

obsessed

(book #12 in the vampire journals)

morgan rice

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Morgan Rice

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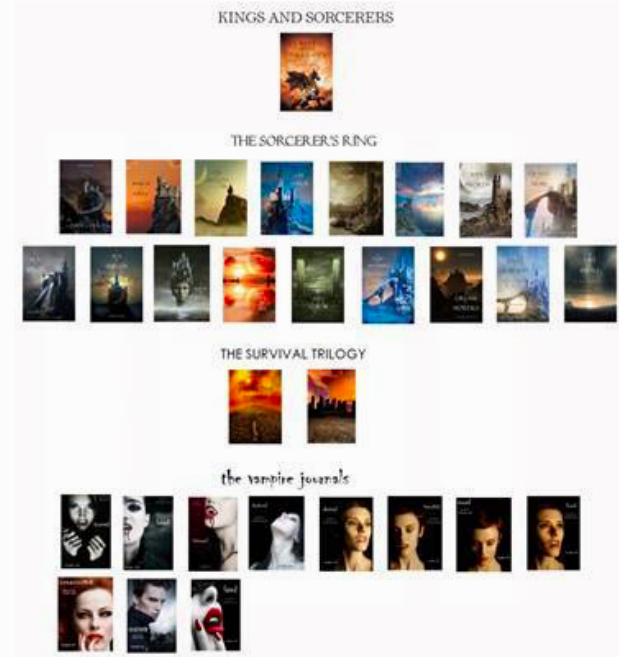
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“Thus, with a kiss, I die.”
--William Shakespeare
Romeo and Juliet

CHAPTER ONE

From the roof of the ancient Boldt Castle, Scarlet Paine could hear Sage’s agonized screams. They echoed through the cold November night, each one feeling like a knife slicing into her heart. She could not bear the thought of it, of Sage being tortured to death by his own kind because he loved her, because he would not kill her in order to live two thousand more years. Scarlet had never dreamed she would be loved so fiercely by someone, so fiercely that they would actually die for her. And yet here she was, about to do the same for him.

Lore, Sage’s cousin, had lured her to Boldt Castle. The Immortalists’ two-thousand-year life span would be over once the moon waned, and Lore was desperate to take her life—the only way to save theirs. She, the last vampire on Earth, had to be sacrificed. Even though Scarlet knew it was a trap, she had to come. She knew her life would end here tonight, yet it would be worth it for a chance to save Sage.

Another one of Sage’s screams pierced the night. Scarlet couldn’t bear to listen to his agony any longer. She drew herself to standing and flapped her wings so that she was hovering an inch or two above the castle’s old, sloping slate tiles. Then, heart pounding, she flew down through the window.

The room was at least a hundred feet high. Scarlet swooped through the shadows of the vaulted ceiling and perched on one of the old wooden ceiling beams. She felt a wave of heat com-

ing from below her and glanced down. The hall was filled with an agitated, angry crowd of Immortalists. There must have been at least a thousand of them in here. The crowd looked like a swarm of insects from this distance, some pacing back and forth whilst others were swooping a few yards above the ground. They were far enough below, at least, for them not to notice her hiding there.

Scarlet clung to her perch, feeling her palms grow slippery with anxious perspiration, waiting for her chance, psyching herself up to jump.

Down below, the Immortalists were fixated in one particular direction: a slightly raised platform that stood at one end of the room. There was an impossibly tall man on the stage, holding a long staff. He seemed to be jabbing the staff against a large cross.

Scarlet cocked her head in confusion as the cross appeared to move. It was then that she realized there was someone shackled to the cross, someone who writhed in pain every time the man's staff was jabbed into him.

Her heart lurched as she realized: Sage.

Anger rippled through every fiber of Scarlet's being. The man she loved was strung out by his arms and legs. His head was drooping forward onto his chest with exhaustion and his hair was slick with sweat. Blood had dripped down his torso and pooled at his feet. Scarlet wanted to scream out for him but knew she had to keep quiet or risk being spotted by the

braying crowd. She felt sick to her stomach knowing that Sage's torture was on display, that he was at the center of their hatred.

Scarlet watched in horror as the man in the long crimson cloak on the stage brandished the staff with a cross at its end before slamming it against the floor. The stone tiles made a loud noise that reverberated through the cavernous space.

"Will you relinquish?" the man screamed. "Will you give the girl up?"

He appeared to be the instigator of the torture and Scarlet concluded that he must be the Immortalists' leader. She remembered Sage telling her about the man who commanded his race. His name was Octal and from what Sage had told her, he was a violent tyrant.

"Answer me!" Octal screamed.

The crowd joined in with a loud jeer.

Scarlet could not hear Sage's answer from this distance but she knew that whatever he had said was not what Octal wanted to hear, because he leaned forward and pushed the metal staff into Sage's chest. Sage let out a blood-curdling scream.

Scarlet could hold herself back no longer. She leapt from the beam she'd been crouched on and screamed at the top of her lungs.

"STOP!"

As she began soaring down toward the crowd, the Immor-

talists below turned their gazes up to her in one sharp, sudden movement. Scarlet faltered and her wings suddenly seized up with terror. She began plummeting through the air on a collision course with the angry mob below.

From far away, Scarlet could hear Sage scream her name. It was the scream of a desperate man in love, a man whose heart was being torn from his body, a man whose pain at seeing his lover race toward death was far greater than the pain of the torture he'd just been enduring.

Scarlet flapped her wings frantically, but it was no use. The terror she felt had overwhelmed her powers. She was falling faster and faster toward the angry crowds. She knew that when she reached them they would rip her to pieces, for her death was the only way they could survive. Their jeers and shouts grew louder the closer she raced toward them.

As she fell, time seemed to slow down and the faces of her friends and family flashed through her mind's eye—her best friend, Maria, her mother, Caitlin, Ruth the dog. Even Vivian flashed into her mind even though Scarlet had hated her.

Then a beautiful face appeared before her eyes, one that made her gasp. It was Sage's face. In her odd slow-motion plummet, Scarlet managed to tip her head to the side and lock eyes with the real life Sage. Though he was covered in sweat and blood and grimacing with pain, he was no less beautiful to her than the perfect memory her brain had conjured up. As they made eye contact, Scarlet felt a surge of love race through

her. Though she knew she was mere seconds from dying, she no longer feared it, because she knew she would die loved.

She closed her eyes and prepared for impact.

But before Scarlet hit the ground, Octal stepped forward and affixed his translucent eyes on her tumbling form. Effortlessly and without emotion he rose into the air and reached out for her. She felt his hands tighten around her arm. He pulled her into him as though plucking her from the air. All at once the rushing, racing sensation she'd been feeling was replaced by a gentle lull as they began floating in a controlled manner to the ground.

Scarlet opened her eyes, almost unable to believe that she was not in fact dead. But whilst the immediate fear of death drained from Scarlet's body, she knew the danger had not passed. Octal may have saved her from dashing her brains against the hard tiles of the church but she knew he hadn't saved her life out of compassion. He was a torturer. It dawned on Scarlet that he had saved her only in order to kill her in a more unpleasant manner.

She peered over Octal's shoulder at Sage.

"Scarlet!" Sage shouted.

Octal let Scarlet down. The crowd surged forward but Octal held his arms up as if to keep them back. The crowd obeyed. Scarlet didn't know why, but Octal was giving her and Sage one last chance to be together, one last chance to say goodbye.

With the eyes of a thousand seething Immortalists on her,

Scarlet ran toward Sage. Her eyes blurred with tears as she flung her arms around him and buried her face into his neck. His skin was searing hot, as though fighting a fever. She held him as tight as she could, fearing it may be the last time she ever would.

“Scarlet,” Sage murmured into her ear.

She drew back and held up his head. His eyes were puffy and bruised, and his bottom lip was split and swollen. Scarlet’s heart ached to see him like that. She wanted to kiss him, to kiss away the pain and heal him, but she knew she had no time. Instead, she swiped a tendril of hair from his face and placed a delicate kiss on his forehead, the only part of him that did not look bruised or broken.

“How did you find me?” he asked.

“Lore. He left me a note telling me you were here.”

Fear flashed in Sage’s eyes. “It’s a trap. They will kill you.”

“I know,” Scarlet gasped. “But I had to see you. My life is in ruins anyway.”

She thought of her parents and their constant arguing, of her mother’s promise to eradicate her, of her house turned upside down by Lore, of Vivian who hated her guts and her friends who seemed to have turned on her.

“You’re the only good thing left in my life,” she added with sincerity. “Don’t you remember me saying that if you died, I’d die with you?”

She tried to smile reassuringly but the look in Sage’s eyes

made a pit of pain open up inside her stomach.

He shook his head.

“I wanted you to live, Scarlet,” he gasped, wincing from the pain of Octal’s staff. “Don’t you understand? The only thing that comforted me through my torture was the knowledge that you would get to live out your life once I was gone.” He sighed. “But now we will both die.”

Scarlet held Sage’s heavy head up in her hands. “And what about what I want?”

“You’re young,” Sage said with a grimace. “You don’t know what you want. I’ve lived two thousand years and the only thing that’s ever made sense to me is you. I don’t want you dying for me!”

“Was Juliet too young?” Scarlet replied sternly, remembering the magical night they had spent together watching Shakespeare’s tragedy.

At that moment, Scarlet felt the surging crowd on her back and knew that Octal was not prepared to hold them back any longer.

“Anyway,” she said, flashing Sage a bittersweet smile, “it’s too late now to change my mind.”

“It’s not,” Sage contested. “Please, Scarlet. Fly away. There’s still time.”

Scarlet responded by pressing a fierce kiss against his lips.

“I’m not scared of dying,” she said replied, firmly. Then she slipped her arm around his waist and turned to face the mur-

derous crowd. "As long as we're together."

CHAPTER TWO

A vampire war.

The sea below Caitlin was as black as night. She listened to the sound of the thrumming engine as the small military plane soared through the clouds, the words repeating themselves over and over in Caitlin's mind. She could hardly comprehend how it had gotten to this, how her daughter had flown off into the night, leaving her and Caleb to chase desperately after her. The worry she felt for Scarlet was all consuming, making butterflies of panic take flight in her stomach.

Caitlin felt a strong, primal sensation stirring within her. Scarlet was somewhere nearby. Caitlin was certain. She sat bolt upright and gripped Caleb's arm.

"You can sense her?" he said, studying her expression.

Caitlin just nodded, gritting her teeth as a yearning need to be with her daughter swelled within her.

"She's in danger, Caleb," Caitlin said, holding back the tears that threatened to choke her.

Caleb looked back out the windshield and set his jaw. "We'll be with her soon. I promise you. Everything will be okay."

Caitlin desperately wanted to believe him but a part of her was skeptical. Scarlet had flown willingly to this place, to this castle filled with vicious Immortalists. As her mother, Caitlin had felt she had no choice but to follow. As a vampire, Scarlet was certainly in more danger than your average teenager.

Another pang of longing struck Caitlin. But this time it was worse than before. It wasn't just the pain of separation from her daughter that Caitlin was feeling, it was something even worse.

Scarlet was in mortal danger.

