier too, and although it concerned her, her mind had been too wrapped up with her kids. She frowned, afraid he wasn’t taking care of himself.

Christian interrupted her musings. “We’d better go.”

Mia turned to him. “Yes.” She gave Nathan one last glance then headed out the door with Christian, her girls in tow. No one spoke as they walked down the street to Christian’s Hummer.

Mia could only imagine what her girls must be thinking about her, but Tiffany was correct about one thing. She had made some very stupid, impulsive choices because she’d let her heart rule her head where Nathan was concerned. She’d known from the beginning he was a bad romantic risk, feared he might destroy her heart. She snorted at the irony. Instead, he’d destroyed her life.

Hormones sucked, in general, but also good sense from one's head. She clenched her jaw, still so angry with Nathan for pursuing her when she'd had no idea he wasn't human. What had he been thinking? That she'd fall in love with him, and when he got around to telling her the truth, she'd just blithely say, "Sure, baby, turn me into a vampire."

Mia suspected that's exactly what he'd hoped she'd say.

Christian told her over 75 percent of his patients were turned vampires and had willingly turned when they'd fallen in love. Julia was one of them.

Mia shook her head. Sometimes people were just plain crazy.



Nathan had just returned home from hunting, a loathsome act these days and probably purposeless. If Mia and her doctor were married and God forbid planning on lifemating, he lived on borrowed time. The thought had been like a vicious cancer, eating through his brain. Last night, he'd sucked down an entire bottle of scotch and still had not been able to exorcize the memory of those wedding bands on their entwined hands.

Logic told him it was a ruse for the sake of her children, but fear and misery had been having a field day with his thinking. Mia trusted La Mond, and the man despised him. He was in the perfect position to fuel her fears where he was concerned and play hero.

He should have ripped out the bastard's throat when he'd had the chance.

Nathan opened the back door that led into his kitchen and instantly caught the faint scent of Isabella. The hairs on the back of his neck stood on end. He inhaled, trying to locate her. Seconds later, Dimitri and Julia strode into the room, and the three of them locked gazes. Dimitri looked furious. Julia terrified.

"Is she still here?" Nathan asked them.

Dimitri shook his head. "She left about an hour ago. I'll explain later. We've heard from Dominic. He has information, and it's urgent. We need to go to your office and conference with him now."

He hurried after the two of them, having a good idea the nature of Dominic's news. The men he'd hired to locate Isabella in New Orleans had struck out. Nathan had been expecting another impromptu appearance from her and had been working on a trap, which unfortunately hadn't come together in time.

Dominic was still on a round-the-clock mission to acquire the most highly skilled assassins he could garner. As long as the men Dominic hired were loyal to his dollar, Nathan didn't care if they were ex-navy SEALs, gang lords, ninjas, ISIS, or the frickin' Taliban. If they didn't have a problem killing a woman vampire, Dominic had been instructed to hire them. Since most would be human, Dominic would be able to read their minds and recognize

whether they could be trusted. If not, that particular individual would never remember the interview.

No one spoke as they all took seats around his desk. Nathan made the call. Moments later, Dominic's image appeared on the screens overhead. Nathan recognized he was in flight on one of his jets, because the Davenport logo was emblazoned on the tan leather, bucket seat beside him.

Dominic wasted no time getting to the point. "I'm on my way to New Orleans. I have twenty-three men and enough weaponry to satisfy two SWAT teams. Our ETA is 3:45 a.m. Dad told me Isabella was there tonight again."

Dimitri and Julia rounded the desk to better view the screens.

Nathan glanced at the couple. The tears swimming in Julia's eyes and the hard set of Dimitri's jaw told Nathan their encounter with Isabella had been a nasty one. He just prayed to God whatever she'd done hadn't put his friends' lives in peril. "What happened?"

Dimitri looked away toward an arbitrary spot on the wall. His expression bore shame. "She enchanted me and mined my thoughts. She knows everything. That Dominic is on his way with forces." He paused there and swallowed hard. "She knows Julia is pregnant. I'm sorry, Nathan. I think she also knows where Mia is staying. If you do not give her what she wants, she will kill Julia. Then Mia next."

Nathan glared at him and swiped a hand across his unshaven jawline. His heart hammered with a violent fear

he'd never experienced in his life. He looked at Julia who stared at her son on the screen. There was love entwined with the worry in her eyes. Dominic's expression mimicked hers, but anger overshadowed the softer emotions.

Dominic looked at him and said, "Dad told me about your lifemate, Nathan, and what Isabella did to her. You know as well as I do, she's in grave danger if Isabella's learned her location. Mom and Dad too. The people we care about can't be spread out in multiple places. We don't have enough forces to protect everyone in such a case. You know better than I, Isabella loves to collect fledglings. She probably already has an army of them waiting in the wings for a face off. She knows you're never going to marry her willingly. She also knows we have a battle plan in the works. What she gleaned tonight from Dad has given her a very dangerous advantage."

His words rang true. He thought of Mia's children—three innocent young women who didn't even know vampires existed, let alone one as evil as Isabella.

He cast a look at Dimitri and Julia, then stared back at Dominic's image on the screen. "It's even worse, Dominic. Mia, my lifemate, has three grown human girls, and they've just arrived in the city. I'm guessing they're staying with her at Dr. La Mond's facility. Trust me, there's no chance I could get them to come here. I don't know how much your father told you about what happened between us, but

currently, she wouldn't adhere to any advice or warnings I, your mother, or father offered her."

Dominic scowled at them. "We have less than two hours to come up with a solution. Surely, between the three of you, enchanting three human women and a fledgling couldn't be that hard in order to get them back to your place. I know you wouldn't want to exercise such force on your lifemate, Nathan. But if she won't be compliant, I really don't see you have a choice."

Julia said to Dominic, "My darling, Mia, Nathan's life mate is currently under Christian's care. He would never allow that. Perhaps I can call him and explain things. He knows the danger Isabella poses."

Nathan sucked in a long breath, then said, "I wouldn't count on him trusting anything that comes from this camp presently. I encountered him, Mia, and her three girls at Mia's restaurant a couple nights ago. She and La Mond were wearing wedding rings. Whether it was for show or for real, I don't know."

Julia gasped. "Why have you not said something?"

"I couldn't speak of it." The memory still made him physically ill. "We've all had enough to deal with regarding Isabella."

"You can't mean they're actually lifemated!" Dimitri exclaimed.

"No." When a vampire couple lifemated, their scents changed. Mia's was still that of an unmated vampire.

That traitorous doctor too. “But they were looking pretty cozy. I can’t be certain, but I suspect the two of them concocted a scheme to tell her daughters she’d married La Mond to provide a reason for why she’s staying with him. Considering her morals, it’s a logical conclusion. Hours before the restaurant incident, the two hadn’t been wearing them. Who knows? I haven’t a clue to what’s going on over there, and I just can’t bring myself to mine her thoughts. I’ve violated her mind enough for a lifetime.”

Dimitri frowned at Nathan and said, “The time for delicacy where Mia is concerned has expired. I understand you don’t want to do anything that might hurt her or your future together, but many lives are at stake. I’m sorry, Nathan, but I will not sacrifice my own lifemate and unborn child due to the stubbornness of yours. We have two choices. We bring Mia and her children here, or we all go there to set up forces against Isabella. There will be gunplay, and you know it. The authorities will be here in droves within minutes. It will take much longer at Christian’s place because it’s rural.”

They were all silent for a bit. He contemplated Dimitri’s speech, which was logical. However, there was a better solution for all of them. *Sacrifice* was a more appropriate word. “I’m going to give her what she wants,” he announced.

“No! You can’t, Nathan,” Julia cried.

He had to. For Mia and his friends. “I have no choice. This battle is between me and Isabella. The minute she showed up on my doorstep I should have immediately

dismissed Mia and asked the two of you to leave as well for your own safety.” The decision stemmed from the age old concept: keep your friends close and your enemies closer. Once Isabella gained what she desired from him, Nathan hoped she’d let down her guard. Then he would end her miserable existence. Quickly, if necessary, but slow and painful preferably.

Dimitri approached him, his expression grave but determined. “You are not thinking straight, Nathan. If you give Isabella what she wants, she will have complete possession of you. How long do you think it will take before she requires you to kill Mia or one of her children? Us even? She already suspects Mia is your lifemate, and she has a score to settle with her. If she forces you to kill Mia or does it herself, your own life will be over. War is the only option we have.”

Dominic added, “Dad’s right. All of us are now embroiled in this. Isabella has to die. I believe I have the resources to make that happen.”

Nathan had fought in many wars, and he knew no matter how certain an army might be of the outcome, people died on both sides. He would do whatever necessary to protect his friends, Mia, and her children, yet there were no perfect solutions to ensure none would be hurt.

“I’m not being rash. I understand explicitly what I’ll face if I give into Isabella and marry her, but I intend to have

measures in place to take her down before that god awful day arrives.”

Dominic replied, “You have them now, Nathan, or will shortly. Creating a defensive force against Isabella will be far more advantageous than an offensive one. It gives us better odds.”

Dimitri and Julia added their agreements. Nathan realized they were right. Giving into Isabella would not guarantee safety for those he loved and everyone else embroiled in this nightmare. Trying to bargain with a feral was a fruitless endeavor. Even if Isabella gave him her word she wouldn't hurt those he cared about, she'd never honor it.

Moving to La Mond's home might afford them time too, because Isabella couldn't just Google the man's location, provided she hadn't extracted the information from Dimitri. It was a private vampire practice and private for good reasons. Nathan had to assume as a vampire doctor, he couldn't afford human entities sniffing into the business of a doctor of their kind.

“If I even had a ghost of a chance of reconciling with Mia, it's over now if we do this. I know her too well. She's ashamed of what she's become, and I'm sure trying to keep the truth from her girls.”

Julia laid a hand on his arm and said, “Call me a hopeless romantic, but your love for Mia will prevail. The muck you may have to trudge through to get there may be unbearable

for a time, but if we survive Isabella, someday, I promise, you will have her by your side.”

Dominic said, “Surviving Isabella is the only issue on the table. All of you, just get there, then text me an address or GPS coordinates. Dad lined up the ground travel, Nathan, and I’ll be there with reinforcements as soon as I can.”

Nathan stared at Dominic, then nodded once. “Very well.” He turned his attention to Dimitri and Julia. “Call him. If he isn’t amiable to the idea, we go get Mia and her children whether the bastard likes it or not.”

Julia looked troubled by what he left unsaid but glanced at Dimitri. “Make the call, cher.”

Dimitri retrieved his phone from his pocket and did so. They waited silently while he explained the crisis facing them. When Dimitri finished, he smiled wanly, then said, “He has agreed.”

Nathan felt very little relief from that news. La Mond’s home would have been the last place he’d have chosen to set up camp against Isabella, but he had no time to come up with a better solution.

Once he ended the call with Dominic, he said to Dimitri, “We need to get ready. I have plenty of my own arms, and we’re taking Jazerra too.”

Dimitri raised a brow. “I’m sure she’ll be none to pleased about this.”

Nathan gave him a pointed look. “She’ll be less pleased if Isabella gets ahold of her and drains her dry.”

The four of them arrived within the hour. The doctor opened the front door and walked outside before any of them exited Nathan's black Navigator.

"Park it inside," the doctor told him as an overhead on one of the bays lifted.

They entered through a side door into a kitchen. Mia stood at the end of a long primitive harvest table, wringing her hands.

Still wearing that cursed wedding ring, Nathan noticed. The silence between them all was palpable, fraught with tension.

Julia broke it. "Christian, Mia, we are all so very sorry about this. We would not be here involving you if this household wasn't also at risk."

La Mond nodded. "There's only one set of shoulders to place any blame, and that's squarely on Isabella's. Mia and I have talked about this at length, and for now, we work as a team, all differences aside." The doctor shot him a sharp look.

Mia stared at Nathan with troubled eyes. "Nathan, do you have any idea how long it could be until she finds us? Can you think of any way I can get my girls out of here before she does?"

He swallowed hard, aching to touch her, offer her a physical reassurance because he had no decent verbal ones. "Hours. Days. She enchanted Dimitri. How much information she sucked from him, we can't be sure. Dimitri

has been here, and she may have learned the location despite the fact he tried desperately to block that information from her. Isabella turned Dimitri. He too was once her fledgling. Anyway, I've already arranged for air transportation to fly all of you out of here, but it will take a bit of time. Ground transporting you now would not be wise when none of us know where Isabella is at the moment. If she should encounter you and your children in transit..." He broke off and cleared his throat, imagining the blood bath that would occur on the side of one of the dark country highways between here and the city.

Nathan knew beyond a shadow of a doubt, Isabella worked on finding this place. The bitch had been right about one thing. Mia was his weakness, and he had no doubt Isabella intended to use her to punish him for refusing to cave to her demands.

She pressed her fingers against her temples, turned, and looked up at her doctor. "What do we do?"

"We fight." Christian shared a fierce look between Nathan and Dimitri. "We need to get the women downstairs into the hospital. The way I constructed the lower level, a vampire wouldn't be able to scent anyone there, unlike the upper two levels. Hopefully, that will protect them initially should she find us. When your men get here, station as many as you can afford with them and at the entrances leading there. Let me give you a tour of the house so you

know all points of entry.” To Mia, he said, “Go wake your girls and take them downstairs.”

“Oh god, Christian, what am I going to tell them?”

“The truth, Mia. I’m sorry it had to come to this, but they have to understand the danger we’re all facing. I’ll help you with explanations as soon as I can. Just get them downstairs. Go to the nurse’s station. They’ll tell you where to take them.” Christian pulled his cell from the back pocket of his jeans, then began to make a call as he headed out of the room.

Nathan gave Mia one last glance, then followed the doctor, Dimitri by his side.



Mia couldn’t stop shaking. She glanced between Julia who appeared as terrified as she and Jazerra who just looked pissed.

“That witch,” Jazerra spat and glared at the bandage on Mia’s neck. “I’m sorry for what she did to ya, chil’.”

Mia nodded, then squeezed her eyes shut, trying to reign in her nerves for what she needed to do. The thought of that evil woman coming here, hurting one of her children was like scalding oil spilling across her soul, her heart. She felt the sting of tears and squeezed her eyes tighter.

“Mia? Will you pray with me?” Julia asked, softly.

Her eyes flashed open. “Yes,” she answered instantly. All the anger and bitterness she’d harbored toward the woman

were long gone in the face of this disaster. She'd had a fast rude awakening when Christian told her Isabella may be trying to hunt her down and use her to get even with Nathan. Mia quickly realized she needed the Lord's help like never before. She also realized she no longer had the luxury of harboring hatred and resentment if she wanted her prayers answered.

She ran the following scripture through her mind and clung to it. "Where two or more are gathered in my name, I am in the midst."

Julia held out her hand, Mia took it and bowed her head as Julia began. "Father God, we come before you to ask for your protection over this household and each and every soul involved in this crisis. We ask that you send your angels to help us battle the forces of evil. Your Word says that whatsoever we ask in your name, if we believe, we will have it. I believe you, Lord, as does Mia. We stand now on your Word, because it is truth. Walk with all of us through these hours of darkness, strengthen our minds, souls, and spirits to face whatever we must. We thank you in advance for answering this prayer, and we ask it in the name of the Father, Son, and Holy Ghost." She looked up and smiled, then made the sign of the cross.

Mia gaped at her. The prayer was beautiful and spot on. She'd had no concept of the depth of Julia's faith. Mia felt humbled because she'd judged her so harshly. Mia saw now that Julia had been caught in the middle between her and

Nathan. Had Julia tried to tell her the truth about him, Mia would have never believed her anyway.

Jazerra said, “If your God answers prayer, he’ll answer that one. But I got my own methods against evil.”

Mia watched her walk over to a large bag she’d placed on the floor near the door where she’d entered. She bent over and extracted two large Mason jars—one held a white granular substance, the other a red powdered one. She took off the lids, then began shaking the red contents in a thin line across all entrances in the room.

Next, she created a large circle in the center of the kitchen with the white stuff which smelled like salt. Her nose couldn’t identify the red one, but it kind of smelled dirt-like. “Stand inside this if she shows up and don’t leave it for any reason. It’s a protection circle. I’ll make them in other rooms too,” she said before she exited into the hallway that led to the great room.

Mia looked at Julia and raised her brows.

“Salt and I’m not sure about the other, but supposedly, it prevents those who practice dark arts from being able to cross from the outside in or visa versa.” She lifted a shoulder in gaelic fashion as Jazerra headed out of the room with her jars. “It won’t work, cher. Isabella is too vain to worship anything but herself, even the devil.”

Mia laughed. “Yeah, that would be my take on her too. Come on. Let’s gather my girls and get downstairs. Lord only knows how much time we have.”

Mia roused Chelsie first, knowing she'd make the least fuss. She told her to get dressed and meet her in the hallway. The girl looked sleepy and confused, but Mia told her she'd explain shortly, so Chelsie wordlessly crawled out of bed.

Dannie's room was next on her agenda. Her edict didn't go as well there.

"What's going on, Mom?" She sat up in the bed, rubbed one eye, and frowned at her, then the clock on the bedside table. "It's four thirty in the morning. Even when we milked cows, we didn't have to get up this early. This is stupid. Come back around seven."

She flopped down and tried to burrow beneath the covers, but Mia grasped her arm. "Now, Dannie. Get dressed and go to the hallway. When I have all of you together, I'll explain." Appearing none too pleased, she huffed and made a beeline for the bathroom.

Mia had saved the worst for last. When she gave Tiffany the same instructions, surprisingly, she didn't get lip or attitude, rather worry. Tiffany was sharp and knew her well.

"This is bad, isn't it? Did you break up with Christian?" she asked as she got out of bed.

"No, honey, but it is very bad. Your sisters are waiting for you in the hall. I'll explain everything once I have you together."

Tiffany's lips thinned, and her drowsy eyes hardened. "What the heck have you gotten yourself into, Mom?"

The time for lies was over. “A huge mess. One way or another, we will get out of it. Now hurry.”

Chelsie, Dannie, and Julia stood at the edge of the staircase leading to the great room. She heard Julia quizzing them about their lives and appreciated her ability to distract them.

Mia heard the front door open and nearly jumped out of her skin. Her eyes slashed to Julia’s, which instantly filled with terror.

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Mia glared at Julia and knew from her expression she too feared Isabella had found them.

Julia sniffed once, then let out a shuddered breath. “It’s Dominic and the others.”

“Who’s Dominic?” Dannie asked.

“My wonderful son. You’ll meet him shortly, cher.” She smiled, but her cheeks quivered, and Mia knew it was from the sudden rush of fear they’d just experienced.

Tiffany was zipping up her jeans as she exited her room, her expression a mixture of irritation and worry. “Spit it out, Mom. What’s going on?”

“We must go downstairs,” Julia said, her tone urgent.

“Who are you?” Tiffany demanded.

“She’s my friend, Julia Chauvinski.” Mia started for the stairs, adding as she went, “All of you button your lips and follow me.”

Once they were in the great room, Julia walked over to a young male vampire with short, spiky, black hair and vibrant green eyes, replicas of hers. He was outfitted in camouflage, military-style attire. A dangerous-looking automatic rifle hung by a leather strap from his shoulder. She could scent the ten other men as human. Christian had taught her how to tell the difference. They were similarly garbed and armed, standing around and behind the attractive young vampire near the front doors.

Mia knew instantly the man was her son. Except for his eyes, his resemblance to Dimitri was uncanny. Julia hugged him awkwardly around his weapon, pulled back, and stared at him. Mia suspected they mind spoke. Christian told her parents of born vampire children automatically had this ability because of the parental blood bond.

Julia nodded, then turned and smiled at her and her girls, which told Mia that for the moment, they were safe. Dominic and his men had apparently been outside searching for Isabella. Relief swept her.

“What the heck is going on?” Tiffany asked.

Mia turned and took stock of her three girls. Tiffany glared at the small army, her expression angry, a cover-up for fear she suspected, which entrenched her other two daughters' expressions.

The time for truth was at hand. “Girls. We are all in serious danger. These men are here for our protection.”

Before she could say more, Christian, Nathan, and Dimitri entered the room, Jazerra moments behind them, now holding two empty Mason jars.

“What’s he doing here?” Dannie asked, glaring at Nathan.

“Why are all of you still up here, Mia?” Christian snapped.

Julia fielded that question. “Dominic just arrived. There hasn’t been time. But he has assured me the grounds are secure presently.”

“Okay, this is bullshit,” Tiffany exploded, slicing her hands in the air in front of her. “If somebody doesn’t tell me what the heck is up with this pitiful remake of a bad Van Damme movie, I’m going to be kicking someone’s ass real soon.” Her gaze narrowed on Nathan. “Something tells me you’re waist deep in this pot of crap. If so, you’re first on my list.”

“I am,” Nathan replied, soberly. “I have an enemy who has made it her mission to destroy me and the lives of everyone I hold dear or have association with. We are all in danger, which is the reason for the security.”

“Her?” Tiffany echoed. “All of this for some chick? Who is she? I’ll clean her clock.”

Mia answered softly, “A vampire. A very nasty, evil one.” She reached up and pulled the bandage off her neck. She knew the wound was still hideous, but she needed a physical factor to prove this unbelievable story.

Chelsie gasped and covered her mouth with her hands. Both Dannie and Tiffany took on nauseous expressions.

Mia used their silence to further her explanation. “Never in a million years would I have imagined there to be such things as vampires. Not in a literal sense anyway, but it’s true.”

“Okay, I don’t know what you’re smoking, Mom, but you need a serious intervention,” Tiffany said, shaking her head, hands on hips.

“Enough, Tiffany Jane. And that goes for all of you. I have a story to tell, and I need to get it done quickly. I mean it. Button your lips.” She shared a scowl between the three of them, which she’d used many times when her patience had expired.

Dannie said, “Go ahead.”

“One night several weeks ago, Nathan came into my restaurant. Long story short, he uhm...” She paused there and cleared her throat, words escaping her.

“I drank from her. I’m one too,” Nathan said, his tone frank. However, when he looked at her, his expression was sorrowful.

A mixture of disgust, disbelief, and horror filtered into all of her girls’ faces. Mia hurried to continue before they assaulted her with another barrage of questions. “I didn’t know he had done so at the time. I didn’t remember it, and I had no idea he was a vampire until recently. It’s very complicated. I’ll explain later. Anyway, we started seeing

each other shortly after I began working for him. Then one night, we were out on a date. Afterwards, we went back to his place, and this woman vampire, Isabella, showed up. She did this.” Mia pointed to her neck. “I was dying. Nathan saved my life by giving me his blood. Christian has been taking care of me ever since. He’s not my husband. He’s my doctor. Both he and Nathan saved my life that night. Unfortunately, I’m no longer human. I am what most everyone here is. Vampire.” She gestured around the room.

“This is insane,” Tiffany muttered, her eyes as round with shock as her sisters’.

Christian stepped between Mia and her girls. “It’s true, Tiffany, but being vampire isn’t what you might imagine. We are physical beings, not human, but a spin off species. Our DNA is so similar to that of humans, when our blood is introduced into the human body, they become one of us. We call it turning. That’s what happened to your mother. Nathan turned her. Had he not, she would be dead now.”

Julia said, “But your mother is still the same person she always was. She hasn’t changed inside. Her heart is still the same, and I can clearly see she loves each of you immensely.”

Christian looked over them, his attention settling on Chelsie. “I don’t have time to explain the details of the science behind this, but consider what she suffers and what we all suffer as a blood disease. Our red blood cells don’t regenerate at the same rate human ones do. Therefore, we need human blood to aid us in the process. In this day and

age, most of us take blood transfusions. I've been providing them for your mother since her attack. I take them too. So does Julia. However, some of us feed directly from humans because prior to modern medicine, it was our only means of survival, and it's instinctual. Rest assured, doing this causes the blood donor no pain or harm. We've developed evolutionary methods to take what we need without a donor ever recalling the episode. Sadly, like humans, we have evil ones of our kind. Your mother encountered one. I'm very sorry for that."

For once, all three of her children appeared at a loss for words.

Dannie gained her tongue first. "Mom, you've always been the most settled, drama-free person I've ever known. How in the world could you have gotten yourself into such a mess? I'm not buying any of this just yet, but even if what everyone's said is true, how could you not see this guy was seriously bad news?" She hitched a thumb toward Nathan.

"This is bull. I'm not buying it at all. But you got one thing straight, Dannie. He is bad news," Tiffany said. Her mouth made a thin line of disapproval.

Chelsie frowned at Christian and asked, "How could such a blood disease be hidden from the medical community?"

"We take care of our own. Certainly, there have been vampires who have experienced situations such as a human ER, due to an accident, but we have methods to keep humans from recalling encounters with our kind."

Chelsie shook her head, adjusted her glasses then said, “If you really are a separate species from humans, it would have leaked out. There would be some sort of proof. Documentation.”

“There is. Sort of,” Christian replied softly. “Who hasn’t heard of a vampire? People have all sorts of speculations to the definition. I am one, and I’m telling you honestly what that entails so that you can understand what your mother faces. She will always be the mother you’ve known and loved, but she has new physical challenges in her life. However, we have no more time for discussion about this.” He faced Nathan. “Pick who you want to guard the women, and let’s get them downstairs.”

Nathan nodded. “Dominic, I want you with the women and your five best for personal combat. Preferably vampires to guard them. Your best snipers I want outside on the roof and the rest surrounding every entrance. Make it quick.”

Mia noticed Dominic didn’t seem pleased by Nathan’s command. Maybe he was eager to be in the fray of the battle. She didn’t know or have time to consider. Everyone split up and left the room.

The rest of the night and morning were uneventful, for which Mia was grateful. Around noon, Julia managed to get Dimitri and Nathan to allow them to come upstairs to cook lunch for everyone. Together, they created a combination of over fifty sandwiches, lunch meats, and BBQ beef along with some potato salad and fried green tomatoes, which

Mia knew Nathan loved. The tomatoes were a small gesture on her part but one she'd hoped might give him a wee bit of comfort in the midst of this crisis.

Her feelings for Nathan had softened into appreciation, and she saw him as well as Julia and Dimitri in a whole new light. Partly, thanks to Christian and the hours of conversation they'd shared about vampire life, mainly because Nathan was doing everything in his power to protect her and her children.

Nathan could have easily left her vulnerable and just covered his own butt. He obviously cared far more for her than she'd given him credit. His concern for her girls had the most profound effect on her change of heart.

All of Nathan's men, two by two, took twenty-minute shifts to come in eat and use the bathroom if necessary. The dinner hour was nearly upon them by the time everyone had eaten. She and Julia were at the tail end of clean up when Nathan, Christian, and Dimitri entered the kitchen.

"Any news?" Julia asked her husband.

He replied as he went to her, "No sign of Isabella, but we've positioned some men down the road to monitor approaching vehicles." He caressed a palm across her hair and cheek.

Nathan offered Mia a kind smile and said, "I have good news. I've arranged for some helicopters to pick up you and your girls and take all of you to a safe place. Julia and Jazerra too. It should be around six thirty when they

arrive. I'm anticipating that if Isabella strikes, it will be after dark. A nighttime assault is much more advantageous for a vampire."

Mia winced, envisioning an overnight visit from Isabella. "Thank you, Nathan. I truly mean it. I appreciate everything you've done for me and my girls."

He appeared taken aback by her words, but he said, "You're welcome, although it's not necessary. There is no way I'd leave you or anyone I love vulnerable. We'll get through this."

Love? The word shot a quick spear of shock through her chest. Did he really love her after everything that had happened between them? Christian seemed to think so, although he hadn't made an outright admission to that fact. He hated Nathan, and she could hardly blame him. Christian was a very ethical man, but Nathan often skated so far to the left of ethics, it was a wonder scandal wasn't his ever-present companion with a public life like his.

Mia turned and began loading the dishwasher. Julia silently joined her in the chore as the men began to discuss a plan about night watches, so the guards could take turns getting sleep. Mia looked up, catching Julia's gaze.

"You are not angry with him any longer?"

She shook her head. "I suppose knowing your life and those of your children could be over by day's end puts a whole new perspective on the world. I owe him an apology, Julia. You too. I'm a hypocrite. What I did to hide the truth

from my girls is no different than what you and Nathan did with me.”

“You are both wise and compassionate, my friend.”

“No, I’ve been self-absorbed.” She’d been giving a great deal of thought to this admission since Dimitri called Christian.

“For good reason,” Julia argued, her expression guilt-ridden. “Keeping the truth from you was wrong of all of us.”

It didn’t matter anymore. Her life had been changed irrevocably. As much as she wanted her old life back, Mia had finally accepted the fact that would never happen. She was a vampire.

Christian had been right. Even with transfusions, she’d experienced vicious urges to taste blood. At times, she’d wanted to release her fangs and sink them into the plastic blood units on her IV pole. The need had been so fierce her body would begin to shake. She had never tasted blood in her life other sucking on her finger after a paper cut or something. If she, a vampire who had never ingested another human’s blood, suffered that sort of temptation, no wonder Nathan, a vampire who always fed au natural, hadn’t been able to control himself with her. Especially with the attraction factor.

Mia offered her a sad smile, finally replying to her comment. “Well, be that as it may, my pity party just got busted.”

Julia grinned. “I think I know what you mean. Your American slang sometimes confuses me, but I find it humorous.”

“If you want a really good infusion of American slang, go hang with Tiffany for a few hours.”

They shared a good giggle over that. Mia realized the room had grown quiet. She turned her head and noticed all three of the men staring at them, with curious expressions.

Julia closed the dishwasher, then walked over to them. She took her husband’s hand and looped an arm through Christian’s. “Will the two of you go with me to check on Dominic? He hasn’t had a break all day. We should give him one.”

Mia knew a clear-the-room tactic when she saw one. She bit back a smile and stared at Nathan. He looked as nervous as she felt. “Can we talk?”

“Of course.”

Mia took a seat at the harvest table, and Nathan settled into a chair across from her. “I owe you a huge apology.”

“What for?” he asked, his brows furrowing.

She inhaled deeply and folded her hands together on the table top. “For all the hateful things I said but mostly for judging you so harshly about keeping the truth from me.” She paused there, half-snorted, half-laughed. “How ironic. I did the exact same thing with my girls by pretending to be married to Christian. Not once during the planning of that lie did I stop to recognize I was doing the same thing you

did with me. I was so afraid of upsetting them. Mostly, I feared what they might think of me, provided they believed me and didn't call the men bearing the white jackets to take me away."

Nathan laughed. "I can easily imagine your daughter Tiffany making that call."

Mia chuckled. She could too. "Will you forgive me?"

He looked puzzled. "For what? You had every right to hate me for what I did. I've never fed on a human donor more than once in my entire life, but I let my lusts for you rob my good sense. And for that, I haven't even forgiven myself yet."

She reached across the table and covered one of his hand with hers, striving for a fervent expression. "Listen, there is no more room in this household for grudges, towards others or self. Too much uncertainty surrounds us all. Julia and I have been praying nearly nonstop for the lives and safety of every soul here. Dimitri and my girls too."

He smiled, but it was a forced one. "I'm glad to hear that. I'm sure it will help."

"True, but the more people on board, the better. I can tell you one thing I know spiritually without a shadow of a doubt. When one's heart harbors unforgiveness or bitterness, getting a prayer through that stinking thinking is impossible. Let it go, Nathan. It took me awhile, but I have. Let's rewrite this story between us and delete the

past. What I'm saying is this, I forgive you for everything. Please forgive yourself."

He didn't reply, merely stared at her, his beautiful violet eyes ripe with astonishment and intrigue.

"Well?" she prodded.

"I've never met anyone like you. You astound me, Mia."

"I'm not looking for platitudes, Nathan. I have my faults, and I'm sure you've witnessed many in the short time we've known each other."

His smile was slick. "Oh yeah."

"Well, you didn't have to agree so readily," she chided and playfully smacked his forearm.

He stared at her with sincerity. "I told you once before, Mia, the only fault I view in you is the fact you don't realize how much I love you or how much you love me."

She squeezed his hand and mimicked his look. "Oh yes, I do. Maybe I was slow getting there, but I got it now. Completely."

"Come here," he demanded, rounding the table.

Without hesitation, she stood and approached him.

He glared at her left hand and let loose a soft menacing growl. "Take that damned thing off."

Mia bit back a grin and removed the gold wedding band Christian had given her and placed it on the table.

"That's better." He covered the last bit of distance, melded their bodies and mouths together, kissing her with a fervency that paled to previous ones, and those had all

been hot enough to melt steel. This here was Dante's final level of hell hot.

Their lips still in kissing battle mode, hands groping each other, he walked her backward until he had her pinned against the nearest wall. The magnitude of need his actions released was equivalent to a lust grenade exploding inside of her. She spun him around and reversed their positions, shoving him against the wall, then grabbed his ponytail and yanked his head back on tiptoes. She buried her face in his neck, kissing, nipping at the skin over his pulse point that thundered like a rabbit's caught in the jaws of a fox.

God, he smelled good. The tinny scent of his blood was intoxicating. Her mouth began to water. She clenched her teeth then opened her mouth and felt a strange tingling sensation in her upper jaw.

Everything sensible fled. Only one purpose blazed through her mind and body—she needed to taste him, and it was an animalistic driving force, which bypassed conscience or will.