"Caleb," Caitlin said hurriedly. "She's down there and she's in trouble. We have to land. Now." The urgency in her voice made her words come out in a hurried whisper.

Caleb nodded and leaned his view to the side. Below them, the black waves churned.

"There's nowhere to land," he said. "I don't want to attempt a water landing. It's far too dangerous."

Without missing a beat, Caitlin said, "Then we'll have to eject."

Caleb's eyes grew wide. "Caitlin, are you mad?"

But even as he spoke she was reaching for the parachute pack and strapping it on.

"Not mad," she said. "Just a mother whose daughter needs her."

No sooner had the words left her lips than the aching need for her daughter flooded through her again. She could just about make out a shape in the distance and thought that perhaps it was a building.

Raindrops had begun to fall, drawing lines down the glass and reflecting the bright moonlight, and Caleb's grip tightened on the tiller.

"You want me to ditch the plane," he said, calmly, more as a statement than a question.

Caitlin clicked her parachute pack into place. "Yes."

She held out another pack to Caleb. He just looked at it, the expression on his face one of incredulity.

"There's nowhere to set the plane down," Caitlin added firmly. "You said so yourself."

"And if we drown?" Caleb said. "If the waves are too strong? The water too cold? How can we help Scarlet if we're dead?"

"You need to trust me," Caitlin said.

Caleb took a deep breath. "How sure are you that Scarlet's near?"

Caitlin leveled her gaze with Caleb as another pang of longing rushed through her. "I'm sure."

Caleb sucked air between his teeth then shook his head.

"I can't believe I'm doing this," he said.

Then he quickly slipped off his shoulder straps and slipped the parachute pack on. Once he was ready, he looked over at Caitlin.

"This won't be fun," he said. "And it might not end well."

She reached out and squeezed his hand. "I know."

Caleb nodded but Caitlin could see the fear on his face and the worry in his eyes.

And then he slammed his palm onto the eject button.

All at once a rush of air swirled around them. Caitlin felt her hair tangle in the ice cold wind and felt herself propelled

upwards at a rate so fast her stomach seemed to drop as though left behind.

And then they were falling.

CHAPTER THREE

Vivian woke with a start to find herself lying on a chaise lounge in her back yard. The sun was long gone, and moonlight glittered off the surface of the swimming pool. From the windows of her family's mansion, a warm orange glow spilled across the perfectly manicured lawn.

___ Vivian sat up and was hit by a wave of pain. It seemed to radiate from her very pores, as though every single one of her nerve endings was on fire. Her throat was dry, her head pounded, and there was a pulsing sensation like daggers behind her eyes.

Vivian gripped the sides of the chaise lounge to steady herself as nausea rippled through her.

What's happening to me?

Memories began floating to the surface of her mind, of teeth bearing down on her, of an excruciating pain in her neck, of the sound of someone's grotesque breathing in her ear, the smell of blood filling her nostrils.

Vivian gripped the sides even harder as horrifying memories flashed through her mind. Her heart beat hard and her stomach plummeted as she remembered all at once the moment Joe ___ had turned her into a vampire. In her grasp, the chaise lounge cracked.

Vivian leapt up, alarmed by her strength. As she did, the pain she'd been feeling immediately dissipated. She felt differ-

ent, almost as though she were inhabiting a new body. A power that had not existed before surged through her veins. As a cheerleader she had been strong and athletic—yet what she felt now was something more than just peak physical fitness. It was beyond strong. She felt invincible.

It wasn't just power. There was something else building up inside of her. Anger. Rage. The desire to cause pain. The desire for revenge.

She wanted to make Joe suffer for what he had done to her. She wanted to make him hurt as much as he had hurt her.

She'd just begun walking toward the mansion, determined to pick up the pieces, to find him, when the patio doors flew open. She stopped in her tracks as her mother, dressed in her pink fluffy pom-pom slippers, silky dressing gown, and Prada sunglasses, peered out. Typical that her mother would wear sunglasses even when it was dark. Her hair was in rollers, a sign she was preparing to go out, probably to one of her stupid society functions.

At the sight of her mother, Vivian's newfound rage began bubbling to the brim. She clenched her hands into fists.

"What are you doing out here?" her mother cried, using the high-pitched critical voice that set Vivian's nerves on edge. "You're meant to be getting ready for the Sandersons' party!" She paused as Vivian took a step into the light. "Dear God, you look like death! Come inside quickly so I can sort out your hair."

Vivian's long, blond hair had once been her pride and joy—the source of envy amongst her school peers and a powerful magnet for hot boys—but right now, Vivian couldn't care less about how it looked. All she could think about were the new sensations ricocheting through her body, the gnawing hunger in the pit of her stomach, and the desire to kill that pulsed through her veins.

"Come on!" her mother snapped, making the rollers on her head quiver. "What are you just standing there for?"

Vivian felt a smile tug up the corner of her mouth. She took another slow step toward her mother. When she spoke, her voice was cold and emotionless.

"I'm not going to the Sandersons' party."

Her mother glared back, her glance filled with hatred.

"Not coming?" she cried. "That is not an option, young lady. This is one of the most important events on the calendar this year. If you don't come all kinds of rumors will start flying. Now hurry, we only have an hour before the car arrives. And look at your nails! You look like you've been crawling through dirt!"

She wore a look of incredulity, mixed with disbelief and shame.

Vivian's anger only deepened. She thought of the way her mother had treated her her entire life, always placing her prized society functions first, only caring about Vivian inasmuch as she fit into the perfect image she wanted to project to

the world. She hated this woman, more than she could say.

"I'm not going to the Sandersons' party," Vivian growled, as she stepped ever closer.

She realized then that there was a word for what she was doing: stalking. It was what pack animals did in the wild as they approached their prey. A thrill of anticipation ran through her as she watched her mother's expression change from frustrated to fearful.

"I'm not going to the Sandersons' party," Vivian said again, "or the Johnsons', or the Gilbertons', or the Smythes'. I'm not going to another party ever again."

The look in her mother's eye was something Vivian never wanted to forget.

"What's gotten into you?" she said, this time a nervous tremble in her voice.

Vivian stepped closer. She licked her lips and cracked her neck.

Her mother stepped back, horrified.

"Vivian..." she began.

But she did not get a chance to finish.

Vivian pounced, teeth bared, hands outstretched. She grabbed her mother, wrenched her head back, and sank her teeth into her neck. Her Prada sunglasses flew to the ground and she trampled them beneath her feet.

Vivian's heart beat faster as the sharp metallic taste of blood filled her mouth. And as her mother fell limp in her arms,

Vivian felt an overwhelming sense of triumph.

She let go and her mother's lifeless body crumpled to the ground, nothing but a heap of twisted limbs and designer clothes. Her dead eyes stared directly at Vivian, unseeing. Vivian stared back down and licked the blood from her lips.

"Goodbye, Mother," she said.

She turned and ran across the shadowy garden, running faster and faster, and the next thing she knew she was flying, up into the night air, over their immaculate estate, and into the cold, cold night. She would find the man who did this to her—and she would tear him limb from limb.

CHAPTER FOUR

A full moon was glowing above Kyle, making the trees that lined Vivian's suburban street look like skeleton silhouettes. He licked the dried blood off his lips, savoring his delicious kill, recalling Vivian's expression of fear and terror. It sustained him. She would, he resolved, be the first of many, the first victim in the vampire army he was about to build.

The high school. That would be next. He had a burning desire to find the girl who'd turned him—Scarlet. Perhaps she would be there—or someone would who knew where she was.

If not, it was just as well—there would be an endless supply of young kids to turn. Ever since feasting on Vivian, he'd gotten quite the taste for teenagers, and he liked the idea of an obedient little army following him around. More than that, he liked the idea of wreaking havoc on this town—and on the world.

Kyle began jogging along the sidewalk, then he stopped short and laughed to himself. He remembered he was a vampire now, with the strength and skill beyond anything a human could dream of—and most importantly, the ability to fly. It was the one thing he hadn't fully tried yet. And now he wanted to feel it all, and to feel it fully. He wanted to soar into the sky and look down at those insignificant ants going about their dull little lives beneath him. He wanted to swoop at them and hunt them down like an eagle picking off its prey.

He grinned to himself as he took two big steps and took to the air.

It was exhilarating. Wind rushed past him, tousling his hair as he flew higher and higher into the sky. Beneath him, he could see the small town lights twinkling. He thought of all the people in their homes, ignorant to the hell he was about to unleash. He laughed to himself, picturing the chaos he would soon create. Nothing would give him more joy than to ruin each and every one of their lives.

Soon Kyle saw the high school in the distance, far below. The police had set up a blockade around a large area of the neighborhood, including every road that led to the school. Each route was lined with police cars.

Idiots, Kyle thought as he flew straight over them unnoticed.

They were being willfully ignorant. Clearly, the idea of a vampire killer on the loose was too much for their little brains to handle, so they'd downgraded him in their minds to just a run-of-the-mill killer. They had no idea.

As Kyle neared the entrance to the school, he could see bits of police tape flapping in the wind from where those two men had tried to gun him down. He could see his own blood on the concrete. He clenched his fists and thought about how no one could stop him. He was immortal now. Cars, bullets, nothing could stop him.

He decided then to take the back entrance. He swooped over the athletics field, where football practice was taking place

under the glare of the floodlights, and set himself down in the shadows. Using his super keen eyesight, he honed in on the two police cars parked just slightly around the corner, thinking themselves out of sight. Perhaps, Kyle thought with a smile, they were out of sight for a human. But not a vampire.

The place was in disarray. Smashed glass and litter were all over the pavement. He wondered how on earth they'd managed to convince any of the kids to stay at school. It was that willful ignorance again, he decided.

He paced toward the closed gym doors, considering it to be his best route into the school. Here, he noted, there was also extra security. Kyle could see they'd stationed a big burly guy by the doors, bigger even than he was. He was the sort of security guard who'd be better placed at a rough downtown nightclub than a high school. Kyle just smiled to himself, relishing the challenge of taking the man on.

He sauntered up to the security guard confidently, noting the way the man's hand slid down to his waist. Kyle guessed he would be reaching either for a gun or a walkie-talkie to radio for backup. Neither fazed Kyle. Guns couldn't kill him and even a hundred police officers would do no more than slow him down.

"You've got some nerve coming back here," the security man said as Kyle strolled up to him. "You're a wanted man. Every cop and security personnel in the city has got your picture. The whole city is on the lookout for you."

Kyle smirked and spread his arms wide.

"And yet, here I am," he replied.

The security man tried not to let his worry show on his face, but Kyle could see straight through it.

"What do you want?" he asked, his voice tremulous.

Kyle nodded his head toward the gym doors. He could hear the pounding beat of music coming from inside and could imagine all the cheerleaders inside in mid-practice. He wanted to turn each and every one of them.

Kyle walked up to the security guard and grabbed him round the neck, lifting him clean off the ground. Even though he was bigger and taller than Kyle, Kyle's strength was greater. The man felt barely heavier than a child.

"I want to make an army," Kyle whispered in the man's ear.

The man let out a strangled wail and kicked. Kyle bent his head low and bit the security guard's neck. The man tried to cry but Kyle's grip around his neck was too tight. He could make no sound as his blood drained from him.