Thoughts of right or wrong did not exist. She bit him and drank greedily with no regard, except for the insanity that held her captive, and she reveled in the act. His taste was wonderful, addictive, better than anything that had ever crossed her palate. *Pure ecstasy*, she thought, drunk on the entwined erotic sensations of both taste and physical desire.

Gradually, she began to realize it wasn't merely her own desire she experienced, when his thoughts began to

echo through her and dance across every sexually deprived nerve ending and cell in her body. And Mia had no trouble deciphering whose they were because she didn't even realize two people could get into that particular sexual position.

I love you, Mia.

Her heart blossomed with the emotion, and she squeezed him tighter, sweet resurrected emotions doing the same to her heart. *I love you too, Nathan.*

Eventually, she hit the downhill side of the new lust. She retracted her teeth yet for awhile, held onto him and kissed and nuzzled his neck, enjoying his scent, the feel of his body pressed against hers.

When sanity returned, it rode atop a trailer load of guilt. She released him, and he promptly fell to the floor with a hard thud. She gasped and stared down at him, sprawled on his back, his expression dazed. Terror sizzled through her like a bolt of lightning.

What had she done?

She fell to her knees and palmed his cheeks. "Nathan! Oh god! I'm so sorry. Are you all right?"

He grinned, the drowsy look in his eyes seasoned with pure delight. "Better than. Damn woman, as the kids today say, you rocked my world."

Mia slapped a palm over her mouth, hiding a grin. She knew he'd felt every ounce of pleasure she had. She'd remembered feeling everything he'd felt when he'd done

this same thing to her, and the raw lust, the pure wonder of being that close and intimate with another person.

The prudish part of her reared its ugly head for a conscience lashing because she'd just committed an act she would have never believed herself capable of. One she'd always viewed as a sin. The vampire part of her now realized lifemates were for real, and what they'd just experienced was a normal facet of this strange bond everyone had been trying to explain to her.

When Christian told her lifemates drank from each other, at that particular point, the thought had disgusted her. That it didn't anymore made Mia realize she truly had lost her humanity. The realization sparked a bit of sadness, but she couldn't think of that now. Concern for Nathan ranked first. "Can you get up?"

His eyes rolled back as he said, "Give me a minute, and be prepared for a round two when I do."

She giggled and stroked his hair, which she had made a major mess of. She understood now what had happened to him. Mia recalled the same thing happening to her when Nathan fed from her. Christian told her vampire venom acted like a heavy drug, which accounted for why Nathan hit the floor when she'd released him. That kind of power was a little heady and so were all the rekindled emotions flooding her system.

God help her, she did love this man. She realized she could deal with this vampire thing and all the craziness that went with it, as long as she had Nathan by her side.

“Oh mercy!” Julia exclaimed. “We heard a loud noise when we were exiting the elevator. Nathan, are you hurt?”

Mia’s gaze shot up. Julia, Dimitri, and Christian stood just inside the kitchen entryway. They each took in the scene with varying arrays of emotions. Christian pursed his lips and scowled with irritation. Dimitri grinned and glanced at Julia. Her brows raised then she smiled knowingly.

“Excuse us,” Dimitri said.

Moments after they exited, Nathan sat up. His movements were slow, measured. Mia glanced at the bite marks she made, worried. “I didn’t really know what I was doing. Did I hurt you?”

“Horribly. But I have some ideas about how you could ease my discomfort.” A mischievous grin inched across his face.

“I bet you do, rotten man.”

They stood, and Nathan wrapped his arms around her waist and stared at her. “I love you, Mia, and we will have a life together.”

Had this present threat not been hovering overhead like thunderheads capable of F5 tornadoes, Mia would be basking in the joy of their love. However, reality had returned and with it the fear she’d been feeling ever since Dimitri called Christian with the awful news.

He frowned, then said, "It's going to be okay, love, but you need to go back downstairs until the choppers arrive. Prepare your girls and have them pack but quickly."

She nodded. "You be careful, Nathan. If Isabella finds this place, I know you'll have to face her. Don't be a hero. I mean it. I can't lose you."

"You won't. I have more to live for now than I've ever had in my life."

They shared a brief passionate kiss then parted.

Mia gathered enough sandwiches and potato salad for Dominic and the girls in case anyone got hungry later. She and Nathan's little episode had kept Dominic from his break. She felt her cheeks warm. Although she knew the witnesses to the scene understood, it still embarrassed her.

When Mia exited the elevator on the hospital level, she found Dannie, Dominic, Julia, and Dimitri at the end of the hallway near the doctor's suite all the women had been sharing. They spotted her seconds later, and conversation ceased. Each of their expressions were tense and serious. Concerned, she approached them. "What's going on?"

Guilt squirmed in both Dannie's and Dominic's features. Julia and Dimitri appeared extraordinarily displeased. No one answered, and another harsh wave of fear swept her for whatever disaster she was about to face next. "What's happened now?" Mia demanded.

Julia muttered something in French, then glared at her. “It appears our children have developed an affinity for each other.”

“Very poor timing on your part, Dominic,” Dimitri said and scowled at his son. “You don’t need your head muddled with such things right now.”

Dominic shot him a challenging look. “I haven’t lost my focus. And talk about the pot calling the kettle black. How many times have I heard the story of how you and Mom met? You fell in love in a barn with Nazis surrounding you and a full-blown battle in the background.”

Mia got it. For the last two days, she’d noticed Dannie and Dominic with their heads together constantly talking, laughing. She’d paid it little mind, actually grateful Dominic seemed to be distracting Dannie from the troubles that faced her and the entire house. Her mind had been too centered on those same troubles to see the signs.

Her gaze honed on her daughter, who gave her a sharp look. Dannie grasped Dominic’s hand and said, “I’m not going to tolerate any judgments from you either, Mom. I like Dominic, and I want to get to know him.”

Mia rolled her eyes and sent up a little prayer for wisdom. Her conscience couldn’t bring her to chastise the girl or Dominic after what she’d just done with Nathan. However, Mia was no longer human. Dannie was.

With as much calm as she could muster, she asked her daughter, "Have you any idea what will have to happen if you get to know him and *really* like him?"

Dominic answered, "I've told her everything. Trust me, Ms. Peebles. I would not harm your daughter or coerce her into anything. Right now, we're just good friends." He gave Dannie an affectionate smile.

Mia heard a harrumph, glanced up, and saw Tiffany walk out of the doctors' suite. "I just heard the last of that." She glared at her sister then Dominic. "Sorry, dude. That dog's not hunting for me." To Mia, she said, "I caught them early this morning in Christian's break room making out like two teenagers under the bleachers. I reckon his parents must have too just somewhere. At least they seem to have enough sense to recognize a train wreck in the works."

Dannie turned on her sister, fury in her eyes. "You big, fat, tattletale. This is none of your business or anyone's for that matter." She shared an equal dose of that emotion with the rest of the gathering.

"Simmer down, girls. We don't have time to worry about this now. Nathan has helicopters on their way to take us out of here within the hour. Gather Chelsie, go upstairs, and pack your things." Both of her daughters blinked at her. "Now, young ladies. Go!"

She rarely raised her voice to her girls, but when she did, they knew she meant business. Both left without a word,

retreating to their shared quarters. Moments later, the three emerged and headed for the elevator, trailed by two guards.

Once they were gone, Julia said, "I am so sorry, Mia." She gave her son a reproving look.

Mia waved her hand, dismissively. "Right now, this is the smallest fish in our fryer. One catastrophe at a time. We need to get ready to leave too, Julia. Where's Jazerra?"

Once she had Dannie alone, away from Dominic, she'd have a good talk with her. Vampire males had a sexual aura surrounding them capable of making any red-blooded female's head swim. Plus Dannie was very naive where men were concerned. One way or another, she'd get through to her.

"Sleeping, I believe. I'll go wake her."

As Julia departed, Mia turned and headed toward the elevator, intending to go upstairs and pack her own things.

"Stop!" Dominic shouted.

Mia spun. Both men's eyes were wide with fear. A split second later, she realized why. She heard the unmistakable sound of rounds being fired in the distance, but they were muted because they were underground. "Oh my god!" she exclaimed. *The girls were upstairs!*

Dominic and Dimitri snatched up their rifles, leaning against the wall and sped down the hall into the stairwell a short distance from the elevator. Mia had been instructed repeatedly by every male vampire in the house to remain

downstairs no matter what she heard occurring beyond this level. She couldn't do it.

Mia ran after the two men, leaping up the stairs, three, four at a time, a feat she wouldn't have been capable of as a teenager. She heard more shots being fired inside the house. Fear propelled her to vampire warp speed.

Mia exited seconds behind the men. They all rushed into Christian's great room, filled with armed forces, human and vampire. Isabella stood at the base of the hearth, holding Dannie in front of her.

All guns were pointed at Isabella and Dannie. Mia's heart fluttered wildly then literally stopped for a few brief seconds. Every person, sound, voice faded into the background in that insane second. Mia's purpose became tunnel—to save her child.

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Once Mia had gone downstairs, Nathan made his way through the doctor's house to go outside and listen for the choppers. He walked into the great room and found La Mond standing in front of the fireplace, staring at the huge, bull elk mount over the mantle.

The doctor's gaze slashed his way, saturated with resentment. "What do you want?"

Nathan had a pretty good idea what sparked his attitude. He had won; he saw no reason to be cruel. Had he lost Mia to him, he'd have been far more snarly at the moment than La Mond. "She has great respect for you."

La Mond snorted. "I know that."

Nathan knew he'd been hoping for far deeper emotions than respect from her. He couldn't blame the man for his anger and knew exactly how he felt. "I'm sorry."

He let out a ragged breath and faced him. "Just make her happy."

Nathan nodded.

La Mond's eyes widened a mere second before he spun toward the front of the room. Nathan heard what captured his attention—the sound of approaching vehicles. The doctor took off toward one of the front facing windows. Nathan trailed him.

“We have guests,” the doctor announced through gritted teeth.

Nathan looked through the window, and his gut clenched when he saw two white SUVs roll to a stop at the end of the long drive. Seconds later, all four doors on both vehicles opened, and men began piling out. Then Isabella emerged and looked toward the house.

Damn it! She'd gotten past road security. Nathan feared those men to be dead. What he feared more was who would be next.

He saw her pointing their way and speaking to her men, fledglings he was sure. All wore dark-tinted sunglasses. They were dressed for battle, black military wear, and possessing serious weaponry. Even Isabella sported a similar outfit but no gun. She was too certain of her abilities to consider needing one.

Seconds later, gunfire exploded from above. The snipers on the roof managed to take down four of the fledglings. Her remaining ones returned fire. His heart sank, sick with fear, and he prayed to God that they'd missed his men.

Isabella's attention snapped toward the house, and Nathan could tell by the fact she didn't move, and no more shots ensued, that she enchanted the men she could see. Seconds later, she took off toward the house with preternatural speed, her six remaining fledglings behind her.

Both he and La Mond moved just as fast to the wall where the automatic rifles he'd brought rested. A few of the guards inside the house, obviously having heard shots, rushed into the room. All raised their weapons and took aim with mere seconds to spare. The double oak doors burst from their hinges and fell to the floor with a boom.

Nathan started firing, La Mond and the other men with him. One of them managed to take down a fledgling who had tried to step inside, but the spent rounds were few. The weapons flew out of their hands upward. Some crashed into solid objects behind them, one hit something glass. He heard whatever it was shatter but didn't dare divert his gaze.

Isabella walked in, across the fallen doors, flanked by her five remaining men all bearing arms. He couldn't see her eyes for her sunglasses, but he could tell by the tight line of her mouth she was pissed.

"I am so very exhausted with these hide-and-seek tactics of yours, Nathan. It is apparent you are not as intelligent as I gave you credit, if you think your little army of puny humans and infant vampires will win you your way."

"You've witnessed far more battles than I, Isabella." Battlegrounds in the aftermath often became a feeding

frenzy for ferals and their fledglings. That's how Isabella found him that night his human life ended at Shiloh. "Meaning you should know a weaker army possessing will, determination, and the grace of God can often thwart a stronger foe." The moment those words were spoken, he knew he'd just poured fuel on the fire of her rage. Her expression tightened with hatred and fury, yet he only partially regretted his tongue. He refused to die a coward.

She shook her head, teeth clenched. "You're a fool, Nathan, and your stubbornness will be the death of everyone here. Starting with you. Because of your mulish behavior, watching you die will please me far more than enjoying a life with you. Kill them," she ordered. The fledglings lifted their rifles and took aim. A moment later, she raised her hand, "Wait!"

Nathan scented Mia's three girls behind him, seconds before he heard footsteps. He knew with a sinking heart, they'd just walked into the room, and Isabella's attention riveted on them. She pulled off her sunglasses and stepped forward, sniffing.

"What have we here? Ah, you've provided refreshments, Nathan. How thoughtful. And they smell delicious." Her grin and ensuing laughter was a parody of mania.

Nathan struggled for a plan around the chaos of emotions flooding his mind. He'd been in many battles but never had the potential casualties meant as much to him as the people in this house.

He took a step toward her, hands lifted in a defensive gesture. “Listen to me, Isabella. You’re right. I have been foolish and stubborn. Surely, you can understand. I’ve been independent of you for over a century and a half. Did you really think I wouldn’t fight for my freedom? Would you have even wanted me had I caved to your demands so readily? You said yourself the chaos that would exist between us would be enjoyable for you.” He swept his arm across the room, the gesture encompassing the totality of his security. “Have I not provided the very bedlam you requested?”

Nathan paused there to gauge her expression, which seemed contemplative. “You’ve won, but the security stays to make sure no one else becomes a victim of one of your mercurial mood swings. I’ll go with you now if you back off your men and promise no one else dies.”

She pursed her lips, irritation claiming her features. “Now where would the fun be in that? I will promise you nothing because I will get what I want from you. Make no mistake, but I can’t possibly start off our marriage with you thinking you can control me. And that is best case scenario providing you do nothing more to fuel my ire. Otherwise, everyone here dies.”

The reasoning hour had expired. He shot a quick knowing look over his shoulder at La Mond and nodded. Together, they spun and with the speed of their kind, grabbed Mia’s girls around the waist and bolted. He had Danielle and Chelsie; La Mond had Tiffany, who fought

him and cursed a blue streak. He and La Mond had just reached the rear hallway when Dannie was snatched from his grip. He made a swift backward glance. Isabella had her by the throat.

“Get them out of here,” Nathan shouted and shoved Chelsie at the doctor. He whirled and rushed Isabella. A futile effort but he had to try. With a mere glare, she sent him careening across the room. His body hit the wall with such force; it took a few moments to clear his head and gain his feet.

“Let her go, Isabella, or it will be all-out war.” The punctuation of his statement came with gunfire. Absolute perfect timing. The remaining men he’d hired rushed into the room from various entry points and unloaded their clips on the fledglings. They dropped like flies. None of the rounds hit Isabella, because she’d darted to the fireplace, using the stone hearth to cover her back and Dannie for a frontal shield.

The poor girl’s eyes were wide, riveted with fear. Her body trembled, and her breaths came harsh and erratic around little sobs and mewls.

Every armed man had their rifle sights honed on them. Each had been instructed to protect the women at all costs. Hopefully, none would chance a shot because they all had been briefed on Isabella’s capabilities. She could deflect bullets. However, if one did venture a shot, Nathan also knew Isabella would make any bullet coming her way root

in Dannie's body. He turned, glanced over his men, and held up his hand.

Before Nathan could contemplate his next move, La Mond, Dimitri, and Dominic ran into the room, bearing assault rifles, Mia right behind them. The horror in her expression when she saw the scene was an echo of the same emotion pumping through his system. He knew what she was going to do before she did it.

"No!" she screamed and with vampire speed, lunged for Isabella.

Nathan caught her midair and spun her around. She went wild, flailing, scratching him, screeching for him to let her loose. Her emotions were rocket fuel for her strength, and he could barely hang onto her.

Stop, Mia! This isn't the way.

He wanted to offer explanations, but he could feel Isabella in his mind. He glared at Mia in a way he hoped she'd comprehend. She nodded but continued to breathe hard and glare at Isabella and Danielle. Out the corner of his eye, he saw Dominic flash by, straight toward Isabella.

"You warped bitch. Let her go," he yelled.

Isabella hissed at him and sent him flying. The results were the same for him as his own previous episode. Danielle screamed as Dominic hit one of the wood, Adirondack sofas full force. The piece of furniture crumbled on impact, and his gun went off, bullets spraying across the ceiling, creating a dotted serpentine line in the oak beams. The

young man was far more dazed than he'd been. He groaned, his gun falling to the floor beside him.

"Let her go, Isabella!" Rage had Nathan seeing red. He wanted to sink his fangs into her throat and rip but knew he would have never penetrated her mental shield.

Isabella shot him a vicious look. "Tell your men to lay down their arms, or I'll do it for you, however, I'll make sure they unload their clips first. And the fledgling in your arms will be their first target."

The tension, the evil engulfing the room was so thick, Nathan struggled for air. He glanced at Dimitri who nodded once then laid his rifle on the floor. "Do what she says," he commanded the men. Reluctantly, they obeyed but held their posts. Nathan spared a quick glance over them. Their expressions were like any warrior surrendering arms—pissed and defeated.

Nathan hadn't a scrap of an idea how he'd get any of them out of this alive, but his brain filed through notions at computer speed. Finally, he plucked one he hoped Isabella would entertain. "What kind of wedding would you like, Isabella? It can be anywhere, anything you want. Do you want the president there, the queen of England, Hollywood stars? Name it. I'll get on the phone right now and have it done but only if you agree to not harm one person here. Those are my terms. If you choose vengeance over sensibility, then we all die together."

“Don’t be foolish, Nathan. All of you collectively couldn’t overpower me.”

“Don’t be so sure. The one thing you’ve never understood about the bonds of our kind is their eternal depth, whether they be friends, lifemates, or parental ones. Every vampire in this room will give their lives for each other and the humans too. If one soul in this room dies, I’ll fight you to my death. Then what have you gained?”

Her expression turned thoughtful. For a few brief moments, he’d hoped he’d gotten through to her, until her gaze slid to Mia, then swamped with hatred. She glanced between Mia and Dannie. The calculating smile that crept across her face told him he’d failed.

Her attention narrowed on Mia and an evil grin slid across her face. “Is this your child, fledgling?” she crooned, her voice deceptively saccharine.

Mia wisely held her tongue, but Nathan could feel her trembling, sense the rage and terror boiling inside her.

“No need to answer. Your actions and the resemblance between you is proof. Had Nathan not been distracting me, I would have realized it before now.” She grabbed Dannie’s hair and jerked her head back, then began to scent her neck as her fangs extended. Dannie screeched and struggled in her hold.

Mia wrangled out of his arms. “Let her go! You want another piece of me, fine. She has no part in this.”

“Oh, but she does, *Cara*. Nathan is correct. You each would give your lives for those you love. Death is quick and easy. Living with the knowledge you could do nothing to save someone you love lasts forever. I like that notion much better.”

Dominic had revived and approached Isabella. “Don’t be stupid, Isabella. If she dies, then you do. You’re outnumbered, and you know it. She is the only thing standing in your way right now from the gates of hell.”

Mia put an exclamation point on Dominic’s words. “And if you think death is easy, I have a shock in store for you. All the dark forces you’ve played with for however long you’ve lived will be here to collect your black soul to take it to the deepest pit of hell teaming with demons. When you get there, your vampire abilities will be stripped from you, and you’ll know fully what it’s like to be powerless.”

Isabella let out a sharp snort and raked her black gaze across her. “Intriguing speech, fledgling, but I don’t believe in such foolishness. What I do believe in is retribution. And you most definitely have this coming.” Before anyone could draw their next breath, she yanked Dannie’s head back again and bit, growling, ripping skin, tearing into her throat like a wild beast.

Every vampire in the room converged on her. They each hit her mental block like a brick wall. All were propelled backward, crashing into objects, the walls or the floor with the brutal force of their efforts.

At last she released Dannie, and her little body fell in a heap. Blood literally sprayed in a thin stream from the ghastly wound on her neck. Mia screamed and made another attempt to get to her daughter, but Isabella sent her hurtling backward before she gained five feet of distance. He and Dominic were an instant behind her. Same results.

His men had regained their weapons and opened fire, but the bullets just ricocheted off her mental barrier like ice pellets against a window pane. Obviously, realizing their efforts were both futile and dangerous, they stopped firing.

Nathan opened his mouth, ready to plead, get down on his knees to beg for the girl's life, but he heard a soft *whoosh* sound. There was a moment of stunned silence as all of them stared at a fiberglass arrow protruding from both sides of Isabella's body.

Shock seeped into Isabella's features as she stared across the room. "You! A human?" She coughed, and blood sputtered from her lips, draining down her chin and throat.

Nathan's gaze followed her line of sight. Across the room, Tiffany stood next to the broken cabinet that stored the doctor's bows. She held a recurve, now resting at her side. Somehow, she managed to look angry, tough, and relieved all at once.

"Yeah, I'm human, bitch, and you won't be messing with my family no more."

Isabella's hand fluttered helplessly above the projectile in her chest. She wobbled on her feet once, then crumpled to the floor.

For a brief moment, everyone just stared at her body in stunned silence. Nathan could only fathom Tiffany's luck stemmed from the fact that Isabella had been too engrossed in the vampires and guns threatening her to give a thought to an unarmed human. She'd failed to create that telekinetic barrier. This was the second time she'd underestimated a human. That it had been her downfall was sweet, poetic justice for all the human lives she'd ravaged.

All of them converged on Dannie's unconscious body. Mia knelt beside her, sobbing, tears streaming down her cheeks as she caressed the girl's head. La Mond knelt on the wound side; Nathan, Dominic, and Dimitri at her head. La Mond put his hand on her neck and pressed. To Nathan, it seemed to do no good, because blood squirted through his fingers like he held the end of a garden hose.

"Oh god, do something, Christian," Mia pleaded.

"I will, but I need to get her to surgery."

"What can I do?" Dominic asked, his tone tremulous.

"Lift her so I can keep pressure. Slowly, though." He glanced up at Mia and said, "Reach into my back pocket and get my phone. Scroll the contacts for Asa. Call him. Tell him I said to get here now and be ready for surgery."

Mia didn't hesitate nor Dominic. As Dr. La Mond and Dominic took her out of the room, Mia cast glances

between them and the phone. She was shaking so badly. Nathan knew her fingers weren't going to accomplish the task. "Here, love." He took the phone from her hand and made the call. He gave the man a very brief explanation, but the doctor assured him he'd arrive within twenty minutes. Nathan just prayed La Mond could keep Dannie alive without this other doctor's help.

Nathan's gaze settled on Isabella. He didn't have to be a doctor to realize she was dead. His relief was profound. He looked at Tiffany, staring at Isabella's body with a sneer. Amazingly, out of everyone present, vampires and soldiers included, she looked the least affected by the insanity, which had just ruled this room.

The girl was a force of nature. God forbid, she should ever become vampire. With her temper and determination, she'd dominate her universe and every poor soul orbiting in it.

Tiffany leaned the bow against the fireplace, then walked over to her mom. She hugged her, pulled back, and said, "Dannie's gonna be okay. Right?" There was a thread of uncertainty in her tone, but her facial confidence didn't waver.

Mia forced a shaky smile. "Of course she is. Christian is an amazing doctor. She'll be fine. We should go and see if we can do anything to help though." She lifted her chin and tried for a brave smile, which grieved Nathan because it didn't even come close. She was a mess.

He went to her and pulled her into his arms. “You’re the prayer warrior here, love. If anyone’s voice could reach God, it would be yours. Do now what you do best.”

She nodded and closed her eyes, squeezing out tears, which trailed down her cheeks. Nathan closed his eyes too and prayed. He could sense everyone’s else’s in the room centered on them. Tiffany’s most of all, because she had no idea about the two of them yet.

Dannie mattered now. No one else.

17

Mia rushed out of the elevator into the hospital level of the building, followed by Nathan, Tiffany, and Dimitri. Julia and Jazerra stood at the end of the hall speaking. They spotted them, and their heads jerked their direction.

Mia ran toward them. “Do you know anything yet?” Fear had been pumping through her system so long now, her heart felt near to exploding, and her legs barely held her. She shook so badly. This fear was worse than any she’d ever known. Her daughter’s life could be slipping away this very moment, if it hadn’t already.

“No, my darling.” Julia’s face was wrought with worry and trepidation. Jazerra’s too. “Christian just took her into surgery a few minutes ago. Your daughter Chelsie volunteered to help since Christian sent home the staff before all of this. I know Christian will save her, Mia. Have faith.”

“She will survive one way or another. I intend to see to it,” Dominic growled as he shoved through some swinging, metal doors right of them. There was blood spattered across his camo wear, some on his face and hands.

Mia swallowed back a wave of nausea and blinked at him, confounded by his staunch statement. The hurt and determination in his emerald gaze was an instant eye-opener. Basically, he was saying he would do for Dannie what Nathan did to save her life. Make her vampire.

No one said anything to that. What could they say? Not one of them, least of all herself would choose death for Dannie over life as a vampire. Any one of them would have offered their blood.

A short time later, after they'd settled into chairs outside the doors leading to the surgery area, a tall blond man, a bit larger than Christian and Nathan, burst through the stairwell entry next to the elevator. He rushed past them with vampire speed, sparing none a glance as he entered the doors that led to wherever Dannie was being treated.

Mia looked at Nathan. “He must be Christian’s partner, Asa.” She let out a shuddered breath, grateful for the medical reinforcement.

Nathan nodded and threaded their fingers together. No one said anything. Words would have been a shallow comfort at this critical moment. Her baby girl’s life hung in the balance. Mia closed her eyes and prayed for her child and the doctors tending her. Chelsie too. She wanted to be

a doctor more than anything, but Mia didn't want to even imagine what Chelsie might be seeing happening to her sister right now.

Mia opened her eyes and looked to her left at Tiffany, seated in the chair next to her. Her arms were crossed over her chest, and she stared at the doors Asa had just passed through with a hard, angry expression. Her stomach clenched with another rancid bout of fear, this one for Tiffany. She'd just killed a person. As thankful as she was, Tiffany had put an end to Isabella, she knew the girl couldn't possibly be unscathed by the incident.

Mia scooted forward in her chair and laid a hand on her daughter's knee. Tiffany's frigid gaze slashed her way. "Are you okay, honey?"

Tiffany snorted. "Are you frickin' kidding me? Until that pretend ex-husband of yours gets his ass out here and tells us Dannie's going to make it, there ain't a one of us gonna be okay."

Mia nodded once because that was certainly true. "Tiffany, there is nothing we can do right now but pray for Dannie."

She snorted again and shoved Mia's hand off her knee. "You know God doesn't answer every prayer. If he did, not a one of us would be sitting here right now waiting to find out if Dannie is dead or alive. All of us would be back in Missouri where we belong."

That comment hurt Mia because she hadn't been able to make things right for Tiffany, for any of them. Daniel made his choice, and that choice had been Reanna. "You know better than that, Tiffany. God answers every prayer, but the results might not always be to our liking. You did a brave thing upstairs and no doubt saved many lives. Your sister's included. Get ahold of yourself and pray. Dannie needs our prayers, our positive thoughts."

Tiffany shot a vicious look Nathan's direction. "You caused all of this, and you know it. If Dannie dies, you'll be wishing for the quick death I gave that vampire bitch."

"I'm so sorry, Tiffany. You're right. I placed all of you in danger. I would say take your best shots at me, but I have to agree with your mother regarding positive thoughts and prayer. Your sister's life is all that matters now."

Julia added to that statement. "Your mother and Nathan are both right, cher. We must set aside anger, differences, and continue to pray for Danielle."

Tiffany bolted to her feet and shared a hateful look between Nathan and Julia. "What would you frickin' bloodsuckers know about prayer? You're all disgusting perverts. As far as I'm concerned, you can all die and go to hell and join that sick, twisted bitch I sent there." She shot the entire company of them a nauseated glare, then stalked off toward the elevator.

Tears welled in Mia's eyes. Her heart ached for Tiffany. She wanted to go after her, comfort her, but she wasn't about to leave this spot until she had information about Dannie.

Nathan took hold of her hand, and Mia looked at him. His expression was riveted with grief and sorrow. "I'm so sorry. Your daughter's right. I am the catalyst in this disaster."

Before Mia could answer, Dimitri spoke, "Isabella is the only one to blame."

Julia added, "You were correct, cher. God does not always answer prayers to our liking, but he always provides them."

Before Mia could consider a reply, Christian shoved through the doors Dominic had exited. He wore surgery gear, and his front and hands were covered with blood—Dannie's blood. Everyone stood. Mia's heart pounded as she met his gaze. The sorrowful look in his eyes told her everything.

She started shaking her head. "Oh no, no, no. Don't even, Christian." She slashed her arm toward the doors he'd exited and pointed. "Get back in there and do what you have to do to save her. I will accept nothing less."

Christian stepped toward her. His tone was soft but firm. "She's gone, Mia. Her wound was worse than yours. It was arterial. No human can lose that much blood and survive. I stopped the bleeding and have been pumping units of blood into her since I got her in there, but it wasn't enough. Her heart stopped, and I can't get it started. Asa

is still giving her CPR, but, Mia, she can't be revived as a human. You have less than a minute to make a choice."

Mia knew exactly what he meant and didn't even need a second to make the decision. "Do it. Can you use my blood?"

"Of course."

"I'll do it," Dominic said.

Everyone's attention focused on him. He swallowed hard and said, "She is my lifemate. It should be my blood. No one else's."

"Then, come on." Christian turned and went back through the doors, Dominic at his heels.

Mia was on such a terrifying emotional trip, breathing was an effort. She glanced between all of them, her gaze settling on Julia because she wore a wisp of a smile.

"She will live, Mia. Just as you did. You know now this life is better than death. Danielle will too. She will be grateful, trust me. My son will see to it."

Mia clamped a shaky hand over her mouth and nodded. She'd had zero time to consider the burgeoning relationship between Dannie and Dominic. This lifemate thing still held much mystery, but apparently, when the males knew it, they were solid in their convictions. Her gaze locked with Nathan's, which bore surprise.

"I didn't realize something transpired between the two, but I've known Dominic since he was a child. Nearly seventy years. I trust him explicitly. Your daughter couldn't ask for a better husband."

She lowered her arm and said solemnly, “I just hope she gets one.”



Mia had been at Dannie’s side since the moment Christian allowed it. Dominic’s blood had saved her life along with Christian and Asa’s resuscitation efforts. Her human life was gone, but she lived, and that’s all that mattered to Mia.

Chelsie, Tiffany, and Dominic also surrounded her hospital bed. Mia glanced at Christian standing off to the side. He’d gathered them all here for her awakening and told them the presence of those she loved would be emotional reinforcement for the memories that would trail her slide into consciousness.

Mia winced. She completely understood what her child would face the moment she woke. She had never wished anyone dead in her life. God forgive her, but she was so grateful Isabella’s soul roasted in hell.

Mia looked over the gathering, feeling bad for the absence of one important person in Dannie’s life. Her father, Daniel. Despite all that had happened between her and Daniel, they’d continued to work together for the sake of their children. Under normal circumstances, she would have called him immediately if one of their kids were in the hospital. Daniel could never know about this or any of Dannie’s friends. The secrecy of this new life she and her daughter shared was a bit daunting.

Dannie made a little groan and began to stir. Moments later her eyes fluttered. The turning had made them amber, just like hers. She smiled down at her daughter and caressed her head.

“Mom? Where am I?” she asked in a rusty voice.

“The hospital. Don’t be frightened. You’re fine, and I love you. Your sisters and I are here for you.”

She frowned and looked around the room with a groggy expression. Mia knew personally that the morphine Christian had been pumping into her still had Dannie’s body and mind confused and weighted. However, Mia knew she would remember some very bad things really quick. To her utter surprise, Dannie gave Dominic a sleepy smile and reached a hand toward him. He instantly approached her and took it.

“I love you,” he said.

“Really?” She appeared so happy and astounded. “I love you too, Dominic. But what happened?”

The smile he returned to her was filled with such love Mia’s mouth popped open. She knew emotions were simmering on medium high between the two, but she had no idea they were at this level of commitment. It sort of scared her, but at the moment, Dominic’s presence seemed to be a stabilizing factor.

“It doesn’t matter, baby, because you’re going to be just fine. How do you feel? Can I get you anything?” His gaze raked over her with concern.

“Weird. I’m sort of seeing double.” She paused there, and her eyes flashed wide. “Oh god! I remember that woman. What she did to me.”

Dominic squeezed her hand and replied, “She is no longer a threat to anyone. You’re completely safe.”

She heaved in a ragged breath and glanced at Mia, then her sisters. Mia followed her line of sight. Chelsie gave her a bolstering smile. Tiffany tried for one, but it was so forced it bordered on scary, then her gaze darted between the couple with disapproval.

Yesterday, Mia had a heart to heart with Chelsie and Tiffany about her and Nathan’s relationship and her take at the time on Dannie and Dominic’s. Chelsie took it in stride but Tiffany not at all. Although she’d apologized for her outburst that night Dannie had nearly died, her view hadn’t changed toward the vampires who were now a part of her and Dannie’s lives. Mia couldn’t blame her. Tiffany trusted very few humans. Naturally, she wouldn’t trust vampires since she’d witnessed firsthand what bad ones were capable of.