Kyle dropped the man to his feet, knowing that he had created his second vampire. When he woke, reborn, he'd be in his army.

Soldier number two.

Kyle threw open the gym doors and loud pop music burst out along with the smell of sweat and the cheers of the girls in practice.

"Hey!" a girl shouted from the bleachers. "You can't be in

here.”

She was wearing the same cheerleader outfit as the rest of the girls. She stormed over to Kyle and stopped in front of him, peering up with a frown.

“Get out of here!” she demanded.

Kyle ignored her demands.

“Do you know Scarlet Paine?” he said.

She grimaced. “That freak? I know *of* her.”

Behind the girl, the other cheerleaders turned to watch what was going on.

“Where is she?” Kyle asked.

The girl shrugged.

“How should I know?” she said.

Kyle lunged forward and grabbed her, hauling her above his head. The other girls began to scream.

“If any of you know where Scarlet Paine is,” Kyle shouted at them, “you sure as hell better speak up now.”

The cheerleaders cowered. The girl Kyle was holding above his head squirmed. Only one of the watching girls was brave enough to say anything.

“I don’t know where she is,” she said, trembling. “But her friends Becca and Jasmine are in the school choir. They’re practicing down the hall.”

Kyle narrowed his eyes at the girl. “Are you telling the truth?”

She pressed her lips together and nodded.

Finally, Kyle put down the struggling girl in his arms. She ran over to the rest of the girls and they pulled her into a huddle, keeping her safely behind them, some of them crying.

Kyle went over to the wall and wrenched a climbing ladder down. He snapped off one of the long pieces of wood and used it to secure the gym doors by slipping it through the handles.

“No one moves,” he instructed the terrified girls.

He still wanted to turn them, but he had to follow up on the lead first.

He could hear the muffled weeping behind him as he left the gym and went into the school corridors. Despite the earlier altercations and gunfire, the place was still packed with kids. Kyle laughed to himself as he realized they must have thought that surrounding the school with police cars would be enough to keep him out. They were trying to keep everything normal so as not to scare any of the kids or parents in the community.

“How dumb do these people get?” Kyle thought to himself as he smirked.

Kyle walked up to a group of alternative-looking kids hanging by the lockers. They looked like the sort of kids he’d hung around with when he was at school, the type that would drop out without diplomas and be destined to work in bars for the rest of their lives.

“Dude,” one of the boys said, nudging the friend standing next to him. “Check out the bum.”

Kyle walked right up to the group and slammed his fist into

the lockers beside them, making a dent. The group jumped with shock.

“What’s your problem, man?” the boy said.

“Choir practice,” Kyle grunted. “Where is it?”

One of the girls in the group, a goth with long black hair, stepped forward. “Like hell we would tell you.”

Before any of the group could blink, Kyle had grabbed the girl and pulled her into him. He sunk his teeth into her neck and sucked. In a matter of seconds she turned limp in his arms. The rest of the group screamed.

Kyle dropped the girl to the floor and wiped the blood from his lips with the back of his hand.

“Choir practice,” he repeated. “Where is it?”

The boy who’d first spoken pointed a trembling finger down the hall. Beside him, two of his female friends were crying and hugging, their frightened stares locked on the body of the dead girl.

Kyle made to leave but had only gotten two paces when he turned back and grabbed the two crying girls. He bit one first, then the other, draining the blood from their necks in turn as their pained cries turned finally to silence. He dropped them at his feet, stepped over them, and headed down the hall, leaving the rest of the group gaping.

Kyle followed the sounds of singing until he reached the room where the choir was practicing. He slammed open the doors.

The group could tell the instant he entered that they were in danger. Their singing ceased immediately.

“Jasmine. Becca,” he demanded.

The two trembling girls came forward. He grabbed them both by the necks, hauling them off the floor.

“Scarlet Paine. Tell me where she is.”

The girls kicked and writhed in his grip. Neither could speak as Kyle’s grip was too tight on their necks.

“I know,” someone said.

Everyone turned, surprised. Kyle dropped Becca and Jasmine and looked at the girl.

“Who are you?” Kyle said.

“Jojo,” the girl replied. She twirled some hair in her fingers and smiled. She was wearing a Ralph Lauren top. Clearly one of Vivian’s friends.

“Well?” Kyle said.

“I...” the girl began but stopped. “We were at a party together the other night.”

“And?” Kyle demanded.

“I saw her. With this guy. Really hot guy actually.”

Becca and Jasmine exchanged a look. Jojo coughed and carried on talking.

“They were talking about how they couldn’t be together forever because he was, like, dying or something.”

Kyle’s patience ran dry. He flew across the floor to the girl and hauled her into the air.

“Skip to the end!” he cried.

The girl clawed at his hand round her neck. “Church.”

Kyle studied her for a moment then put her down. “Church?”

The girl nodded, her eyes wide with terror. She rubbed her neck.

“Church. Or castle. Or cathedral. Something like that. They... flew off together.”

Had the girl said such a thing earlier, her classmates would have ridiculed her. But moments after witnessing Kyle fly across the room at her, the idea of Scarlet Paine and some handsome boy flying into the moonlight together suddenly seemed less far-fetched.

From her heap on the floor, Becca flashed angry eyes at the girl.

“Why would you tell him that, Jojo?” she cried. “He clearly wants to hurt her!”

“Vivian loyalty,” Jasmine replied scathingly.

Kyle’s ears pricked up. He thought of Vivian’s sweet blood. He turned to Jojo.

“You’re one of Vivian’s friends?” he asked.

The girl nodded.

Kyle grabbed her hand.

“You’re coming with me.”

The choir watched in horror as Jojo was dragged from the room and into the hallway. Kyle dragged her along the corri-

dors with him. The whole place was a scene of chaos. The kids he’d turned had begun feasting on one another. Those who had yet to be turned were running and screaming, trying to get out. Kyle nodded to the goth girl and her friend as he passed them, watching them sucking the blood of their school mates. Beside him, he felt Jojo quiver.

He reached the gym and hauled open the doors to find the cheerleader girls had attempted to form a human pyramid to get out through one of the top windows. The pyramid tumbled as soon as they realized their capture had returned and foiled their plot.

“Clever,” Kyle said with a laugh. “You’ll all make excellent additions to my family.”

“Jojo!” someone cried as Vivian’s friend was thrown into the gym.

Kyle looked around and licked his lips.

“Let the fun begin,” he said to himself.

CHAPTER FIVE

Police officer Sadie Marlow peered through the small glass window into the room. In the otherwise bare room, she saw that there was a bed against one wall. Sitting upon it was the girl she'd been sent here to speak to.

The psychologist standing on one side of her pulled a swipe card from his pocket. But just before he swiped it against the door lock to allow the officers entry, he paused and turned to face them both.

"You know we haven't been able to get an intelligible word out of her yet," the psychologist said. "All she says is 'Scarlet. Scarlet. I have to find Scarlet.'"

It was police officer Brent Waywood's turn to speak up.

"That's why we're here, sir," he said, pointing to his open notebook. "Scarlet Paine. That name keeps cropping up in our investigation."

The psychologist pursed his lips.

"I understand why you're here," he replied. "I just don't take kindly to the police interrogating my patients."

Brent flipped his notebook shut abruptly, making a smacking noise. He glared at the psychologist.

"We have dead cops," he said in a clipped tone. "Good men and women who won't be going home to their families tonight because of some psycho who will kill anyone and everyone in his path. What does he want? Scarlet Paine. That's all we have

to go on. So you can see why questioning your patient is a priority for us."

Officer Marlow shifted uncomfortably from foot to foot, frustrated by the way her partner seemed to find conflict in every situation. She couldn't help think that her job would be much simpler if she could do these interviews by herself. Unlike Brent, she had a calm demeanor__ and a way with witnesses, particularly the mentally vulnerable ones like the girl they were here to see. That's why the police chief had sent her to the secure the mental facility in the first place. She just wished he'd picked a better officer to accompany her. She realized then, with a sinking feeling in her stomach, that the police chief hadn't exactly had many cops to choose from. Other than the ones guarding the high school, the rest in the precinct were dead or injured.

She stepped forward.

"We understand the witness is in a fragile state," she said, diplomatically. "We'll keep our tone civil. No demanding questions. No raised voices. Trust me, sir, I've got years of experience talking to kids like her."

They all glanced back through the window at the girl. She was rocking back and forth, her knees pulled up to her chest.

The psychologist finally seemed satisfied to allow the officers entry. He swiped the card against the door lock. A green light flicked on, accompanied by a bleep.

He led the two officers into the room toward the hunched

girl. It was then that Officer Marlow noticed the cuffs on her ankles and hands. Restraints. The hospital didn't issue restraints unless the patient was a harm to themselves or others. Whatever this girl had gone through, it had been horrific. How else would a sixteen-year-old high school kid without so much as a blemish on her permanent record be suddenly deemed dangerous?

The psychologist spoke first.

"There are some officers here to see you," he said, calmly to the girl. "It's about Scarlet."

The girl's head darted up. Her eyes were wild and roved across the faces of the three people before her. Officer Marlow could see the anguish in her expression and the desperation.

"Scarlet," the girl cried, pulling on her restraints. "I need to find Scarlet."

The psychologist looked at the two officers as he left the room.

*

Maria looked up at the officers. Somewhere in the back of her mind, the sane part of her was still working, still lucid and awake. But the part that Lore had messed with was in control, and it felt like a dark storm cloud fogging up her mind. She had to get out of this place and she had to find Scarlet. Scarlet would be with Sage, and Sage, she was certain, would be able

to help her. He'd be able to undo what his cousin had done to her.

But no matter how hard she tried, she couldn't explain to anyone that she wasn't crazy, that she didn't belong here, shackled like a convict. Even when her friends came to see her, even when her mother held her hand and cried, Maria couldn't get the words out. Whatever Lore had put inside of her brain was impenetrable. And it was getting stronger. With every passing moment, she felt her strength seeping away. Her ability to fight Lore's mind control was diminishing and the sane part of her was becoming weaker and weaker. Maria was certain that if she didn't get help it would eventually disappear altogether, leaving her an empty shell.

The male officer stood with his gaze tipped down to Maria. The female officer perched on the side of her bed.

"Maria, we need to ask you some questions," she said, softly.

Maria tried to nod but nothing happened. Her body felt heavy. She was exhausted. Fighting whatever Lore had done to her brain was tiring work.

"Your friend, Scarlet," the woman continued in the same gentle way. "Do you know where she is?"

"Scarlet," Maria said.

She wanted to say more but the words just wouldn't come out. She watched in frustration as the male officer rolled his eyes.

"This is useless," he said to his partner.

"Officer Waywood, you need to be patient," the woman snapped at him.

"Patient?" Officer Waywood cried. "My friends are dead! Our colleagues are in danger! We have no time to be patient!"

Trapped inside her own mind, Maria felt her own frustration grow. She understood Officer Waywood's concern. She wanted to help, she really did. But thanks to Lore, she could hardly utter a word. Getting the words out of her mouth felt like running on a treadmill—all that effort and she never got anywhere.