Tiffany was such a dichotomy. Hard as nails on the outside, with a mouth and attitude that should have anyone with an ounce of sense scurrying from her path. It was all bravado. Inside, the girl was so fractured. Mia marveled she could appear tough and together to anyone who didn’t know her intimately. Oddly, at this critical moment, she worried more about Tiffany than she did Dannie.

Mia's gaze slid back to Dannie. The girl's attention was riveted on Dominic. She knew they mind spoke by the loving, focused look in each of their eyes. They were blood bonded now because Dominic's blood had saved her life.

Mia smiled, sensing Dominic would get her through this and help transition her into this world with much more ease than her own experience. In fact, she suspected Dominic may have already told her she was vampire. Logically, that should have terrified Dannie, but she was so centered on Dominic, the news probably hadn't registered. Then again, maybe it would be good news to her daughter, based on the sappy look the two shared.

She glanced up and caught Christian's gaze. He smiled and hitched his head toward the door. She nodded. "Dannie, honey?"

She turned her head and looked at her. "Yeah?"

"Are you okay?"

Dannie reached up and fingered the bandage on her neck and frowned. "It hurts, but yes, I'm fine." Magnetically, her attention riveted back to Dominic.

"Well, your sisters and I are going to leave the two of you alone for a bit. I'll be back a little later with something for you to eat."

"Sure," she said absently, grinning at Dominic.

Once they were all in the hall outside Dannie's room, she looked at Christian and shook her head. "She seems to be

doing great, but I don't know what to make of this between her and Dominic. She's only known him for mere days."

Christian smiled. "Yes, you do. We've had very long talks about the lifemate bond."

"But so quickly?" she argued.

"With our kind, it can happen that quickly. It's not at all uncommon. You told me she's never had a serious boyfriend. Unlike you, she doesn't have the filter of bad life experiences to wade through to make a decision." He hunched a shoulder. "I know a good deal about Dominic because Julia has been my patient for years. I can assure you, he's as solid as a rock."

Tiffany huffed. "The last thing Dannie needs right now is some vampire dude, sucking common sense from her brain."

Mia turned to her and frowned. She knew the girl didn't understand any of this, but she was fed up with her attitude. The soft approach had failed time and again. It was time for some tough love. "Shut up, Tiffany Jane. Dominic is exactly what she needs now." She pointed a finger at her. "You will support her, as we all will. If you even try to give her lip or attitude where Dominic is concerned, I *will* hold you down and wash your mouth out with soap. Now I have the power to do it."

Christian and Chelsie started laughing. Tiffany gave them all a disgusted look, then turned and stalked off toward the elevator.

Mia sighed and glanced upward. “Lord Jesus, what am I going to do with that child?”

Christian took hold of her hand and squeezed. “Love her. You’re an incredible mother, but she’s hurt and angry. She’s had an extreme amount of emotional trauma to deal with this last week. Everyone deals in their own way. I’m confident you’ll get her through it.”

Mia shook her head. “Christian, all of this is just icing on the cake for Tiffany. Her pain goes back years because of what happened between me and her father. I’ve loved her fiercely yet made little progress over the last five years.”

Chelsie said, “Mom, Tiffany and I talk about the past often. Honestly, I doubt she’ll ever forgive Dad, but I think she’s healing. Don’t say anything to her, because she doesn’t want anyone to know just yet, but she’s considering starting her own business. Web design, IT, and such. I think it would be a great focus for her.”

Mia smiled. Yes, it would. When she had the time and privacy, she would ponder ways to help her.

Chelsie said, “I’d better go find her and try to simmer her down. Tell Dannie I’ll be back soon.”

Once Chelsie entered the elevator, Mia took hold of Christian’s other hand and smiled at him. “You’re so amazing. How am I ever going to repay you for what you’ve done for both me and Dannie?”

Christian’s brows knit with a frown. “I told you before that I wouldn’t accept money from a human patient who

was a victim of a feral. Believe it or not, our kind have far fewer people who commit crimes than humans. No doctor of our kind with ethics would make money a requirement of care in such an instance.”

God, he is an astounding man, Mia thought. “Fine. If I can’t repay you monetarily, allow me to do so with friendship. I want you in my life, Christian. I don’t need you as my doctor anymore, but I will always want you for my friend.”

He looked away. For a brief instant, he’d allowed his professionalism to slip, and Mia viewed something poignant in his face. Sorrow. It took a few moments, but understanding began to dawn. She reached up and palmed his face, bringing his gaze back to hers. “We’ve had a very complicated relationship. You were my doctor, then my pretend husband, but throughout the crazy, my friend. You know I’ll always love you that way. Right?”

“Yeah. It wasn’t the love I wanted, but I’ll settle for it. I still think Davenport is an asshole, but if he’s your lifemate, I wish you both the best.”

Mia sighed. “He is complicated, but I love him with all my heart. You know more about this lifemating thing than I do, so you know you’ll find yours eventually.”

He nodded, his expression unconvinced. “I’ve been telling myself that for nearly eighty years. If she exists, she’s taking her sweet time getting here. Sadly, not all of our males lifemate. Those who don’t either turn feral or die far too young.”

That was a stark news flash. Mia frowned. “Well, I’m going to pray fervently that you will find yours. God wouldn’t allow a man as wonderful as you to be denied such joy.”

He forced a smile. “Well, as they say, from your mouth to God’s ears.”

She wrapped her arms around his waist, and they hugged for several moments. He broke away first. Mia noticed his expression had regained a shielded air, for his pride she was sure.

“I’m going to scrounge up something for Dannie to eat. I’m sure she’ll be hungry soon. I’ll bring something for you too.”

Christian nodded. “Betty will be here soon to tend to her personal needs. She’s going to be right as rain. No worries. Okay?”

Mia grinned. “With you as her doctor? Not a one.”

When the elevator doors closed and she’d punched the button for the building’s second level, Mia let out a huge breath of relief. Because of Dominic, Dannie would accept this life eagerly. That made her so happy. Christian on the other hand troubled her. She had no idea he viewed her as more than a patient in his care. His professionalism hadn’t slipped once. Not even when they’d been playing house. He could have easily convinced her Nathan was a threat and used the emotional turmoil in her head to his own

advantage, yet he'd called things as he'd seen them, always keeping her best interests in mind.

She sucked in a fortifying breath against the sadness in her heart. Christian was a beautiful soul. She was determined to pray through until that woman God designed for him came into his life.

Julia, Dimitri, and Nathan were seated at Christian's harvest table eating lunch when she walked into the kitchen. Their conversation ceased, and they each focused on her with expectant looks.

She joined them, settling herself in the chair next to Nathan. "She's awake and doing marvelous, thanks to your son. Honestly, I'm still trying to wrap my mind around how those two came together so quickly, but it's seems to be working. Dominic has her completely distracted from what's happened to her." She shook her head. "I just pray it works out long term. I don't want to see either of those kids hurt." She looked at Dominic as a kid, because he appeared to be just a few years old than Dannie, but chronologically, he was old enough to be Mia's own grandpa.

Nathan took her hand. She gave him an appreciative smile, but her attention went back to Julia when she spoke.

"It will work out. I know my son. Danielle is his lifemate, I assure you. Now that she's vampire, nothing can stand in their way. Just like you and Nathan." Her smile was a little devious as she glanced between them.

Dimitri added, his expression fervent, “My wife is correct on all accounts. We wish all of you happiness, and we welcome your beautiful daughter into our family.”

Mia looked into Nathan’s eyes and sighed. “Well, call me superstitious, but there has been way too much bad happening. The time for good has to be at hand.”

Nathan cupped her cheek and smiled. “We will make it good. Life always brings troubles, but with you by my side, it will never be truly bad again.”

“Agreed.” Mia leaned forward and kissed him.

18

“Where the heck is Dannie?” Tiffany grouched, pausing from her pacing to glance up Christian’s staircase. “We have to be at the airport in less than an hour.”

Dannie does seem to be taking her time, Mia thought. She shared a troubled look between Nathan, sitting next to her on a couch, then her daughters, and the other vampires in Christian’s great room, all gathered to bid her kids good-bye.

Chelsie and Tiffany were catching their return flight to Springfield, Missouri. Dannie would be flying with Dominic to New York on one of Nathan’s private jets. After much discussion, the two had managed to convince her, Julia, and Dimitri, to accept the fact they’d be going to New York together where he lived and worked for Nathan.

Mia realized Dominic would be Dannie’s best choice as chaperone and teacher. Still, it scared her to release her youngest child into his care. She would have preferred Dannie stay with Christian for a couple more weeks

because he was an expert at guiding a human into vampire life. Dannie refused to have any part of that. She wanted to be with Dominic every second of every day if possible. Mia understood. She felt the same way about Nathan. Besides, Dominic knew far more about this life than she, and being male, he could protect her against ferals.

Over the last few days, her girls had spent a great deal of time socializing with the vampires in the house. It had been pleasant for everyone. Dannie faired well in all aspects of her turning.

All three of her daughters had taken a shine to Julia. Who wouldn't? She had such a precious heart plus a remarkable ability to put people at ease and draw them into conversation.

Chelsie had practically glued herself to Christian's side, quizzing him about vampire anatomy and physiology and all the things that made their race unique. With Dannie still healing and spending most of her time with Dominic, Tiffany became odd man out with her sisters. Of course Mia gave her all the attention she would allow, but eventually, Tiffany began to trail Chelsie and Christian. She too had asked Christian many questions.

Amazingly, Tiffany seemed to be slowly accepting this new life she and Dannie were now a part of. Mia was so thankful. With all the pain in that child's soul, it could have easily gone the other way.

“Do you want me to go check on her, Mom?” Chelsie asked, glancing at Dominic who wore the most nervous expression in the room.

“No, no. I will. Knowing the way that girl packs a suitcase, she probably can’t get it closed.”

Christian chuckled and said, “When I gave her a transfusion about an hour ago, clothes covered her bed and dresser. She’s probably still packing. I wouldn’t be worried.”

Mia offered him an appreciative smile, but his logic didn’t convince her. The girl had been chomping at the bit to leave and start her new life with Dominic. She should have had her bags packed last night. Something was up.

“Go help her,” Nathan said. He took her hand and squeezed, his expression encouraging. “She’ll be fine.”

Mia nodded, then headed up the stairs. She knocked on the door of Dannie’s suite, then opened it. Her daughter sat on the edge of the king bed, frowning, hands clasped in her lap. Her gaze slashed to hers, and Mia viewed fear there.

“Wanna talk about it?” Mia had a real good idea the nature of her troubles. She suspected reality had finally pierced the orbit of the little fat cherubs bearing bows and arrows swimming around her head since she’d met Dominic.

Dannie sighed. “I don’t know. I’m just...just...”

“Scared?” Mia supplied.

She nodded and glanced at the floor.

Mia went to her and sat down beside her on the mattress. “Not of Dominic, right?”

Her gaze shot up. “Oh no. I love him, Mom, but he’s so much older than me. So worldly. I’m afraid.” She broke off and bit her thumbnail.

Mia pulled her hand away from her mouth and folded it between both of hers. “That you won’t be everything he wants and needs?”

She nodded again. “What’s it like? You know. With our kind?”

Ah, the vampire sex talk. Actually, Mia didn’t know anything about this. In a vampire sense, they were both virgins. Mia knew Dannie, and Dominic would lifemate at some point soon, and it worried her. “I would prefer you marry Dominic traditionally before you marry him in the way of our kind, but based on what’s happening between you two, I’m sure that’s not going to happen. Has Dominic explained what marking means?”

“Yes. It sounds weird and scary. Christian has too in his doctorese. That was even scarier. We aren’t going to rush into it, though. He’s not pressured me in any way, Mom. Has Nathan, uhm...you know?” Her brows knit, and she went back to nibbling at her thumbnail.

Mia shook her head. “I have no idea what marking entails either, other than what Christian explained. It can’t be too bad, or Christian would be out of a job.” She chuckled, trying to lighten the mood, but it didn’t work.

“Mom, I’m just...I feel so inexperienced. This marking business aside, when the time comes, I just don’t want to disappoint him as a woman.”

Mia tried for a reassuring smile, reached up, and rubbed the creases between her eyebrows. “You won’t. You love him, and he clearly loves you. I can only give you my experience regarding your father because he’s the only man I’ve ever been with. We were younger than you when we married. It was very good between us in the beginning as you know.”

“But it didn’t work out,” Dannie argued. “What if Dominic finds someone prettier, more world-wise? Now that I look back on what happened to you and Dad, I can’t imagine what you must have gone through. The thought of losing Dominic at some point to another woman would destroy me.”

“You won’t lose him,” she stated adamantly. All the conversations she’d had with Christian about lifemating began to rifle through her thoughts. She pulled them together and said, “Christian and I, more than anyone, have discussed the lifemate bond. He deals with these people every single day as a doctor, and he’s assured me that the bond is eternal and nothing like what humans experience. Why, I don’t know. Julia believes it’s God ordained. I think so too. However, faith is always involved in love and life commitments. You have to have faith in Dominic and more so yourself. You are a beautiful, amazing girl with more talent than you realize. Any man you set your sights on

would be a fool not to see that. I think Dominic has seen your heart, and I don't believe him to be fool."

Dannie's eyes rolled upward and she groaned. "You know I've never been with a guy. He hasn't told me outright, but I suspect he's been with women."

Mia smiled. "Sex and love are polar, Dannie. Especially for men. Love him fiercely, and you trust your instincts, girl. They won't fail you. I promise."

Dannie bit her lower lip and nodded. Mia pulled her into her arms and hugged her tight. "I love you, baby girl. Everything will work out. Okay?"

Dannie pulled back and smiled. "Okay. I think I'm ready." She glanced at her luggage lying on the end of the bed.

Mia followed Dannie downstairs, carrying her suitcases. Dannie went directly to Dominic and gave him a tentative look. Whatever they said mind to mind must have been the confirmation she needed. She gave him a love-struck smile as Dominic took her in his arms and said, "Forever, Dannie. I mean it. God as my witness."

Mia cast Nathan a curious glance and sat the suitcases on the floor beside her.

Nathan also mind spoke as he approached her. *I know you're worried about her, but she'll be fine. I assure you Dominic will see to it. Just so you know, forever for us too.*

Mia slid him a shrewd grin. *Better be. If you think Tiffany is a bad ass, remember she learned it from the mistress of bad ass.*

He laughed, then took her hand. *I'll keep that in mind. If I ever do piss you off, beat me. I'll love it.*

She bit her lower lip to keep from grinning. *You're so twisted.*

Yeah. Soon I'm going to show you just how twisted I can get.

Tiffany, proficient at bombing a personal moment, said, "You guys are nauseating me with your sappy looks. Ya'll need to get a room."

Christian started laughing first, then the rest joined in.

Bidding her girls good-bye at the airport was one of the hardest partings Mia had ever experienced with her kids due to this insane week. She and Nathan had driven them in his Navigator, and they were currently back on the road alone. He'd attempted to make conversation, but little had occurred. Her mind was wrapped around her kids.

Her gut told her Dannie and Dominic would be okay. Chelsie? Well, by the time she hit her apartment, she'd probably have her nose buried in her computer in order to create a thesis on what she'd learned about vampires.

Tiffany scared her the most. She was a stuffer. She seemed to be accepting things, but Mia had no idea what really transpired in her mind.

"Mia, I suspect you're upset about your kids, and I'm trying to give you space. But if you don't start talking, I'm going into your head, woman."

She glanced at Nathan and tried for an apologetic look. His tone was edgy, his expression concerned. "I know I've

been a clam, and I'm sorry, but I can't stop worrying about all of them after everything that's happened."

Nathan's jaw clenched for a moment, then he said, "I'm still furious about the collateral damage Isabella caused. Every one of us have much healing ahead because of her, but your children are as bright and resilient as you. They'll be fine, and so will we."

Mia sighed. "I know. It's Tiffany I'm most worried about. She knows Dannie and I can't help what happened to us. That I think she's accepted. I know she likes Julia and Christian. I'm just not so sure how she feels about you and Dominic."

Nathan gave her a encouraging smile. "Give her time, Mia. I can tell she's very bright. Logically, she probably knows you and her sister would be dead if the two of you hadn't been turned, but I'm the reason this happened to both of you. I can't regret for a second meeting you, despite all the chaos it's caused. When I met you and brought you into my life, Isabella hadn't yet found me. Once she did, I should have let you go, even though it would have killed me."

"It doesn't matter now, Nathan. We can't go back and change the past. Honestly, I'm grateful for how things turned out, and I believe God had a hand in it. God often turns the Enemy's plans to destroy a person into a blessing instead. That's what happened here with us, with Dannie and Dominic. Dannie found her lifemate and the two are

incredibly happy. So am I. Once Tiffany realizes that, she'll stabilize. I hope."

"I'm fairly sure you're right about that. She loves her family. That's clear based on how many times she threatened to kick my ass."

Mia started laughing. "Thank God she didn't try. The girl fights dirty. Had she gotten ahold of you, you probably would have never had chance for children."

Nathan chuckled. "Guess I'm lucky then, but seriously, love, I'll support you any way I can. If you want to go to them at any point, say the word. I'll have you there in hours."

He was so wonderful. She reached across the console and grasped his forearm. He released that hand from the wheel, pulling his arm down so he could capture hers. "Thanks, Nathan, but this is a mother thing. Apparently, worry is the number one job requirement. I haven't been able to stop doing so since I took them each home from the hospital."

He gave her a meaningful look as he said, "I'm here for you in any way necessary, but I think you need a serious diversion."

"What did you have in mind?"

He shrugged. "A couple of ideas. For one, how about a boat ride?"

Mia studied him, curious to the enigmatic smile on his handsome face. "Sure. You're probably right about us needing a diversion. When and where?"

“This evening, and it will start on the Mississippi. You’ll see. It’s up to you, but it could be an overnight or two thing.”

He stared at the road. Nothing in his expression jumped out at Mia, but she sensed nervousness in him. Nathan had been by her side all through Dannie’s turning and the days that followed, except for several hours in the afternoons when he went home to shower and check on business matters. Their time together had been a very educational crash course on his inner self.

She’d learned Nathan was a master of emotional control, but those intriguing violet eyes of his, often let slip what really went on in his head. For one, the depth of compassion and commitment he had for those he cared about. He’d put his life on the line for Dannie. For everyone. This man was the real deal, and she had no more trust issues where he was concerned.

He gave her a quick glance and said, “If you don’t feel comfortable with that idea, as I said, I have others.”

Mia squeezed his hand and smiled. “No, that sounds perfect. It’s been scorching hot these last few days. As long as there’s some swimming involved, I’m cool with the idea.”

He grinned. “I can provide that, no problem.”

Later that evening, Nathan’s limo took them to a marina on the Mississippi.

Prior, they’d stopped at her apartment so she could pack, then went to his house where he’d done the same.

Proper attire for this excursion was a bit of a mystery, so she packed some nicer things as well as clothes she might wear at the lake because she'd spent many a day at Tablerock Lake fishing, swimming, and boating with her ex and kids.

Tonight, she opted for sandals and a simple cotton/polyester sundress with a floral pattern, sporting an off-white lace section covering her upper back that connected the shoulders and skirt. Nathan wore a pair of tan shorts, deck shoes, and a light-blue button-up shirt. He looked ready for a day on the water and sexy as hell. He did no matter what he wore.

Now walking down a dock, his driver trailed them with their bags. Mia pushed her sunglasses higher on her nose and looked around. The slips contained boats of every kind and size, ski, pontoons, fishing, fancy yachts.

"Where's yours? And what kind of boat is it?" she asked.

He smiled down at her and said, "Not much further. You'll see."

Mia rolled her eyes. The man loved mystery. They took a left at a section where the dock split, and Mia spied what she could only describe as a mini cruise ship. The yacht was outrageously huge with multiple levels. She knew it had to be his.

She stopped and pointed at it. "Is that yours? And is that a pool I see on top?"

"Yes and yes." He chuckled.

She faced him and wagged a finger at him. “Okay, that is not a boat. Even though I know absolutely nothing nautical, I can see that there is a water pimp ride.”

He started laughing and shook his head. “Trust me, you’re going to like it. Come on.” He took her hand, and a few minutes later, they embarked.

Three men of various ages stood to the left of their entry point. All wore white uniforms. An older man, whom she assumed to be the captain, stepped toward Nathan and extended his hand because he wore that style hat, a white short-sleeved shirt with black-and-gold shoulder thingies, and smartly pressed white slacks.

“Good evening, Mr. Davenport. It’s a pleasure to have you onboard again. I have everything you’ve requested in order.”

Nathan shook the man’s hand, then turned, smiled at her, and said, “This is my guest, Mia Peebles. Mia, Captain Davis.”

“Good to meet you, Captain.” She offered him a warm smile and her hand.

Next, Nathan introduced her to a man in his midthirties, Collin, the purser, then the ship’s chef, Caleb, the youngest of the bunch, who wore a pristine chef’s jacket and white slacks like the other two men.

Collin took their bags from Nathan’s driver and preceded them inside. They followed him down a narrow hallway, took a right, which merged into another long one.

She paid no attention to her surroundings because she was going into overload mode. Reason being the magnitude of Nathan's wealth began to sink into her brain.

During the time they'd spent together, she given little thought to his massive fortune and the lifestyle he led. Initially, she'd been leery of him because of the fact that he was Nathan Davenport; but once she began to know Nathan the man, his life beyond New Orleans hadn't been a consideration. Until now.

Mia was scared. She loved Nathan and wanted a life with him more than anything. How could she fit into this world of his? The press. Public engagements, and Lord only knew what other troubling matters faced her if she were to be his lifemate. She had no concept of such a life and how to behave in a manner becoming to a wife of a man like Nathan. Had he bothered to think about that?

Finally, they stopped at the end of the hallway between two doors. Nathan said, "Thanks, Collin. I've got it from here."

"Yes, sir." He put their bags on the floor next to one of the rooms, then left them.

Mia swallowed back the lump in her throat and stared at him, "We need to talk, Nathan."

His brows furrowed. He nodded once, opened the door to his left, and gestured for her to proceed him.

Mia walked inside and gaped at the ostentatious stateroom, which reminded her of ones she'd seen in movies.

The king bed had an ornate, wood headboard sporting carved dolphins and mermaids. There was a fireplace with a beautiful wood hearth, likely gas, she wasn't sure.

The wall opposite the bed held an actual bar. A glass mirror set behind shelves of a ridiculous amount of liquor for a bedroom. A few feet from that was another door, which led into what she suspected to be the bathroom. Several feet from the fireplace, sliding glass doors separated the room from an exterior balcony. The decor and furnishings were nothing short of opulent.

If this was his bedroom on a ship, he probably didn't have that much time to enjoy, what in the world did his normal residences look like?

Sure, his New Orleans home was amazing, a historical work of art. But Mia realized he probably had many homes just as fancy and a way of life that parodied all those worldly things.

She heard him approach her from behind. He wrapped his arms around her waist and kissed her temple. "I know what's on your mind. I was bad and snuck into your thoughts, although it was unnecessary. You're afraid of being a part of my life, but, Mia, we're embarking on a life together, love. Where and what that entails has to be negotiated. We just fought the forces of hell and won. Not my money or anything else will come between us ever again. I won't let it. If I need to live with you in a two room shack for the rest of my life, I will. Get that straight."

Mia turned in his arms. The intensity of the love and determination in his eyes following that speech stole any protest she might have made. He'd proved his love to her in every way possible. It was time for her to prove hers to him. Whatever the costs or challenges the future held, she had to face them head on and overcome.

She shot him a pretend chastising look, then said, "Well, are you just going to prattle on all night or show me around this behemoth boat of yours?"

That made him happy, judging from his Cheshire grin. "Let's start with my stateroom."

Mia's eyes widened. "You mean this isn't yours?"

He chuckled. "No, it's yours unless you choose to share mine tonight."

Mia was committed. She'd be sharing a room with him for the rest of her life. "Well, let's go check it out."

For the next hour, they toured, then sat down to dinner around dusk on the top deck by the pool. Once they were seated, a male server brought them the first course, a crab salad with kiwi slices, tiny white grapes, and quinoa seeds. She smelled citrus and cilantro in the dressing. It looked wonderful and sparked her appetite.

Mia glanced around as the server filled their wine glasses with a fruity smelling Pinot Gris. The view was amazing. The pool glittered in the pale evening light. A couple dozen loungers encircled it. There was a full outside

bar on the opposite side of the deck and round gold railing surrounding the whole area.

The ship had been moving down the Mississippi for awhile now. Each side of the river revealed an untamed, beautiful, never-ending tour of the green thicket of bayou country. In the distance, she could hear voices, laughter, and cajun and country music coming from the dwellers within. The fishy scent of the river wafted on board, but her new enhanced sense of smell picked up wood burning somewhere on shore's edge, and it reminded her of nights at the farm when she and her family had cooked hot dogs and s'mores over an open bonfire.

"This is incredible," she said, smiling at him.

"I'm glad you like it. Have you ever been at sea?"

She shook her head. "Why?"

"By morning, we'll be in the Gulf of Mexico. It can get a little choppy at times. Hope you aren't given to sea sickness."

She winced, hoping so as well, then echoed, "The Gulf of Mexico?"

"Unless you have a problem with that." He hunched a shoulder, then took a drink of his wine.

"Not at all. I'm here for the adventure, wherever it may lead."

A smile played at the corner of his mouth, while intrigue and pleasure did the same in his eyes. "Good, because our adventure in life is not going to end for a very long time if I get my way."

She gave him a heated look, then said, “Oh, I’m pretty sure you’ll get your way.”

One of those possessive vampire growls rumbled softly in his throat. “We’d better eat, before I take you up on that immediately.”

A subject change was in order. Mia took a drink of her wine then said, “You’ve had a good infusion of my life, Nathan. It’s time you tell me more about yours.”

“Ask what you will.” He speared some salad with his fork and took a bite.

She did the same and chewed, pondering a starting point. “How about your roots, your age? Christian told me he was born in 1917. Dominic is around seventy, you said. How old are you?”

“Ancient. I was born in 1843. I was turned in 1862.”

Mia knew her eyes had grown saucer-like because he didn’t appear that much older than Christian. Someday she’d ask him about his turning but not now with Isabella’s wounds so fresh in both their minds. “You told me once about your childhood. Was that all true?”

He nodded. “I left out the dates and the fact that my parents and sister died of scarlet fever within months of one another. It happened a of couple years after the war between the states. I didn’t get sick because I was vampire at that time.” (We can’t contract human illnesses.)

“Oh my god, Nathan. I’m so sorry.” She reached her hand across the table. He took it and squeezed. “Did they know about you? If you don’t want to talk about this, it’s okay.”

“No, it’s all right. It happened long ago. And yes, they knew. I wasn’t Isabella’s fledgling all that long. When she released me, I didn’t know where else to go but home. They were horrified. Naturally. But they accepted what had happened to me. I told you we were a very close family. When I returned, the war had been over for a few years. The south had been decimated due to the Emancipation Proclamation. I was never a proponent of slavery, but it was our way of life. In a time where slaves were equal to livestock, my father treated them with a dignity and respect, which most slave owners considered repugnant. He actually paid them. It didn’t make owning another person right, but it was another time. Daddy had sold the majority of the plantation. He’d been left with 230 acres and our home, which had been plundered, gutted, and burned out by Yankees. We lived in two barely inhabitable rooms, scarcely surviving. We ate what we were able to grow, basically. The sellable items we had for cash didn’t last long. Poverty took their lives way too early.”

Mia didn’t care how long ago this had happened. Her heart ached for him because his grief was palpable. No wonder he’d devoted his life to the gain of riches. “I am so sorry. A hollow comfort, I’m sure.”

The smile he returned was a bit sad. “Not at all. I know you care, but as I said, it was long ago. I managed to salvage the place, and I still own it. Eventually, I had it restored as it had been when our lives were happy. I haven’t been there in about ten years, but I have a couple who live on premises and tend it for me. I’ll take you there sometime if you like.”

“I’d love that.” The story prompted many questions. “How could you keep ownership that long?”

A shrewd look filtered into his eyes. “I’ve had many adopted sons and nephews over the years to whom I’ve deeded my properties.”

It took a few moments, then Mia got his meaning. “Oh. That’s clever. No one ever grew suspicious?”

“A few people, but I learned to move around a lot over the years. By the time I came back to live at any particular property, most everyone I associated with assumed me to be a Davenport heir, except for other vampires. Most all of us do the same thing.”

Mia leaned back in her chair and sipped her wine, studying him. She couldn’t fathom the life he must have led, the history he’d lived. On the outside looking in, one would assume he’d had an amazing life, but Mia knew loneliness had plagued him along that journey. Well no more. She intended to put an end to that emotion for him forever.

While they ate, they shared aspects and stories of their pasts. Afterward, Nathan led her to the railing of the ship. She grasped hold of the top one and looked about. The

full moon gave the muddy Mississippi a weird, iridescent, brownish/green glow. She saw a few other boats, large and small with their night lights sparkling in the distance, closer to the riverbank.

“This trip is open-ended, Mia,” Nathan said, wrapping an arm around her waist.

She turned into him. “I’m okay with that, but what about transfusions? Christian said I’d could taper off to three or four a week, depending on how I feel. I suppose I’ll have to have one in a couple of days.”

“You think I wouldn’t have thought of that?” he asked, brushing a curl behind her ear. “There’s a doctor on board. He’s human, but he asks no questions. I’ve arranged for a good supply of blood units.”

She grinned. “You are a very thorough individual, aren’t you?”

“You have no idea, but I intend to educate you to that fact very soon.”

She liked the sultry innuendo and couldn’t wait to see. “So where did you have in mind?”

“The US Virgin Islands. I have some residences on a couple.”

She placed her hands on his shoulders and stroked her palms down his arms. “Sounds intriguing.”

“I hope so, but I’m more intrigued with you right now.” He leaned in and caught her lips.

The kiss was sweet at first, soothing, a perfect end for such a perfect evening. However, it wasn’t long before the

gentle flame became a blazing inferno. He was a master at the art of lip locking, knowing just how to use his mouth and tongue to tease, excite, and draw out her wild side.

His hands were always busy given the opportunity, and she was giving him free reign. One hand had hold of her bottom, pressing her against his front, while the other explored places across her back she didn't even know were erotic points until he found them, causing her to make all kinds of soft approving noises into his mouth.

She let her own hands explore. One stroked his hair, then pulled out the tie so she could thread her fingers through the silky strands. Emboldened by his actions, she trailed the other down his chest, then lower, snaking it between their bodies so she could explore that part of him she intended to have a lot of fun with later tonight.

He released a sound into her mouth that was part gasp and part vampire growl, then stepped back. Mia sucked in a sharp breath because the look in his was wild, almost painful.

“Oops. Too much?” she asked, then gave him a saucy grin.

“Never, but we need a time-out. There's something I have to ask you.”

Mia leaned her back against the railing and crossed her arms, curious about the seriousness of his tone and expression. “Well, ask. You have my heart and trust 100 percent, so I assume you're not about to hit me with another unpleasant revelation.” She sort of teased, but his expression remained solemn. “No, Mia. If we go forward,

you know what will happen tonight. We will marry in the way of our kind. I know your doctor,”—he spoke the last word as if it were a curse,—“explained what that means.”

“Yes, and just so you know, nothing happened between us even remotely romantic. He always put my best interests first.”

“Good thing. I know how fond Julia is of him and you too,” he paused, his expression jealous and possessive. “Enough of him. I’m trying to get to an important point here.”

He seemed intense and it started to worry Mia. She stepped forward and palmed his cheek. “Nathan, I love you. I am committed to a life with you. Honestly, I don’t understand everything involved in this vampire marriage thing, but you know I’m down for it. I wouldn’t be here if I wasn’t.”

He nodded, then took hold of her hand, and kissed her fingers. “This is new for me too. It might be painful, Mia.”

So that’s what had him tied in knots. The news caused a few to unfurl in her own gut. “I trust you. You wouldn’t hurt me on purpose. Obviously, it can’t be too bad, or vampire lifemates wouldn’t exist. Right?”

He smiled. “I’m sure that’s true. I hope so anyway. There’s something else I need to say about our future. I want everything legal and traditional too.” He reached into his pocket and pulled out a little black velvet box, knelt on one knee, and popped it open. “Mia, will you marry me?”

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Her beautiful amber eyes were wide and riveted on the box. He had surprised her. His intent. Her mouth was slack with astonishment as she stared at the ring he'd spent the entire last week consulting with a New Orleans jeweler to design. It was a three-carat round, nearly flawless diamond, set in the center of another two carats adorning a double band. He'd chosen rose-colored gold to make it appear more antique and old-fashioned, figuring she'd like something more simple. Still, it was obnoxiously large. Maybe that's what had her tongue-tied.

"Mia?" he prompted.

She blinked then reached out and took the ring from the box and examined it. A smile slowly wreathed her features. "This is beautiful. And yes, of course I'll marry you. Legally. Traditionally. As a vampire. Whatever it takes to be with you forever."

Relief flooded him. He stood, took it from her and placed it on her finger. She had beautiful hands—thin, delicate, long fingers. The ring was perfect. He could both see and feel that she loved it. More importantly, he could view in her eyes and heart that she truly did love him.