The female officer ignored Officer Waywood's outburst and turned back to Maria.

"The man looking for your friend, his name is Kyle. Have you ever seen him before? Heard her mention his name at all?"

Maria tried to shake her head but couldn't. The female officer chewed her lip and fiddled with the notebook in her hands. Maria could tell by her gestures that she was weighing something in her mind, trying to decide whether to tell her more.

Finally, the female officer reached out and squeezed Maria's hand. She looked deep into her eyes.

"Kyle... he's a vampire, isn't he?"

From his standing position, Officer Waywood threw his arms in the air and scoffed. "Sadie, you've gone crazy! That vampire stuff is just crap!"

The female officer stood quickly, bringing her face up to the

man's.

"Don't you dare say that," she said. "I'm a police officer. It's my duty to question this witness. How can I question her properly without telling her what we know?" Before Officer Waywood had a chance to respond, Sadie added, "And it's Officer Marlow, thank you very much."

Officer Waywood gave her a displeased look.

"Officer Marlow," he said, enunciating it through his teeth, "in my professional opinion, introducing the idea of vampires to a mentally unstable witness is a bad idea."

From her place on the bed, Maria began to rock. She could feel the sane part of her, buried so deeply beneath whatever Lore had done to her, starting to surface. Somehow, the fact that Officer Marlow believed in vampires was helping the trapped parts of her mind break free. She tried to speak and at last a noise came from her throat.

"War."

The two officers stopped arguing and looked back at Maria.

"What did she say?" said Officer Waywood, a frown across his face.

Officer Marlow rushed to the bed and sat beside her.

"Maria?" she said. "Say that again."

"W..." Maria tried. She shut her eyes and took a deep breath. Her lucidity was returning to her. Her mind was becoming her own again. Finally she got the word out. "War."

Officer Marlow looked up at her colleague. "I think she's

saying 'war.'"

He nodded, a worried expression on his face.

Maria took another deep breath, willing the lucid part of her to take control, to tell them what she so desperately needed to.

"Vampire," she said through her gritted teeth. "Vampire. War."

Officer Marlow's face paled.

"Go on," she urged Maria.

Maria licked her lips. It took every ounce of effort she had to stay present.

"Kyle," she said through a grimace. "Leader."

Officer Marlow squeezed Maria's hand. "Kyle will lead a vampire war?"

Maria squeezed back and nodded.

"Scarlet," she added. "Only. Hope."

Officer Marlow exhaled and sat up straighter. "Do you know where Scarlet is?"

Maria gritted her teeth and spoke as carefully as she could. "With Sage...the castle."

Suddenly, a deep pain started inside Maria's brain. She screamed out and clutched her head, pulling her hair into her tight fists. Instantly she knew that the sane part of her was being overpowered once again by whatever damage Lore had done to her. She was slipping away.

"Help me!" she screamed.

She began pulling against her shackles and thrashing wildly.

Panicking, Officer Marlow stood. She looked over her shoulder at her partner.

"Call it in," she commanded him.

She tried to calm Maria but the girl had lost it. She was screaming over and over. The door beeped and the psychologist rushed in.

"What happened?" he cried.

"Nothing," Officer Marlow said, backing away. "She just flipped."

She paced away as the psychologist tried to calm Maria and stood beside her partner.

"Did you call it in?" she said, panting from anguish.

"No," he replied tersely.

Officer Marlow frowned at him and reached for her walkie-talkie. But Officer Waywood leaned forward and grabbed it from her hands.

"Don't," he snapped. "The Chief doesn't want to hear this crap. He's got his whole squad to look out for and you want to bother him because some crazy kid thinks there's a vampire war!"

Over the sound of Maria's screams, Sadie Marlow spoke in a hurried, insistent voice.

"The Chief sent us here for a reason. Why would he want to question a so-called 'crazy kid' if he didn't think she could help? Kyle wants Scarlet Paine. That girl," she pointed at Maria, "is the closest we're going to get to finding her and

maybe ending this thing. If she knows something then I'm pretty sure the Chief will want to know."

Officer Waywood shook his head.

"Fine," he said, shoving the walkie-talkie back at her. "It's your career on the line, not mine. Let the Chief think you're a lunatic."

Officer Marlow snatched the device from her partner and clicked the button.

"Chief? It's Marlow. I'm down at the institute with the witness."

The walkie-talkie crackled.

Officer Marlow paused, weighing her words. "She says there's going to be a vampire war. Led by Kyle. And the only person who can stop it is Scarlet Paine."

She looked up at her partner's raised eyebrows, feeling like a fool. Then the walkie-talkie buzzed again and the police chief's voice rang out.

"I'm coming."

CHAPTER SIX

Scarlet coughed and wiped dust from her eyes. Her mind swirled as she tried to make sense of what was happening around her. One moment the Immortalists had been advancing on her and Sage, the next moment there'd been a tremendous explosion that rocked the castle. Then the ceiling had caved in, bringing with it brick, wood, and heavy slate tiles.

Scarlet looked around and found that she was in a cocoon of rubble. It was so dark she could hardly see. Thick dust clogged her lungs, make it difficult to breathe.

"Sage?" Scarlet cried into the darkness.

Something stirred beside her.

"Scarlet?" came Sage's voice. "Is that you?"

Scarlet's heart leapt as she realized her beloved was still alive. She scrambled over boulders and debris toward the hunched shape of Sage. Once she reached him, she pressed her lips against his.

"I've got you," she whispered.

"Scarlet, it's too late," he countered.

But Scarlet wasn't listening. She slipped her arms around his naked torso and pulled him to sitting. He slumped, weak, barely able to hold his body up.

"What happened?" he said, surveying the damage, his voice little more than a croak.

"I have no idea," Scarlet replied.

She looked around again and this time started to notice the tangle of Immortalists sprawled across the floor, or trapped beneath ceiling beams and clumps of brick and stone. Flames rose from several different areas like strange orange shrubbery.

Octal lay motionless on the floor. His staff lay beside him, snapped clean in half, and the cross on the tip that had been used to pierce Sage was aflame. Scarlet couldn't tell whether Octal was dead or not but he certainly looked like he wasn't going to be doing any harm for the time being.

Then Scarlet recognized the twisted metal fuselage of a military plane amongst the rubble. She gasped.

"It was a plane," she said. "A military plane crashed into the castle."

Sage shook his head, confusion across his brow.

"There'd be no reason for a plane to be here," he replied. "The castle is in the middle of nowhere."

"Unless they were looking for it," Scarlet finished for him, as it dawned on her. "Unless they were looking for *me*."

Just then, a mound of brick shifted and Sage winced as it slammed into his leg.

"We have to move," Scarlet replied.

It wasn't just danger from the damaged building she was worried about—it was the Immortalists. They had to escape before anyone came to their senses.

She turned to Sage.

"Can you run?"

He looked up at her with weary eyes. "Scarlet. It's too late. I'm dying."

She gritted her teeth. "It's not too late."

He grabbed her hands in his and stared deeply into her eyes. "Listen to me. I love you. But you have to let me die. It's over."

Scarlet turned her face away from him and wiped away the single tear that fell from her eye. When she turned back she reached out and hauled Sage's arm across her shoulder, wrenching him to a standing position. He cried out in pain and sunk into her. As she began to lead him across the rubble and through the plumes of acrid smoke, she said:

"It's not over until I say it is."

*

The castle was in disarray. Though the plane that had crashed into it had been small, the damage to the ancient building had been colossal__.

Scarlet weaved through the corridors as the walls crumbled around her. She held Sage tightly to her side and he slumped into her, groaning with pain. He was so weak and feeble it made Scarlet's heart ache. All she wanted was to get him to safety.

Just then, she heard shouting coming from behind.

"They're getting away!"

Scarlet realized with a sinking sensation that they were

coming back to their senses, that despite their castle being destroyed and many of their brethren lying hurt and dying around them, their desire for vengeance was going to drive them on.

“Sage,” Scarlet said, “they’re coming for us. We need to go faster.”

Sage gulped and grimaced.

“I’m going as fast as I can.”

Scarlet tried to hasten her pace but Sage’s weakness was slowing them down. He had to stop running. She had to find somewhere safe to hide him so that they could at the very least say their goodbyes.

She looked over her shoulder to see several Immortalists advancing. There, at the back, half concealed by shadows, she saw Octal. So he wasn’t dead.

As the group gained on them, Scarlet saw that half of Octal’s face was badly burned. He must have been in significant pain and yet he still wanted to harm her and Sage. It made Scarlet so sad to think that the love between her and Sage outraged the Immortalists so much.

Suddenly, an almighty crash made Scarlet leap, and a sudden spray of icy water soaked her. She looked over her left shoulder to find that the whole side of the castle had crumbled into the sea, causing a mighty wave to crash over them.

She heard screaming and looked back to see the Immortalists tumbling into the sea. They fell so quickly they didn’t even

have time to fly to safety, and as soon as they hit the waves, the angry ocean swallowed them up.

As the tiles began to give way beneath her feet, Scarlet slammed her back against the wall of the corridor and pushed Sage back with her arm. The black water churned several feet below them. Scarlet suddenly felt as though she were balancing precariously on the ledge of a mountain.

The only person left standing, on the other side of a wide chasm, was Octal. Scarlet knew that it would take him no more than a few seconds to fly across the gap between them. But instead, he decided to watch.

He thinks it’s hopeless. He thinks we’re going to die.

“Quick,” she said to Sage. “Before we fall into the sea.”

Cold ocean spray hit her face as she led him across the ledge. With every step, more of the flooring broke off and tumbled into the ocean. Scarlet’s heart raced with anguish. She prayed that they would make it out of the castle and to safety.

“There,” she said to Sage. “Just a few more steps.”

But no sooner had the words left her lips than the tiles beneath Sage’s feet cracked. He just had time to look up into her eyes before the floor gave way and he plummeted down into the blackness.

“Sage!” Scarlet screamed, her hand outstretched, reaching for him.

But he was gone.

Scarlet glanced up at the other side of the chasm and saw a

smile spread across Octal's horrifically disfigured face.

Without a second of hesitation, Scarlet leapt off the ledge like a diver from a diving board, and soared downward toward Sage's falling figure. Seconds before he hit the ocean she swept him up into her arms.

"I've got you," she whispered, holding him to her chest.

Sage was heavy. Scarlet was only able to hover. They were barely inches above the treacherous water. She knew she couldn't fly up because that would reveal to Octal that they had survived and he would launch an attack on them right away.

It was then that she saw caves to her right. They were naturally made, eroded into the solid rock by the ocean over centuries. The castle must have been built on top of them.

Scarlet wasted no time. She flew into the cave, Sage in her arms, and set him down on the floor. He flopped back and groaned.

"We're okay," Scarlet said to him. "We made it."

But she was soaking wet and shivering. Her teeth chattered as she spoke. When she held Sage's hand, she realized he was trembling too.

"We didn't make it," he finally said. "I've been telling you all along, I am going to die. Tonight."

Scarlet shook her head, making her tears fly from her cheeks.

"No," she said.

But she realized then it was no use. Sage was dying. It was really true.

She held him in her arms and let the tears fall freely. They rolled down her cheeks and onto her neck. She didn't bother to wipe them away.

Scarlet was about to utter her goodbyes when she noticed a strange glow coming from beneath her T-shirt, just where her heart was. She shook her head, thinking at first she must be hallucinating. But the glow got stronger.

She looked down and realized it was her necklace that was aglow, white light spilling through the hinges. She reached inside her top and pulled it out. She had never before been able to open the necklace but something told her this time would be different. As she slid a fingernail into the latch, she realized that her tears had been dripping onto it. Perhaps they had somehow unlocked the pendant.

The two halves folded open and white light burst into the cave, illuminating Scarlet's and Sage's figures. In the middle of the glowing light was an image. Scarlet studied it. It was a castle in the middle of the sea, but not Boldt Castle. This one was taller and thinner, more like an elaborate tower than an actual castle.

Scarlet shook Sage by the shoulder.

"Look," she instructed him.

Sage managed to half open a weary eye.

Scarlet heard him take a sharp intake of breath.

“You know where it is?” she asked.

Sage nodded. “I do.”

Then he slumped his head back into her lap, exhausted.

Something inside Scarlet told her that wherever this place was, it was important. And if Sage knew of it, then it was significant to the Immortalists. Why would her necklace show her such a place? And why would it only open when her tears fell on it? Surely it was a clue.

Scarlet snapped the necklace shut and the white glow disappeared, taking with it the image of a crooked castle in the middle of a raging ocean. Somehow she knew deep inside of her that if she got Sage to this castle, he would live. But she was running out of time.

She heaved the unconscious Sage onto her back. He was heavy, but this time Scarlet was more determined than ever, and more certain that there was hope. She took to the sky.

She would save him. No matter what it took.

CHAPTER SEVEN

Caitlin struggled to catch her breath as she fell though the night sky. One moment Caleb had hit the eject button, and the next, the plane was suddenly no longer around her. She was in the black air, falling toward the raging ocean.

She glanced right, looking for Caleb. He wasn't there. Feeling anguished, she looked about her—and finally, she spotted Caleb above her, his parachute deployed. He was pointing to his parachute cord. She couldn't hear him over the sound of the roaring air.

Then she realized: he was trying to tell her to pull her cord. She did and all at once the plummeting stopped as her body snapped. All was suddenly peaceful. She was hovering, floating, the white parachute spread open above her like angel's wings.

Caitlin took some deep breaths to calm her racing heart. She looked back up at Caleb and saw him giving her two thumbs up. Caleb, who had far more experience with this sort of thing, managed to maneuver himself so that they were almost level.

“It's going to be cold!” he shouted to her.

Caitlin looked down. The water was looming, and before she had a chance to think about the frozen waves hitting her, an enormous explosion made the whole world shudder.

Panicking, Caitlin looked to her right to see that the plane

had crashed into something. She realized with a sinking sensation that it was the building she'd seen on the horizon, the one her senses had told her was where Scarlet was to be found.

"No!" she screamed.

Flames and bits of burning fuselage tumbled into the sea as a huge plume of black smoke billowed into the air.

Then Caitlin hit the ocean.

Caitlin gasped as she hit the freezing water. It was so cold, it felt as though her bones had turned to ice.

But the sharp sting caused by the frigid ocean paled in comparison to the anguish in her heart. Just ahead, the building Caitlin was certain her daughter was in was ablaze. She watched, as though in a daze, as the ceiling caved in. A moment later, the whole sea-facing wall crumbled into the ocean, leaving a deep wound in the exterior.

"Caitlin!" Caleb's voice came from a little distance away.

Caitlin shook her head and found her way back to her senses. Caleb was swimming toward her, his parachute already detached and floating away, snatched by the strong current.

"Get your pack off!" Caleb instructed the second he was beside her.

Caitlin shrugged the heavy thing off, feeling instantly more buoyant. But her body was still weary, and her water-logged clothes were weighing her down.

"We have to get to land," Caleb said.

He scooped his arm around his wife. She could feel that he

was trembling violently. He was trying to be strong for her but really his situation was just as perilous.

"Do you think you can swim that far?" he added, nodding to the crumbling Boldt Castle.

Caitlin gritted her chattering teeth.

"What if the plane hit her?" she managed to say.

Caleb shook his head. "Don't think like that."

"I can't help it. She's our daughter. What if—"

But Caleb didn't let her finish. He pressed his hand over Caitlin's heart.

"If she was dead, you'd know," he said. "Wouldn't you? If you can sense our daughter, track her to this place, then you'd know in your heart. I'm right, aren't I?"

Caitlin bit her lip.

"Yes," she said, finally. "You're right. I would know if she was dead. I would feel it."

But even as she said the words, and even though she believed them, she couldn't help but feel that same sense of dread. Even if Scarlet was alive, she was most certainly still in danger.

Caitlin felt her arms begin to fatigue from treading water for so long.

"What are we going to do?" she cried to Caleb. "The only land is that way."

She pointed at Boldt Castle, at the gaping hole in its side. Caleb followed her outstretched finger.

"I know," he said with trepidation.

Caitlin nodded. Wet tendrils of hair stuck to her face. She swiped them away and began to swim toward the castle.

Just then, a noise caught Caitlin's attention. It sounded like a distant whining noise, mechanical in nature. Familiar. Getting louder.

Caitlin glanced over her shoulder at Caleb.

"A helicopter," she said.

Caleb paused mid-stroke and stared up at the sky as the noise grew louder and louder.

"The police?" he said. "They can't still be on our tails, can they? Unless they were tracking the plane."

Caleb suddenly thumped his open palms against the water, making a huge splash. But the noise was almost completely drowned out by the whirring blades of a helicopter approaching fast.

His features dropped into resignation.

"Get ready," he said. "This is about to get a lot more dangerous."

*

It took several minutes to swim to Boldt Castle. The side closest to Caitlin and Caleb was completely destroyed where the plane had struck. Stone and rubble had tumbled into the ocean, creating a sort of slope that they could now climb up. It

was precarious going but they made it, finally, into Boldt Castle.

The smell of airplane fuel was strong in the air, mixed with the smells of dust, smoke, and sea salt. Caitlin heard a clamoring of noise in the distance, of people shouting, arguing, and crying out in pain. She knew at once that the building had been full before the plane hit, and that thanks to her, many people had been hurt. She shivered, her frozen body racked with guilt.

Caitlin was in a state, her hair a mess, the jump from the airplane and force of the waves having turned it into soggy dreadlocks. Her clothes were torn in places. Caleb looked just as bedraggled.

"Well?" he said. "Can you sense her?"

Caitlin put a finger to her lips to quiet him. She tried to get a feel for her daughter, to let her instincts tell her where she was, but she was struggling to catch hold of anything tangible. The sound of the roaring helicopter circling above them, the heat coming from the fire, the cries coming from the injured, all were crowding her mind and messing with her abilities.

"I can't feel her," Caitlin whispered, feeling defeated.

Caleb rubbed his chin. Caitlin could tell he was at his wits' end. She wished she could do more to help but her mind was too frantic to hone in on Scarlet.

"Is she in the castle somewhere?" Caleb asked.

Despite his best attempts to hide it, Caitlin could hear the

exasperation in his voice. She'd led him to this place, forced him to jump from a plane, and now she couldn't even tell him whether she'd been right or not.

She squeezed her eyes shut and tried to calm her mind.

"I think she is," she said finally. "I think she's here somewhere."

"Then we search," Caleb replied.

He turned to leave but Caitlin grabbed his arm.

"I'm scared," she said.

"Of what we might find?"

She shook her head.

"No," she said, "of seeing the damage I've caused."

Caleb reached out and squeezed her hand.

They stepped further into the castle. They walked carefully as the ground underfoot seemed unstable. When Caleb suddenly stopped short, blocking Caitlin's path with an extended arm, she assumed there was some kind of obstacle ahead. But when she craned her head to look over his shoulder, her mouth dropped open with astonishment. A little way ahead of them were hundreds upon hundreds of men and women. Some of them were flying, others hovering, and all were facing a man who stood taller than any human Caitlin had ever seen. He was at least double the size of a normal man. Half of his face was burned red raw.

"What is he?" Caitlin whispered to her husband.

Caleb just shook his head.

Caitlin shivered. Finding her daughter seemed more imperative now than ever before. These strange people were disconcerting her, especially the giant man with his disfigured face.

"This way," Caleb said in a hushed tone to her.

They crept away, keeping as silent as possible, sticking to the shadows where the crowd would not see them. Then Caitlin placed her hand on Caleb's arm to stop him. He looked back.

"What is it? What's wrong?"

"Scarlet," Caitlin said. "I can't feel her anymore."

"You mean she's not here?" Caleb challenged her.

Caitlin shrunk back from the fury in his voice.

"I think she's gone somewhere else," she said quietly, feeling defeated and desperate. "I could feel her before, right by the place where we came in, but the further into the castle we go, the weaker it becomes. I think she left before we got here. She got out the way we got in."

Caleb ran his hands through his hair in exasperation.

"I don't believe this," he muttered under his breath.

Just then, a strong light beamed into the castle from the helicopter above. It was lowering itself through the collapsed ceiling.

"It's attempting to land!" Caleb cried incredulously.

The crowd in the great hall began to disperse, with people running and flying all over the place.

"We have to leave," Caitlin said to her husband.

"I know," he replied. "But how?"

"This way," Caitlin said, tugging on his arm.

She led him across the great hall. Thanks to the descending helicopter, none of the strange people in the hall seemed to realize that the two figures racing across the room were strangers. The helicopter blades were creating a mini tornado in the room, whipping up plumes of smoke that added even more to the chaos.

Caitlin and Caleb burst out of the hall and into a gloomy corridor. The smoke was thick here and the light dim. Together, Caitlin and Caleb ran the length of the corridor until they reached a door. Caleb shoved it with his shoulder and it opened at once, revealing to them the outside world.

"Over there!" Caitlin cried, surveying their surroundings.

Caleb looked to where she was pointing.

Just ahead, down some stone steps leading from the castle, was a small parking lot with enough space for four or five vehicles. Amongst them was a motorcycle.

They ran for the bike. It hadn't been locked up or secured in any way.

It took several attempts before he was able to kick the motor into life, but all at once the engine roared and spewed out fumes. By then, people from inside the crumbling church had begun filing out.

"Quick," Caitlin cried, jumping on the back behind Caleb. "They're coming."

But before Caleb had a chance to accelerate away, the sound of police sirens began wailing out from nearby.

He took off, swerving to avoid the people darting from the castle. Streaming out of Boldt Castle after them came the police who had arrived by helicopter. Hurling down the dark, winding pathway toward them came several police cars, their lights flashing furiously.

"Now what?" Caitlin cried.

Caleb looked over at her. He revved the motorcycle's engine.

"Now you hold tight," he said.

Caitlin just had time to loop her arms around his waist before the bike sped away.

*

The bike bumped along the road. Caitlin was exhausted. She rested her head against Caleb's back, comforted by the steady thumping of his heartbeat, and gazed up at the black night. But she knew she couldn't rest. Scarlet needed her help and there was no way she could pause for even a moment while she was in danger.