“How did I get so lucky?” he muttered staring into her glittering gold eyes.

“No luck was involved. It’s called being blessed. If we always look at this between us that way, and give God the glory, we will never stop appreciating it. Why don’t we start by appreciating tonight?”

Desire began to hum between them again. Nathan wasted no time. He took her hand, and they hurried back to his stateroom. He swung the door open, then swept her into his arms.

She started giggling. “Seriously?”

“I’m a man for tradition.” He carried her across the threshold and placed her on his bed, then drank in the siren vision she made, laying there. Her long auburn curls framed her beautiful features, alight with love and the glow of the moon filtering through the balcony doors. Excitement and passion filled her exotic almond-shaped eyes.

“Take off your clothes.” Her tone was deep, husky, a command.

Nathan grinned and did her bidding, pleasantly surprised by both her urgency and lack of hesitation. It told him two things. She didn’t waver in a commitment, and

they were both in for one hell of a ride, tonight and for the rest of their lives.

When he was bare before her, she sat up, knelt on the mattress, and licked her lips, her hungry gaze raking over him.

“My turn,” he said, then grabbed the tail of her dress, and pulled it over her head, tossing it on the floor. “Oh hell,” he muttered, his gaze skimming over her. She hadn’t been wearing a darn thing underneath. “You’re naughty. I love it.”

She let out a wicked chuckle. “I intend to get even naughtier.”

She proceeded to show him, lightly running her nails across his chest and stomach, exploring with her eyes too as she went. The second her fingers touched the part of him, rock hard and aching to have her, he grunted and his whole body quivered for a second. He sucked in a steady breath for her explorations, which did get very naughty. Finally, he could take it no longer. He grabbed her wrists and laid her on the bed, pinning her arms over her head as he settled on top of her.

“My turn.” He started working on her with some sizzling kisses that soon had her squirming beneath him. She managed to free one leg and wrapped it around the back of his thigh, which afforded her the mobility to torture him with little arched hip movements.

Both lusts were pounding in his brain like a jackhammer, and he couldn't decide which one to give to them first. He broke the kiss, braced himself on the bed, and pulled back, breathing hard as he stared into her eyes. She looked as drugged with arousal as he. "I want to taste you," he growled.

"No need to hold back," she whispered and turned her head, exposing the uninjured side of her neck.

Nathan marveled that she trusted him to drink from her when it was the very thing that had unraveled their relationship. Not so surprising, maybe. She'd given into the lust herself. Thank God, because he didn't think he could live without that aspect of marriage.

His gaze slid to the other side of her neck, bearing Isabella's scar. He wasn't so sure about this. He would know instantly if bad memories entered her mind because everything she thought and felt would be open to him when he drank from her. This was the most important night of their lives. Their wedding night. He couldn't risk anything spoiling it.

Apparently, his hesitation made her curious. Her eyes filled with frustration. "Nathan, I trust you, and I'm in no mood for delays. So get busy. I'm so horny. If you don't, I'm going to attack you."

She never failed to surprise and delight him. He laughed and rolled over onto his back, pulling her on top of him. "Well then, attack."

She did, starting with some kisses, then a few nips and bites across his neck that had him breathing hard in seconds. She straddled him and continued the hot sweet torture across his chest and stomach.

He saw in her mind what she had in store for him next. The visions in her head had him sucking in a reinforcing breath before her lips ever touched the head of his cock. When she took him deep inside her mouth, he cursed from the raw vicious pleasure. He'd never experienced this sort of sexual torment in his life, but then, he'd never been in love before. He growled and grabbed a handful of her hair, forcing her to stop before he embarrassed himself.

She sat up and sighed, her expression feline-like. "Problems?"

He snorted. "You're a handful." Before she could answer, in vampire swift movements, he had her onto her back and spared only a second to locate the pulse spot that fluttered wildly in her throat.

She let out a little grunt when he sank his fangs into her neck. Her arms fell to her sides when his venom hit her bloodstream. The temporary paralysis sparked no fear in her heart as it had before. Nathan felt her getting as swept away in the intimacy as he.

His pleasure became one with hers and hers with his. Their mixed passion tore through his head and body with the intensity of a hurricane, causing him to literally shake.

He'd imagined this moment a hundred times and had well-laid plans to drag out the passion for hours. Fantasy and reality often differed, and it sure did now. The frenzy of need vibrating between them made waiting impossible. They had both waited long enough.

He licked the bite marks he'd just made, staunching the flow of blood. "Roll over."

Excitement and nervousness flashed across her features, but she obeyed, apparently as eager as him for this long awaited moment. Nathan wasted no time becoming one with her.

As soon as she began to crest, he sank his fangs into her shoulder; an act that would seal them as lifemates for eternity. She let out a strangled cry, but he knew she felt no real pain, only pleasure, because in that moment, all sensations become one through the beauty of the mating bond heightened exponentially by their physical joining. In conjunction with his own pleasures and sensations, he could feel all of hers—the throbbing in her shoulder, radiating through his *own* muscles, her body absorbing each thrust from his. And in the midst of it all, the most powerful, delicious waves of sensation built higher and higher, pushing them both toward climax.

When it burst, it was like a supernova—pure light, pure power, an all-consuming supernatural force. Pinpoints of white and black sparkled in front of his eyes and hers. He felt them both diving downward, physically and

consciously, and had just enough presence of mind to fall onto his side and pull her beside him, before they both slipped into darkness.

20

Mia released a sleepy little groan and opened her eyes. She glanced around the room. Sunlight filtered through the vertical blinds covering the balcony doors, telling her it was morning. Soft snores drew her attention to Nathan, sleeping beside her.

She sat up with cautious movements because she didn't want to wake him. She wanted to study him because she'd never seen him asleep. *And, dear God, he was h-o-t, hot.* He sprawled over the majority of the king bed, on his stomach, one arm curved over his head, the pillow resting beneath. She glanced over the little section she inhabited and wrinkled her nose at him, realizing her husband was a major bed hog.

They were married! Mia smiled as her gaze raked over him. The comforter rested sideways across his lower back, revealing half of one, rock hard butt cheek. She was tempted to stroke it but refrained. Aside from just enjoying the

view, she wanted to go to the ship's galley and make them breakfast. She had plans for them to enjoy it outside on the little deck. After that, well, a whole lot more lovemaking.

Her smile widened into a grin. Ah, but this was fun for now, watching him sleep. The man was as beautiful as she imagined a real angel might look like, almost innocent in slumber. However, the things they'd done last night until the wee hours of the morning had been far from innocent.

Dang, he was a skilled lover. Mia lost count of how many times they'd made love. Each time had been an explosive force of nature, ending with them both passing out. No wonder vampires mated for life. *The sex alone would keep you tied to your mate*, she thought.

The potency of their lovemaking went so far beyond explanation or comprehension. She still wasn't sure she understood the full extent of what had occurred between them. They'd not only experienced each other's thoughts and feelings like they did when they fed from one another, but after he'd marked her, they'd experienced each other's feelings and emotions simultaneously, making it seem as if it were all happening at once to one individual. It had been intense, powerful, and beyond incredible.

She smiled and fingered the mark on her shoulder, still tender from the night before. There had been no pain because Nathan had skillfully mixed it with pleasure. Every time after that, their lovemaking had been exactly the same—explosive—with the exception of the marking.

Once that occurred between mates, it was forever binding. Mia knew beyond a shadow of a doubt, whatever link had been created between them really had been marriage for vampires, and only death could sever it.

Her gaze swept over him again, and she sighed. A swath of black hair overlaid his cheek, which sported a serious five o'clock shadow. His full delicious lips, which had given her such pleasure throughout the night, were parted, and he sucked in steady, even breaths. She inhaled deeply, scenting him.

All vampires had their own unique smell, always pleasant; but Nathan's was aphrodisiacal, and she felt her blood begin to heat with desire. Automatically, her hand reached out to touch him, but she reigned in the urge, then crawled out of bed and quietly made her way to the bathroom.

After a quick shower, she headed to the ship's galley. She found Caleb at a stainless steel prep table, dicing up a bunch of basil with knife skills that made her envious.

He glanced up and smiled. "Good morning, Ms. Peebles. Would you like some breakfast?"

"Yes, and some coffee, but I can make it if you'll show me around your kitchen."

He laid his knife on the cutting board, then approached her, his gaze honing on her neck. Mia knew Isabella's bite scar looked horrible, and it embarrassed her. Christian had offered her plastic surgery, and Mia intended to take him up on it as soon as possible.

Caleb gave her a pleasant smile. “That’s not necessary. Give me about thirty minutes, and I’ll have whatever you want delivered to your stateroom.”

Mia offered him one in return. “I appreciate that, but I’d rather fix it myself.” Depending on the kitchen’s supplies, she intended to prepare a gourmet breakfast she felt certain Nathan would enjoy.

Caleb indulged her. Together, they executed a morning feast: Eggs Benedict, homemade biscuits and gravy, a fruit compote, bacon, sausage, grits, beignets, chicory coffee, and Mimosas. He was a very talented chef and a nice young man. She shared with him her culinary background as they worked and told him she’d been Nathan’s personal chef. That news gained a very curious stare from him at the time. He’d also sported a few of the same at the huge rock adorning her left hand, so she’d confessed that they were “engaged.”

The news obviously shocked him, and Mia suspected the whole crew would know in short order. Mia was so happy she didn’t care if the news leaked to the entire world. It would soon, she was sure. Nathan Davenport’s engagement would be national news and fodder for every rag print and TV station in the country.

The thought of being shoved into the public eye unnerved her, but she was determined to suck it up and accept this aspect of life with Nathan. For that matter, any

aspect of life with Nathan. She was his wife, so whatever that brought, good or bad, she was down for it.

Caleb followed her back to Nathan's stateroom with the bounty they'd prepared. Just as they arrived, the door opened. Nathan glanced over them and the trays they both held. He was bare from the waist up, wearing his shorts from the night before and a scowl.

"Where have you been?" he demanded.

Mia just rolled her eyes. If she hadn't been able to read his thoughts now that they were mated, his attitude might have pissed her off, but what rifled through his head was crystal clear. He'd awoken just minutes ago and thought he'd dreamed the previous night. Mia felt his fear. This lifemate thing was bizarre, but she loved the complexity.

"Calm down, Nathan. I was fixing us breakfast and coffee." She strode past him and placed her tray on a small round table a short distance from the door. Caleb did the same with the one he bore, then left.

Mia faced him. "Hungry?"

Nathan gave the food a cursory glance then pinned her with an edacious look. "Famished. Now get back in that bed so I can eat."

He reached out to take her arm, but Mia stepped back, evading him, a playful expression on her face. "Oh no, you don't, you horny thing. Breakfast first."

He released a low rumbling growl, then said, "Fine. Let's make it quick."

He stepped forward, but Mia planted a hand against his chest. "I want to eat outside." She nodded toward the balcony doors.

His teasing expression faded. "Whatever you want, love."

Nathan retrieved their sunglasses from the dresser, then one of the trays; and Mia grabbed the other, following him onto the little balcony, which had a wrought iron table and two matching chairs. She sat the tray down and looked out across the blue/gray water, to which there was no end. She sniffed, smelling salt, and realized, just as Nathan promised, they were in the Gulf.

"It's beautiful, Nathan." She glanced up at him, now next to her at the railing.

He smiled then pointed toward the front of the ship. "Look. Dolphins."

Mia gasped. "It's like their following the boat!" She watched them nose dive into the water, then pop up, repeating the actions over and over.

"They are. Sometimes they do that."

Mia palmed her face, delighted. "Oh my gosh! Wouldn't it be fun to swim with them?"

"It's loads of fun. Want to?"

She turned her head and stared at him. "Are you serious?"

He nodded. "I assume you know how to swim?"

"Of course, but you mean like now? Here? Are you crazy?"

He smiled. It was a bit secretive. “About you, yes, but I’m serious about joining the dolphins. If we were human, it would be dangerous, but we’re not.”

Mia watched him walk inside and pick up the receiver of the phone on the nightstand, then a minute or so later, he gave Captain Davis orders to stop the ship.

Oh my gosh! He was serious. Mia just blinked at him when he returned to her. He leaned down and planted a soft kiss on her lips.

She stepped back and said, “I don’t know about this, Nathan. Will they bite or attack us? What about sharks?”

He started laughing. Mia gave him a playful shove because she was worried. “Mia, it’s obvious you still have much to learn about being vampire. If a vampire can control the mind of a human, how much easier do you suppose it is to control one of an animal?”

“Oh.” She got it, then grinned, excitement trilling through her. “What about the crew? Do they know about you?”

“Yes and Dominic too. He uses this thing more than I do.”

Mia bit her lip, wondering if the staff on board had figured out she too was vampire. She supposed they would soon enough since she and Nathan were “engaged”.

“In the meantime, let’s eat. It takes a while to bring a ship this size to a halt.”

After breakfast, they donned their bathing suits and some water goggles with black tinting, then headed to the lowest exterior deck. Nathan led her to the railing where a long white plastic ladder extended down the side of the ship, at least thirty feet. Her stomach lurched, viewing the distance between the deck and the water, which looked far choppiier than it had when they'd been moving. "Oh," she groaned, having second thoughts. "I've changed my mind. Let's just watch them."

Nathan chuckled, then hauled her into his arms. "Too late. Hold your breath." In a single fluid move, he jumped straight up and over the railing. Mia screeched as they plummeted toward the water. She managed to suck in a deep breath right before they went under.

She scrambled for the surface. When she popped up, Nathan tread water a few feet from her, grinning. The water was rough and waves slapped her in the face. This was nothing like the lake and she was more than a bit scared. Nathan swam to her, encircled her bottom and lifted her so the crests mainly hit her chest. She glanced around. "I don't know about this. We should be wearing life jackets."

"We can't. It slows the dolphins down. You'll be fine. Quit thinking of your abilities to be that of a human. You can swim as fast as a dolphin, and you can hold your breath much longer now too. Watch." He let her go, then took off swimming, skimming the surface with uncanny speed. Not

to be bested, she took off after him and to her surprise, quickly caught up with him.

“That was a rush!” she exclaimed, giggling as he caught her around the waist and lifted her again. She glanced around. “Where did the dolphins go?”

He nodded, and Mia turned her head, then gasped. Two, a mere thirty or forty feet away, swam directly toward them. Moments later, they stopped, close enough for Mia to reach out and touch them. They began chattering and bobbing up and down in the water. Mia clamped a hand over her mouth to stifle her giddy laughter, afraid she’d scare them off. Nathan’s face was sober as he stared at them. A moment later, one swam up right beside them.

“Go ahead. Pet her,” Nathan said.

Mia complied, amazed by its smooth slick skin and the fact it actually let her pet it.

Her? He was obviously in the creature’s mind, and he proved it a second later when he hoisted her onto its back. Mia let out a little whine of excitement and clamped her legs around her body, like a horse. She bobbed with the waves, and Mia wasn’t quite sure where to hold on with her hands. A second later, it took off, and she grabbed the sides of her head, which got Mia a spray of water in the face from her blow hole.

“Nice, dolphin. Whoa, girl. Slow down.” It did so immediately, and Mia wondered if it understood her or if

Nathan controlled her. She connected to his thoughts and found the answer to be both.

Nathan was laughing when the dolphin he'd mounted swam up beside her. "Having fun yet?"

"A blast. They're kind of slippery and hard to hang onto, though." She brushed the dolphin water off her face and grinned.

"It's about to get even more fun. Lay across her but scoot back a little bit and don't cover her breathing hole." Nathan showed her how to straddle the thing, then Mia copied him. "Hang on tight and hold your breath when you go under. If you get scared, just pop off. I'll get you."

A second later, both dolphins took off at high speed, dipping into the water, leaping up and out, then down again, repeatedly. Even with vampire strength, it was all Mia could do to hold on and quickly wore out. After several minutes, her arms and legs were shaking so bad, on its next bolt out of the water, Mia jumped off. Nathan was right beside her when she bobbed to the surface.

"Dear god! That was insanely fun," she exclaimed and wrapped her arms around his neck. The two dolphins swam around them in a wide circle making figure eight patterns, chattering in their cute way, making Mia giggle from the pure enchantment of the moment. "I love you, Nathan. I'll never forget this day as long as I live." She couldn't see his eyes, but she could clearly see his heart and the passion and love for her residing there.

“I love you too, and I will forever.” He leaned forward and kissed her as waves splashed across their bodies and waves of rapture engulfed them.

21

“Rise and shine, Mom,” Dannie said, grinning as she, Chelsie, Tiffany, and Julia entered her room. Julia carried a tray with breakfast, beaming with as much excitement as her girls. This was her and Nathan’s traditional wedding day and her bevy of bridesmaids and matron of honor were on the case.