"Any ideas?" Caleb cried over his shoulder, battling to get his voice heard above the wind and the police sirens that tailed them. "Directions?"

Caitlin could tell he was trying his hardest to stay calm and composed but he was just as drained as she was.

"I can't sense her," Caitlin shouted back. "Not right now."

Caleb said nothing, but Caitlin saw his hands tensed against the handlebars hard enough to make his knuckles turn white.

The bike flew onwards, gradually increasing the distance between them and the police cars.

The road was a narrow country lane. It began to wind up a hill. Soon there was a steep drop on one side and a cliff face on the other. Feeling queasy, Caitlin ducked down behind Caleb's back for protection. The wind danced through her hair.

Just then, she felt something vibrating in her pocket. Surely it couldn't be her cell phone. But when Caitlin reached inside her pocket she discovered that her cell phone had, indeed, survived the ocean plunge. She hadn't had reception before but now suddenly it had sprung to life, flashing up to her that she had a voicemail.

Caitlin dialed her voicemail and listened to Aidan's hurried voice on the other end.

"Caitlin," he said. "Where are you? You need to call me back now."

The message ended. That was it. She went to hit redial—but lost service.

"Damn!" she cried.

"What is it?" Caleb called over his shoulder.

"We need to pull over," Caitlin replied, realizing as she glanced down at her handset that the battery was on one percent.

"I can't pull over," Caleb replied. "The police are on our tail. We have to get far away from this place first."

Just then, Caitlin noticed a cave cut into the cliff side.

"In there!" she cried.

Caleb sprung to attention, twisting the bike's handlebars with expert precision so that it swerved and skidded into the cave, kicking up dirt before drawing to a halt.

As soon as they'd stopped, Caleb turned to face his wife. "Can you can sense Scarlet?"

"No," Caitlin replied. "My phone came back. I need to call Aidan."

Just then, the police cars that had been on their tail went screaming past the small cave where Caitlin and Caleb were hidden.

Caitlin grabbed her cell phone and punched in Aidan's number, praying that the battery would hold out. He answered on the third ring.

"You took your time," he said.

"I've been a bit busy," Caitlin replied, thinking of the plane ride and ocean plunge. "So what was it you needed to tell me?"

Caitlin listened to the sound of Aidan's voice on the other end of the phone as he shuffled around and rifled through books and papers. She felt her frustration grow.

"Can you please hurry up?" Caitlin barked. "I don't have much battery."

"Ah, yes," he said at last.

“What?” Caitlin demanded. “Tell me!”

“Tell me the chant again. Tell me the chant that is the cure.”

Caitlin fumbled in her pocket and pulled out the notes she’d made when studying the book. But they were soggy and the ink had run. She closed her eyes and tried to visualize the page as she had read it. The words began to appear in her mind.

“I am the sea, the sky and sand,

I am the pollen on the wind.

I am the horizon, the heath, the heather on the hill.

I am ice,

I am nothing,

I am extinct.”

_____ Caitlin opened her eyes and the words disappeared from her mind. There was a long moment where Aidan was silent.

Caitlin wanted to scream at him to hurry up.

“Caitlin!” he said at last. “I’ve got it. I’ve got it!”

“Tell me,” Caitlin replied hurriedly, feeling her heart race.

“We’ve been such fools! It’s not a chant at all.”

Caitlin frowned.

“What do you mean? How can it not be a chant? I don’t understand.”

“I mean that the chant isn’t the cure,” Aidan replied, fumbling over his words in his excitement. “The chant is a *clue* to the cure!”

Caitlin could feel her heart thumping with anticipation.

“So what’s the clue then?” she asked.

“Caitlin! Think about it. It’s a riddle. Directions. It’s telling you to go somewhere.”

Caitlin felt the blood drain from her face as she ran through the words in her mind.

“I am the sea, the sky and sand,” she repeated under her breath. Then, suddenly, it came to her. “No. You don’t mean —”

“Yes,” Aidan replied. “S. P. H. I. N. X.” _____

“The vampire city,” Caitlin whispered under her breath.

Of course. Before Scarlet had disappeared into harm’s way, Caitlin had been trying to find the cure, to find a way to turn her daughter back from a vampire into a human. She thought the words on the page needed to be read to Scarlet to cure her, that what she had found was the cure. But no. What she had found were instructions that would lead her to the cure. Caitlin had let her innate anguish as a mother override the sensible, logical scholar she needed to be right now, the one who would work out that the riddle was not a cure—but a map.

“Thank you, Aidan,” she said hurriedly.

Her phone went dead.

Caitlin looked up at Caleb’s expectant face.

“Well?” he said.

“I know where we’re going,” Caitlin replied, feeling a twinge of hope for the first time in a long time.

Caleb raised an eyebrow and looked over at his wife.

“Where?” he said.
Caitlin smiled.
“We’re going to Egypt.”

CHAPTER EIGHT

Lore stood on a mound of rubble amongst the ruins of Boldt Castle. The blades from the lowering helicopter made wind whip his torn clothes and ruffle his hair. He glanced around, surveying the damage the plane had caused. Hatred filled him to the brim.

He cried, shaking his fist at the gaping hole in the side of the ancient castle. Then he took a deep breath. There was no time to waste. His people would be dead, eradicated, by the end of the night. Their only hope was to find the girl who had stolen his cousin’s heart. And that meant killing anyone who stood in their way.

But the Immortalists were panicking, startled by the presence of the helicopter. They began zooming around the great hall, some streaming out of the castle altogether, running off to their inevitable deaths.

“What are you thinking, son?” a voice beside Lore said, breaking him from his reverie.

He looked down to see his mother gazing up at him. Though Immortalists experienced parent-child relationships differently from humans, Lore still respected the woman who had fed him, clothed him, and seen him safely through infancy. The thought of her death at the end of the night made his heart clench even more than the thought of his own.

“I’m thinking of Sage,” Lore replied. “We used him as bait

before and the girl came.”

His mother frowned.

“You think there’s still hope?” she asked, quietly.

Lore could see that weariness had crept into her eyes. She was ready to die. Or at least, ready to stop fighting.

But Lore wasn’t. And neither were hundreds of the Immortalists still clinging to life in Boldt Castle.

“I’m not going to give up,” Lore told her fiercely. “We cannot let our people die just because my cousin has fallen in love with a vampire. He’s going to die anyway. What’s the point?”

Lore’s mother shook her head. “You don’t understand love.”

“No,” Lore replied. “But perhaps if I lived two thousand years more I would.”

His mother smiled and squeezed his arm.

“I want that for you, son,” she said kindly, “But I can’t help but feel that fate is against us.” She tipped her head up to the sky and the bright full moon shining in through the collapsed ceiling. “The stars are aligned. The wheels of fate are in motion.” She looked back at him. “Tonight is the night the Immortalists die.”

Lore balled his hands into fists.

“No it’s not,” he said through his teeth. “I will lead an army if I have to. I will bring chaos to the earth. I will destroy the whole human race before I let my people die.”

As he spoke, the Immortalists around him began to look over, roused by his speech and passion. He turned his back on

his mother and directed his words to them.

“Who will stand with me?” Lore cried, shaking his fists. “Who will fight for their right to live?”

The small crowd began to mumble their agreement, and the noise attracted still more toward Lore. They streamed past the smoldering airplane fuselage to get a better look. Soon, Lore’s words were met not with mumbled assent but with cheering and clapping.

“Who amongst you has heard enough of fate and prophecies and stars?” he said. “I am not prepared to let our proud people die today!”

The crowds roared their agreement.

Lore noticed that Octal had joined the crowd and was standing at the edges. Lore beckoned to his leader, to the man he respected above all others. But Octal shook his head, as if communicating silently that Lore should be the one to lead the Immortalists.

Lore couldn’t help but frown. Could he really lead an army?

But he didn’t have time to ponder it, because the helicopter was touching down.

“Kill them!” Lore screamed. “Kill the humans!”

The Immortalist crowd followed his command immediately. They rushed at the helicopter. Lore heard the sound of desperate shouting as the police began drawing their weapons. But it was futile. There was no way the police could stand up to the Immortalists.

As they fought, Lore noticed several police officers were escaping from the castle.

“Block the exit!” Lore ordered his troops.

With the exits blocked, the remaining police had no other option but to take to the skies again in their helicopter.

But that wasn’t enough for Lore. He did not just want them driven away, he wanted them dead. As the helicopter began to rise, Lore’s murderous intent grew only stronger.

“Don’t let them get away!” he commanded his followers.

He watched as a group of Immortalists sprung into the air. The police on board the rising helicopter looked on in disbelief as the hovering Immortalists began swarming the helicopter, dragging it down. It began to stutter under their weight and started to fall. The police inside began to scream. As the helicopter plummeted to the ground, the Immortalists leaped out of harm’s way.

A fireball plumed into the air as the helicopter hit the ground and exploded.

The crowds cheered, exhilarated by the death and destruction their actions had caused. They zigzagged through the air before finally landing and calming down. It was then that Lore realized they were all looking to him again, awaiting his instructions.

“What now?” one of them cried.

“How do we save our people?” another added.

They had been bolstered by the victory against the heli-

copter and the humans. Lore had awoken a desire to fight and live in them all. The crowd erupted into a rabble of worried exclamations.

This time Octal moved through them toward Lore. He was ready to command his people once again.

“The girl is in the caves,” he said, his voice booming out through the destroyed great hall. “She has Sage. They are together.”

Lore nodded and squeezed his hands into fists.

“To the cave!” he cried.

Together, the band of Immortalists followed Octal and Lore in the direction of the caves.

CHAPTER NINE

Vivian felt the air rush past her as she flew over the small town, her heart beating fiercely in her chest. She didn't know exactly where she was going; she just had a compulsion to fly, to let the shackles of her old life melt away. She felt exhilarated, and the world felt suddenly so full of possibilities she could hardly contain her excitement.

But the longer she flew, the more a new sensation began to swell within her. It was a sort of gnawing emptiness. The human part of her had died and had been replaced by this awesome, powerful new creature. The death of her mother—at her own hands, no less—was not the source of it. The feeling was more primal.

Vivian swooped past a flock of birds. As she flew, she tried to decipher the new feelings within her. Hunger was of course the most prominent. Anger came a close second. Then she realized with startling clarity that the other feeling overwhelming her was the need for a mate.

And that meant Blake.

At once, Vivian changed her course, heading the in direction of the high school. She licked her tongue across her sharp incisors. This time, there was no getting away. Blake would be hers forever. Once she turned him, they would be intrinsically linked, bound forever, in the same way she could feel the disgusting man who sired her pumping through her bloodstream.

And knowing that she could have Blake forever made Vivian's desire for him grow even stronger.

She laughed maniacally, her body practically pulsing with electricity. To think that stupid girl Scarlet had been so close to stealing Blake away from her once upon a time. Well, not anymore. Blake would be Vivian's. She would win.

The high school appeared in her sight line. So, too, did the flashing police lights, and she wondered what was happening.

The closer she got, the clearer her view became. The school looked like it had been at the center of a shootout. There were damaged police cars and bits of straggly tape fluttering in the wind. Bits of paper from dropped notebooks were whipped up by the wind and deposited in the branches of the trees that lined the sidewalk.

Yet despite the disarray, Vivian would see that the floodlights were on for the football team to practice by. There appeared to be people on the field.

Vivian felt confused as she swooped down to land around the back of the science labs. She went up to the window and pressed her face to the glass. Inside, the classroom was deserted. The door was open and Vivian would just see through into the corridor. There was a large smear of blood across the tiles.

Vivian drew back, confused. Then suddenly a thud startled her and she looked up to see a face in the window. It was one of those goth girls she avoided like the plague. The girl grinned, her porcelain fingertips pressed against the glass on

either side of her head. Vivian frowned as the girl's smile widened to reveal her lengthened incisors.

"No!" Vivian screamed.

She was irate. It wasn't just her? She wasn't the only one with this incredible power? Rage filled her to the brim.

She raced around the side of the building, her body moving faster than it ever had when she was a human. She got to the gym and slammed open the double doors so hard they flew off their hinges.

The scene that greeted her was one of utter chaos. There were her friends, dressed in their blood-stained cheerleader outfits, fangs on display. Some were zipping round the room, flying in and out of the rafters. Others were chanting, surrounding a scared-looking group of kids.

Vivian felt her blood boiling with anger. All of her friends were vampires? That meant she wasn't special at all.

Finally, her friend Jojo noticed her. She was midway through feasting on a nerdy sophomore boy.

"Vivian!" Jojo cried. "Hungry?"

She shoved the kid at Vivian. She caught him. He was trembling. She let him go.

"Hey!" Jojo cried. "That was my dessert."

Then she hop-skipped over to Vivian and grabbed her hands.

"Isn't this, like, totally awesome?"

Her eyes were big and filled with awe.

Vivian narrowed her own in response.

"Who turned you?" she demanded.

Jojo shrugged. "Just some bum. He got, like, everyone. It was totally terrifying at first, but then I woke up with these kick-ass moves. Want to see?"

Vivian shook her head.

Jojo continued. "We're, like, totally going to be his army or something. It's going to be awesome."

Vivian kept her gaze narrowed.

"Where's Blake?" she asked, coolly.

The primal part of her that was compelled to find a mate began to ache at the possibility of him having been turned already, and by someone else. If Blake had already been made into a vampire then there would be no intrinsic link between the two of them. He would have made that bond with someone else.

Vivian squeezed her hands into fists at the thought. If it had happened, she would kill whoever had sired him. She had to have Blake. He had to be hers.

Jojo gave Vivian a look.

"You look, like, totally tense. What's the matter with you?"

Vivian felt her fists squeeze tighter.

"Where's Blake?" she repeated.

Jojo looked affronted. "Jeez, Vivian, you're being a total downer. What's with this whole serious thing you're pulling? The most awesome thing ever has happened and you're just

going on and on about Blake?”

Vivian reached forward and grabbed Jojo around the throat.

“I’m not going to ask again. Where is Blake?”

Jojo was strong enough to shove Vivian off. But Vivian was still queen bee, even amongst a group of vampires, and Jojo obeyed.

“He wasn’t at school today,” Jojo said, rubbing her neck and looking angry. “It was his mom’s birthday or, I don’t know, she died or something. I can’t remember, but he was out of town.”

“Is that it?” Vivian said. “That’s all you know?”

By now, the other cheerleader girls had noticed Vivian and the altercation with Jojo. Girls who had been in her gang for years began to crowd forward to see what was going on. Each of them was different, each having been transformed into a vampire. As a gang of humans they had been vicious, spoiled, and mean; as a group of vampires they were even more deadly.

“What’s your problem, Vivian?” one of the girls said, flashing her narrowed eyes at her.

It was Jojo who spoke. “She’s being a total bitch. It’s, like, not my fault if I don’t know where Blake is.”

The girl rolled her eyes.

“You’re still going on about Blake? God, Vivian, you’re even more boring as a vampire than you were as a human.”

Vivian felt her anger swell. But she couldn’t fight the girls. They were as strong as her, and she was outnumbered.

“You know,” Jojo said, folding her arms and cocking her

head to the side, “I don’t think you’re the leader anymore, Vivian. I think we can get along just fine without you.”

Vivian stomped forward, her hands balled into fists as though ready to strike.

“Good,” she spat, viciously. “I never liked you anyway.”

She turned her eyes up to the rest of the girls watching on.

“That goes for all of you!” she screamed.

The cheerleaders scoffed and, shaking their heads in disgust, turned away from the former queen bee.

“You are totally not being part of the vampire army,” Jojo said over her shoulder as she followed the other girls sauntering out of the gym.

Vivian was left standing there fuming, watching the retreating backs of the girls she’d thought had been her friends. Just before Jojo disappeared out the door, Vivian’s rage bubbled over. She flew forward and wrenched a piece of wood off the beam then raced toward Jojo.

She grabbed her hair and stabbed her through the back, right into the heart.

“The thing about being the leader is,” Vivian said in Jojo’s ear, “there’s always going to be someone trying to stab you in the back.”

Vivian wrenched the shard of wood out of Jojo and the girl crumbled to dust.

The other girls stared back, shocked.

Vivian smiled. There would be time to put them all in line.

But for now, she had other business to tend to.

She stepped over the girl's remains, smashed the door, and stepped out into the open, lifting up into the air and determined, at any cost, to complete her search for Blake.

CHAPTER TEN

As Kyle paced up the steps of the church, he sensed this was it. He'd been to several churches in the area, but something told him this would be the right one. The windows were all boarded up with plywood, and he could sense that evil had visited this place. He could almost smell the girl in the air.

He found the door of the church open and scoffed to himself. Warmth and light spilled out of the crack, sliding down the steps like honey. The beauty of it was lost on Kyle. The tranquility of church was just something else for him to destroy. He'd left his teenage vampire army behind to continue the rampage he had started, and would return for them just as soon as he found out where Scarlet Paine was.

Kyle barged his way through the doors, making them screech.

The place was candlelit. Light danced off the ceiling from the little flames being stirred by the breeze. The church was mainly empty, but a handful of people were dotted around in the pews, praying or thumbing through the dog-eared Bibles. They glanced up at Kyle as he thundered past, bolting down the aisle. Some stood, sensing the danger like a sixth sense, and made their way out of the church.

Kyle stormed the stage and stood at the altar, glaring down at the few people left in the pews.

"Where is she? Where is Scarlet Paine?" he bellowed.

The people who just moments earlier were basking in the calmness of the church's atmosphere were suddenly thrust abruptly back to reality. Kyle reveled in their frightened gazes.

Some nearer the doors began running down the aisle and back out into the cool evening, making the candles quivers as they passed. Those at the front seemed too scared to move.

Kyle leaned down and leered in the face of an older gentleman, whose crinkled eyes creased with terror.

"Where's Scarlet Paine?" Kyle demanded.

"I don't know who that is," the old man replied in a cracked, aged voice.

"Who is the priest here?" Kyle asked.

"Father McMullen."

Just then, Kyle heard a shuffling noise from his right. He looked right and saw the confession booth. The curtains were drawn.

Leaving the old man trembling in his seat, Kyle thundered over and ripped the curtain clean off its rail, the heavy fabric tearing from the force. A little old lady was sitting in the booth, looking like the last person in the world who had any sins to confess.

"Don't hurt me," she cried, holding her withered hands up for protection.

Kyle snarled and ripped the curtain from the other booth. And there sat the priest.

"Father McMullen," Kyle stated.

He leaned into the booth and grabbed the man by his robes. In one fluid movement, he hauled him out the booth and set him on his feet in front of him. The old woman scampered away, joining the old man whom Kyle had terrorized moments before. The two shuffled along the aisle as fast as their old legs could carry them, crying out in watery voices that they would be calling the police. Kyle smirked, thinking how little help they would be.

Before him, Father McMullen trembled. His robe was all bunched up around his ears in Kyle's fists.

"Brother," he said, "I can help you. Whatever evil lurks within you, you can find redemption here. God will forgive you."

Kyle gritted his teeth.

"It's not God I want," he spat. "It's the girl. Scarlet Paine."

A flicker of recognition passed through Father McMullen's eyes.

"You know her," Kyle stated, catching on immediately.

"I..." the priest stuttered. "I... do. The girl is troubled. What do you want with her?"

Kyle scoffed. "Troubled? You can say that again. The girl is monster. A demon. One of Satan's angels sent straight to the Earth from Hell."

Father McMullen nodded. "I know. She has been to this place." He gestured to the boarded up windows. "She was the one who destroyed the windows." He turned his anguished

gaze back to Kyle. "The same darkness that lurks in her lurks within you too. But you want to destroy. Why? What do you want with her?"

His eyes were as round as full moons. Kyle took great delight in the fear he read in them.

He let go of the priest and smoothed down the front of his robes. Father McMullen stood there looking dumbfounded, as though torn between whether to speak or run or just break down and give himself up to the evil that seemed to land on his doorstep.

Kyle smiled and showed off his incisors.

"Don't make me ask again," he said.

The priest crossed himself.

"Forgive me, Holy Father," he whispered, his fingers skimming across the rosary beads around his neck. "Forgive me for the sin I am about to commit but you have given me no signs."

Tears glittered in his eyes. Kyle folded his arms impatiently.

Father McMullen's face had turned completely white, blanched of all color. He kept muttering under his breath, begging God to forgive him, to guide him, to not test his faith in this manner. Finally, he spoke, his words coming out in staccato sobs.

"The girl's mother is looking for her. She will lead you to her."

The moment the words left his lips, Father McMullen broke down. He sank to his knees and tears shuddered through him,

making his shoulders shake. Kyle narrowed his eyes, disgusted in the outpouring.

"Who is the girl's mother?" he demanded.

"Her name is Caitlin Paine," Father McMullen said, shaking his head, let his tears fall freely. "She's a scholar. The last I heard she was going to see a professor friend in New York City. Aidan. A professor at...Columbia."

Kyle felt triumphant. At last, some useful information. A name and a location. A direct link to Scarlet Paine. Find the mother, find the daughter.

He looked down at the weeping heap of Father McMullen.

"Well, Father, you've been most helpful," he said.

He lowered himself into a crouch and held his hand out to shake Father McMullen's. The priest looked up through his tear-stained eyes, his cheeks red and blotchy. His big, wide eyes bulged out of his bone-white face.

"Come on now," Kyle said. "Shake on it, won't you? You've done me a huge favor. I'm sure He up there is very pleased with your Christian behavior."

The priest seemed paralyzed by fear. Finally, he reached out a shaking hand and slipped the clammy flesh into Kyle's open palm.

At once, Kyle tightened his hand around the priest's, so hard and fast that every bone in the man's hand was crushed instantly. *Crack crack crack*. He screamed out in pain and peered up at Kyle.

CHAPTER ELEVEN

“I gave you what you wanted!” he cried. “Why are you hurting me?”

Kyle looked down and licked his teeth. With a shrug he said, “Just for fun.”

As he sank his fangs into Father McMullen’s neck, the church echoed and echoed with his screams.