“Morning, guys.” Mia forced a smile for them and sat up. She’d been awake for about fifteen minutes but hadn’t been able to haul herself out of bed because she was sick as a dog, nauseous and miserable. She’d been like this for the last two days and had done everything in her power to hide her misery. She’d succeeded with everyone but Nathan because of their lifemate bond. Their parting last night to separate rooms in their New Orleans home had been strained. He’d been so worried about her, he’d threatened to call Christian.

She didn’t need Christian just yet. It had been about twenty-one years, but Mia had a pretty good idea what

ailed her. Keeping the truth from Nathan hadn't been easy, but she now knew how to block her thoughts from him when she wanted.

"Good morning, my darling. The start of your wonderful day will be breakfast in bed," Julia chimed, situating the tray over Mia's lap.

Mia glared at the steaming plate of eggs, bacon, beignets, and juice and clamped a hand over her mouth and nose. The scent of the food was like an olfactory knock-out punch in the face. She was going to lose it. She pushed the tray aside and ran into the bathroom.

Mia felt much better by the time she returned, but all four of the women in her wedding party wore expressions of concern, although Julia's was tinged with knowing. "I guess I can't hide it much longer. I'm not a hundred percent sure, but I think I'm pregnant," she announced.

Chelsie, Dannie, and Julia offered happy smiles and congratulatory statements.

Tiffany said, "Oh dear god, more vampires in our family? Great." She wore a smile too as she said it, and Mia knew she was being her usual silly, sarcastic self.

Julia said, "Mia, this is wonderful news! Nathan will be so happy."

"Lord, I hope so," Mia said, sitting on the bed. "We've never talked about kids, really." They had only been married four weeks, and three of those had been packed full of the

planning of two weddings—Dannie and Dominic’s, which had been day before yesterday, then theirs today.

They’d rushed both weddings mainly because of Chelsie. She’d be leaving for medical school on Sunday. Mia knew she would be so busy, the family would be lucky to see her come Christmas. Plus Dannie didn’t want to wait to marry Dominic, and neither of their weddings would have been the same with Chelsie absent.

Julia took her hand and squeezed. “Trust me, cher, he will be very pleased. Have you taken a test?”

Mia shook her head. “I bought one, though. I was fixing to do it this morning.” She gave Julia a worried look. “Will it work? I never stopped to think about that.”

“Oh yes. Female vampires produce progesterone just like humans when we become pregnant.”

“Okay. Guess I’d better go do it then.” She offered a smile to her girls and noticed Dannie chewing on her thumbnail. “Dannie?”

“I was going to wait to say something because this is your day, Mom, but I’m pregnant too.” She smiled shyly.

“Oh, Dannie, I’m so happy for you. You’re going to be a wonderful mother.” The news blessed her so much. Dannie was very young, but Mia knew her kid’s heart. She’d adjust to motherhood with no problems whatsoever.

“That is so awesome,” Chelsie said and gave her sister a hug.

Tiffany rolled her eyes. “God help us. We’re going to be overtaken with vampire rug rats.” She looked at Julia, grinning. “They aren’t born with fangs, are they?”

Julia giggled and so did Mia.

Mia sobered and stared between Julia and Dannie. “Getting pregnant never crossed my mind because Christian said female vampires have trouble conceiving.” She gestured toward Julia. “You’re case in point.”

“True, but apparently, he failed to tell you, turned females are most fertile during the first few years after their turning. But this is so wonderful for both you and Dannie. I’m going to be a grandmother again.”

Dannie was beaming, and Mia was so happy for her. The girl was crazy in love, and Mia knew her child would have an amazing life. Mia had no doubt hers would too. They had all gone through hell and back to get where they were now, but the fiery trek had been well worth the heartaches.

A short while later, Mia returned to the room with a positive pregnancy test in hand. She smiled at the eager gathering and said, “Girls, it appears you are going to have a brother or sister.”

Everyone began chattering excitedly, even Tiffany. Mia stared at the white wand and scratched her head, imagining Nathan’s reaction. As she thought about it, she realized Julia was right. He’d be thrilled.

Julia approached her and asked, “When are you going to tell him?”

Mia had been pondering that question herself. She also had been pondering a wedding gift for him. Men were always hard to shop for, but when that man was a billionaire, impossible. She grinned and arched a brow. “When he opens his wedding present from me.”

The ceremony began at dusk in the backyard, which Julia transformed into a fairyland for both her and Nathan’s wedding as well as Dannie and Dominic’s. The woman was a creative genius when it came to events. Julia and Dimitri’s present to both couples had been the organization and execution of the enormous list of details that went into creating the nuptial dreamland she, Nathan, and their friends and family now enjoyed.

Mia stood beside Nathan, who spoke with Christian. To her amazement, the men’s conversation, now steeped in big game hunting excursions, was quite pleasant and cordial. More amazing still, Nathan had given her no grief when she’d told him she wanted to invite Christian to both weddings. She’d gone even further and told Nathan she wanted Christian to be a part of their lives. She owed Christian so much, and she loved him dearly. There was such a streak of loneliness in him, which broke her heart. He needed friends and a big, extended family, and she intended to provide them when she could.

From the corner of her eye, she saw Chelsie and Tiffany approach. She turned and smiled at her girls, who returned

happy ones of their own. Dannie and Dominic were behind them and joined their circle.

“Dang, Mom, I know I said it before, but you look great,” Tiffany commented, glancing over her Taylor Harrison wedding gown.

Chelsie added, “And thanks for not choosing hideous bridesmaid dresses.” She tugged at the rose tea-length skirt of her own Taylor Harrison gown and made a little twirl.

“I couldn’t have my girls looking anything but beautiful.” They did. Mia’s smile widened remembering the day all of them flew to New York to meet with the fancy designer, whom Julia claimed to be the best in the world.

The only reason she’d gained an audience with the woman, let alone a wedding gown in mere weeks, had been due to the fact she was the fiancée of Nathan Davenport. When the news of their nuptials hit the press, along with chosen photos, Mia had promised the woman that she would repeatedly tout the maker of the stunning gown she now wore.

She glanced at her husband, who was still speaking to Christian. *Hey*, she said mind to mind, and his attention riveted her way.

Hey back. He grinned and faced her. “Have I told you how remarkably gorgeous you look?” He leaned down and gave her a kiss.

“As usual, it was almost all Julia’s doing. Why the woman hasn’t become a stylist or an event planner is a mystery to me.”

Mia looked around the backyard, aglow with all sorts of soft lighting, paper lanterns, ornate tiki torches. Somehow she’d strung thousands of twinkling, white Christmas lights overhead between the house and trees. An arbor topped the dais, woven with roses of every color. Ivy and wisteria entwined the lattice structure. It was a work of art. Then there were the ice sculptures, melting now in the Louisiana heat, and so many flowers that Mia felt certain Julia had decimated half the supply in New Orleans for these two events.

“I agree,” Dannie said. “Julia needs to be a wedding planner.”

“Did I hear my name being spoken over here?” Julia asked as she and Dimitri joined their little group.

Nathan grinned at them. “You were getting high praises for your decorating efforts. We can’t thank you both enough for putting this together for us. It’s beautiful. But we’ve all come to the conclusion you need to be an event planner.”

Mia added, “Actually, we’re serious, Julia. Nathan and I have been talking about me opening a catering company. I can cook, but I wouldn’t have the first notion how to put any sort of event together. I think we need to go into business.”

“Oh yeah, the two of you would take New York by storm,” Dannie said. Her eyes sparkled with the notion.

“Ew. New York City,” Tiffany snarled. “I know this guy is like a disease to you, but I still can’t envision you living there, Mom.” She smiled at Nathan, who just laughed in return.

Tiffany had developed an affection for him, and for that, Mia was grateful. The girl loved giving him a hard time though, and Nathan fired back with both barrels, which had gained Tiffany’s respect.

“Well, cher, that does sound like a lovely idea. I certainly wouldn’t mind living in New York near my wonderful son and new daughter-in-law.” She smiled sweetly at Dannie. “However, until the babies are born, I think we will have to, as you American’s say, place the notion on the back burner for now.”

Nathan gave Julia a curious look and Mia frowned at her. The woman was a horrible vampire. Their kind’s lives were steeped in secrecy, and she couldn’t keep a secret to save her life.

She wrinkled her nose, apparently realizing her error, then just smiled brighter and looked at Dannie. “I am going to be a grandmother,” she announced.

Nathan’s eyes widened with understanding and delight. “That’s wonderful news! Congratulations, Dannie, Dominic.” He shook Dominic’s hand and gave Dannie a hug.

While he was busy, she pursed her lips at Julia and shook her head. Both she and Dimitri chuckled and returned

knowing looks. Of course Julia had told her husband. Mia suspected she'd mind transmitted the news the moment Mia had walked out of the bathroom this morning with that positive pregnancy test.

Christian walked up with a couple glasses of champagne. "When are we going to do this toast thing, Dimitri?"

Dimitri grinned. "Now is fine with me."

"Oh, then let me tell the serving staff it is time for the toast," Julia said, then trotted off to the banquet area.

Christian handed off the glasses to her and Nathan. "Well, again, congratulations, you two. And to you two as well." He smiled at Dannie and Dominic.

"Thank you," Dannie said, beaming. "I guess I'm going to need a doctor, huh?"

"That you will, darlin'. I know a real good one of our kind currently practicing in New York City. Dr. Noah Langston. I'll connect you with him."

"That would be great," Dominic replied and took Dannie's hand.

A short while later, Dimitri began the toast. Mia pretended to drink the champagne, but Nathan didn't seem to notice. After that, they cut the cake and spent the next couple hours socializing. The reception had been amazing. The entire day had been a dream, but Mia was exhausted and so glad when she and Nathan were finally alone in their room.

After he shut the door, he approached her, his eyes glittering with hunger. “How does this thing come off?” he asked, then reached out and fingered one of her off-the-shoulder sleeves. “I’m dying to get underneath.”

Mia rolled her eyes. “Hold your horses, Mr. In a Big Hurry. I haven’t given you your wedding present yet.”

“I’m sure I’ll love whatever you bought me, but as far as I’m concerned, you are my wedding present, and I’m more than ready to unwrap you.”

He made another attempt to capture her, but Mia just chuckled, spun away, and left to retrieve the gift from her room. When she returned, he held a little blue box bearing a silver ribbon and bow.

“Oh! You got me something too. You shouldn’t have.”

He extended it to her. “Well, I did. Now open it.” Mia sat her gift to him on the end of the bed, then got busy unwrapping his. Her mouth popped open with shock when she saw the contents. It was a double heart necklace. In the center of the entwined hearts was an enormous rose stone. The gold was rose-colored too, just like her ring. “Oh my god, Nathan, this is beautiful. What kind of stone is this?”

He stared at it. “A rose diamond. Seven carats. And it just about took an act of Congress to have it created by our wedding day. Currently, it’s the largest diamond in the world.”

“Nathan! Shame on you. I can’t even imagine what that thing must have cost and how many hungry people it could have fed.”

He chuckled, took the box from her, then placed the heavy jewel around her neck. “I feed plenty of hungry people. Trust me. Anyway, it’s perfect,” he announced, then stood back and admired it.

Mia turned to the bed, then handed Nathan her present. He grinned like a kid on Christmas Day as he opened it, but once his gaze fell on the white wand inside, his smile faded into confusion. He looked at it for several more seconds, then reality must have sank in. His eyes widened like saucers, and his jaw dropped.

Mia pressed a shaky hand to her lips and nodded.

“You’re pregnant?” he whispered, his voice tinged with awe.

“So it would appear. I think those things are pretty accurate these days. Julia assured me they work just as well on vampires as humans.”

He sat the box on the end of the bed. “When did you find out? Why didn’t you tell me?”

“Obviously, I wanted to surprise you. It’s a good surprise, I hope?”

He swallowed hard. “The best ever. I can’t believe it. We’re going to have a baby?”

“Yes. It appears our entire family is embarking on a whole new generation. First Julia, Dannie, and me. I wonder what

Jazerra would think about moving to New York. With that many vampire kids running around, we all might need a little reinforcements.”

Nathan chuckled. “She’d make a great nanny. And I don’t even have to say you’ll make a great mother because you’re an amazing one. I’m so happy, Mia.” He stepped back from her and let out a long breath as he raked a hand through his hair.

His happy countenance faded, and Mia grew worried. He stared at some arbitrary spot on the floor, his brows knit, one hand propped on his hip. Mia remained silent and watched him, expecting him to say something. When he didn’t, she dipped into his head. What she viewed there made her feel like an intruder because he prayed. The gist of that prayer revolved around the notion of why had God blessed him when he was so obviously unworthy of anything good from above?

Mia felt bad. This moment was between him and the Lord. She wasn’t even sure as his wife she deserved this ringside seat, yet she felt compelled to stay in his head.

God apparently chose to respond with scripture, and she heard familiar verses echo through his mind.

For God so loved the world, that He gave his only Begotten Son, that whoever believes on Him should not perish, but have everlasting life (John 3:16).

For it is by grace you have been saved, through faith, and this not from yourselves, it is the gift of God, not by works so that no one can boast (Ephesians 2:8).

Mia felt anger rise up inside him and knew it stemmed from him feeling unworthy. His next thoughts confirmed her assumption.

I don't deserve her or this child, and I sure as hell don't deserve forgiveness from you.

Nathan scored her with a hard look. "I know you're in my head, snooping."

Mia covered the distance between them and palmed his cheek. "No, you don't deserve forgiveness. Not a one of us do. That's the crux of salvation. I see clearly now, it doesn't matter if we're human or vampire. We're still creatures of God, and he laid down a plan of salvation for all his children, which is this: When we were all still sinners, God sent his Son to die for us and made a way for us to be with him forever. You are no different than any other person on the planet. Your sins don't make you unique, Nathan. Accept what God offers you. It's a gift. It can't be earned." She wrapped her fingers around the necklace and pulled it away from her neck. "This was a gift. Right?"

"Yeah, so?"

"Do I have to pay for it? Do I have to earn it?"

He scowled at her. "No. Your point?"

“How is this any different than the gift God offers you? Get it? It’s a gift. Accept it and be thankful. Accept us and be thankful.” She placed a palm on her lower belly, referring to herself and their child.

He stepped back from her, pivoted and stared at the box holding her pregnancy test. “I do, Mia. I’m so very thankful for you, for this baby. Believe it or not, I understand what you’re saying. There was a time all of this made complete sense to me. Before Isabella.” He faced her, his expression rigid. “I just don’t want you to carry me spiritually. I feel so inferior to you in that regard.”

Mia let out a heavy breath and swiped a hand across her cheek. She totally understood his meaning, the way he felt. “I will honor you as my husband no matter where you are spiritually. I would have never married you if I believed for even a fraction of a second you didn’t know God. Life sidetracks us in our spiritual walk sometimes, but I have complete faith in you. You will reconcile with the Lord, and you’ll be an amazing husband and father. I believe that with every fiber of my being.”

Silence reigned between them for very long moments. Finally, he said, “I won’t let you down.”

“I know that.”

“Will you pray with me?”

“Of course.”

They sat down on the end of the bed, the pregnancy test between them and held hands. Their gazes locked, and

she smiled. He returned one filled with love and humility. Then they began their traditional wedding night in the most beautiful, perfect way any two Christian people could—in prayer.

Nathan Davenport is being stalked by Isabella Ravini, the feral vampire who stole his human life over a hundred and sixty years ago. She made him her fledging, a slave for her dark, evil purposes—hunting humans. After a few years she released him, and Nathan reluctantly learned to accept the cursed life she'd foisted upon him.

Over time he amassed a great fortune, which today has made him famous worldwide. Isabella decides she wants to be a part of this world of fame and fortune Nathan created for himself. She's determined to marry him, and love has nothing to do with it. His money is her primary target, and the fame and prestige attached to being the wife of one of the richest men in the world wouldn't be so bad either.

In an effort to evade her until he can figure out how to stop her, he hides at a safe house he owns in New Orleans. One Saturday evening in NOLA, he decides to have dinner in the city. He chooses a quiet little Italian bistro, never imagining this night will change his life forever. The human woman who delivers his order isn't a server, but the restaurant's sous chef, a beautiful ethnic woman possessing the most delicious blood scent he's ever encountered.

The moment Mia Peebles arrives at his table with his plate, tasting her becomes an obsession. Mia wants nothing to do with him because of Nathan's reputation as a playboy. So Nathan enchants her, feeds from her, but his lusts for her blood and body play havoc with his thinking.

Nathan finds a way to bring her into his life as his personal chef and quickly falls in love with her. The trouble is Mia has no idea he's a vampire because during the enchanting episodes, Nathan blocked her memories of those sensual encounters.

How will Nathan tell her the truth without losing her and keep Isabella from finding him? Or worst yet, will Isabella discover how much Mia has come to mean to him?