Deep underground, Lore, Octal, and the Immortalists trudged through the debris of the destroyed castle, heading in the direction of the caves. The smell of airplane fuel and smoke wafted behind them, a pungent reminder of the ordeal they had endured.

They reached the jagged mouth of the dank caves. The silence from within them was thick, almost tangible. The only sound was the steady trickle of water coming from far away.

A sensation inside Lore told him that Scarlet and Sage were not to be found. He pushed it away and gestured for the Immortalists to enter the cave.

“Search everywhere,” he said, feeling a wave of desperation inside his gullet. “Do not stop until you find the girl and my cousin.”

The small army began filing in, weaving past the stalactites that hung from the ceilings. The rock face was damp and slippery underfoot.

Lore shivered as he watched them go. It was cold in the caves and there was an eerie vibe, like the very stone held secrets. Lore started when Octal came up beside him. The burn on his face looked angry, the skin beneath puckered. The sight of it turned Lore’s stomach.

“You lead them well,” Octal said, his transparent eyes locked on Lore’s.

Lore turned his face away and trained his gaze ahead, squinting through the gloom at the milling figures.

"I lead them because someone must," Lore replied, his comment slightly barbed.

"You're disappointed in my leadership?" Octal asked.

Finally, Lore willed himself to look at him.

"You let them get away," he said, his voice cold and curt. "Sage and Scarlet. We had them in our midst. We had them right where we needed them. And you let them get away."

Octal loomed down over Lore, his presence imposing.

"What is meant to be will be, Lore," he said, calmly. "It is written in the stars."

Lore said nothing. He turned his gaze away again and peered back out at the returning Immortalists.

"There's nobody here," one of the men said, drawing up in front of Octal and Lore.

Lore had known it the second he'd stepped foot in the cave. It had been too silent, as silent as death.

In that moment, Lore's frustration reached boiling point. He pummeled his fist against the rock face. In his anger he was ready to turn on his leader and blame him publicly for letting Sage slip away. But then another voice broke out, stopping him in his tracks.

"Wait!" the voice cried.

Lore looked behind him, sucking the blood from his bruised fist, and saw a raven-haired woman with glittering blue eyes.

She was beautiful, with the palest skin Lore had ever seen.

"Look here," she said, pointing to the floor.

She was addressing her words directly to him, not to Octal, and so Lore obeyed. He frowned and walked over to the woman. He looked at what she was indicating to him. It was a patch of wet rock and some droplets of blood.

"What is that?" he muttered beneath his breath.

Lore crouched down and craned his head to examine the strange image from a different angle. All at once, the sight of an arrow of blood piercing a heart of tears materialized before his eyes.

He darted up to his feet.

"They *were* here," he said, addressing the crowd behind him.

The raven-haired girl looked up at him from her crouched position.

"They must have escaped," she said, touching her fingers lightly to the blood splatters. "But only just. The blood is still warm."

She held her hand up to Lore, as though inviting him to feel for himself. He gazed at her white skin and the crimson red staining her finger tips. He felt a strange desire to reach out and caress her hand with his. But he fought the feeling away and, instead of touching the blood, he grasped her hand in his and hauled her to her feet beside him.

The woman looked a little flushed, almost as though embarrassed by the way she had invited him to touch her. Lore didn't

look at her as he spoke.

“Sage is still alive,” he said.

Octal paced over and placed a hand firmly on Lore’s shoulder.

“He’s your cousin,” he said. “You will be able to sense him.”

“Not across the water,” Lore replied quickly.

The water acted as a barrier, blocking one being from sensing another. It was why they built this place on an island in the first place.

But no sooner had the words left Lore’s lips than another thought struck him.

“Of course!” he cried, as all the pieces began to fit into place in his mind. “Scarlet took Sage across the water because that is the only way to stop me from tracking them.”

The crowds began to murmur, excited by what the news could mean. That perhaps, at the end of this fateful night, the girl would be found and sacrificed so that the Immortalist race could live another day.

A man with bushy sideburns and thick, dark eyebrows spoke up.

“But that doesn’t exactly narrow it down, does it?” he said. “We’re surrounded by water in three directions. There’s no way we’d be able to search the entire ocean for them.”

Lore nodded and paced back and forth, wracking his brains. Where would that stupid little vampire girl take Sage?

He shook his head, disgusted once again by her human

emotions. Love seemed like such an unpleasant thing to Lore. It certainly had made his cousin stupid.

“Wait,” he said, finally catching onto something, something that his mother had said. Something about love. Love and family. “I don’t need to track Sage. I need to track the girl’s parents. They were trying to get to her too, weren’t they?”

The black-haired woman narrowed her eyes and tipped her head to the air. “I can smell a human from a mile away.” She snarled as she spat out the word.

A sinister smile spread across Lore’s lips.

“Then come with me,” he said. “Lead us to the parents. And they, in turn, will lead us straight to their precious daughter.”

The woman grinned and leaped into the air, darting out of the cave on the current of the wind. The others followed behind.

Lore followed them to the mouth of the cave, but stopped on the precipice. He looked down at the swirling waves, then up to the stream of Immortalists illuminated by the moonlight. It was a beautiful sight. He smiled to himself, realizing that the human weakness for love and emotion was to be their downfall. The Immortalists would live forever. They would reign over the Earth.

“Didn’t I tell you?” Octal’s voice came from beside him. “Our destiny is written in the stars. What is meant to be will be.”

Lore looked left at the great leader, standing so tall and

CHAPTER TWELVE

noble. Despite the scars running down his face, he still had poise and dignity. He was everything Lore wanted to be one day.

“You were right,” Lore said. “And I was foolish to question you.”

Octal nodded, satisfied, and began to pace away.

“Wait,” Lore said, feeling panic bloom in his chest. “Aren’t you going to fly with us tonight?”

Octal turned back and looked Lore up and down.

“I believe this is your battle to lead, Lore,” he said. “I know you won’t let me down.”

Lore swallowed and watched as his leader disappeared into the shadows. He looked back up at the black sky, and the shapes of the Immortalists gliding through it. Power surged through him as he accepted that they were now his army to lead. Tonight, he would lead them into battle. Tonight, they would be victorious.

Scarlet’s sobs tore through her. She clutched Sage tightly to her chest as she flew through the air. His eyes were closed and she could only just feel his soft heartbeat where he was pressed into her.

Her arms ached but there was no way she was stopping. Something was pushing her onwards, as though some force were drawing her toward the tower she’d seen in her locket.

She didn’t know how long she’d been flying. It felt like forever. Time had become a blur of fear, grief, and pain. And worse than everything was the deep gnawing sensation in her stomach, the sensation that told her she needed to feed. She was craving blood and it was agonizing. She didn’t want to be a soulless demon, feasting on raw flesh like a cannibal, but the need inside of her was one she knew she couldn’t ignore. She would have to feed, and soon.

Desperately she looked around her, trying to see whether there was anywhere to land and hunt. She felt guilty at the thought of setting Sage down just so she could eat, but the vampire she’d become was as demanding as a petulant child.

Then, finally, over the misty horizon, Scarlet made out the features of a tall tower. It was a black silhouette against the murky sky, but the image perfectly matched the one she’d seen shining from her locket.

“There it is,” she whispered to the unconscious Sage.

She couldn't let herself feel relief yet. It was too soon, too precarious, she might still fail in her quest to save him. But she was one step closer and that thought bolstered her.

She tipped her head down and flew faster, propelling her and Sage toward the tower.

As she drew closer, she picked out more features. The tower looked as though it were a million years old, constructed of huge square stones like a Mayan temple. It stretched up impossibly high, the tip disappearing into the clouds. Scarlet tried to imagine the people who had built it all those centuries ago. They must have worked by hand. There was no way such a building could have been constructed by humans—this was an architectural feat surely performed by vampires or Immortalists.

Around the base of the tower, huge waves lapped. But Scarlet noticed that the structure wasn't entirely surrounded by water. Just one part of it adjoined the sea. The rest was attached to an island brimming with lush forests. She made a beeline for the undergrowth.

As she ducked through the canopy with her precious bundle in her arms, shadows engulfed them, painting lines of light across Sage's pale face and making his sweat glisten.

Scarlet touched down, her feet landing in a blanket of forest mulch. The air was pungent with the smell of bark and leaves, and filled with the buzz of insect wings.

Scarlet laid Sage beside a fallen trunk, propping him up. He

was naked from the waist up, his torso revealing the brutal torture he'd received at the hands of Octal. The sight of him made Scarlet weep.

She stroked his cheek and his eyes fluttered open.

"Where are we?" he gasped, his words punctuated by wheezes.

Scarlet smiled at him, trying to look reassuring, hoping that he wouldn't notice her puffy red eyes from all the crying she'd done. She squeezed his hand.

"Somewhere quiet," she said. "Somewhere safe."

She didn't want to tell him that she was still chasing a cure. In the caves he'd seemed adamant that it was over, that she should let him die. But Scarlet knew that was just the pain talking. That was the whole point of Octal's torture—to make him give up.

Too bad for them that I'm not the sort of girl who gives up easily, Scarlet thought to herself.

She turned her gaze back to Sage. His head was bobbing as though it was taking him a great effort to stay awake. Scarlet leaned down and pressed a soft kiss against his mouth. His lips tasted as salty as her tears.

"Get some rest now," she whispered.

Sage's eyes fluttered closed and he let his chin drop to his chest, as though he'd been waiting for her permission to sleep.

Scarlet swallowed her resolve and stood. She glanced around at the thick foliage. She could just about make out the

tower over the thick tangle of branches and leaves above. She began to make in that direction.

She hadn't gotten more than ten paces when movement up ahead made her stop in her tracks. There was an animal just the other side of a low tuft of shrubbery. Immediately her stomach growled. The vampire in her was telling her to feast and she had no power to control it.

Her body worked on an instinct she'd never before possessed. It made her freeze, her breath becoming shallower so as not to make a noise. The background of her vision blurred out so that her sole focus was the shrub before her, rattling as some unknown creature moved behind it.

The creature must have sensed danger because in a sudden blur it darted away. In a split second Scarlet had taken in a thousand pieces of information—its size and color, its speed, its vulnerabilities—and she pounced, tearing through the forest after it. The creature was deer-like but similar in size to a dog, and Scarlet couldn't help but think of Ruth, her husky back home. It made her feel sick to think that she could possess these murderous instincts, and that she had no control over them.

Scarlet tore across the undergrowth, shoving branches out of her way as she ran. The deer-like creature had a better grasp on the terrain and it dodged and weaved expertly. It hopped elegantly over a stream. Scarlet went plunging in after it, splashing gracelessly in the freezing water.

But despite its upper hand, the deer was no match for a starving vampire. Scarlet reached her prey and leapt on it. She sank her fangs into its neck.

Its blood was delicious, filling her veins with power and strength. She sat on her knees, devouring the creature, sucking on its blood.

As soon as it was drained she sat back and took a deep breath. She turned her gaze up to the stars twinkling through the canopy and a silver tear streaked down her cheek.

She wiped the blood from her lips and looked down at the limp creature.

"I'm sorry," she whispered.

But as she stood, she felt a surge of strength wash through her. As much as it disgusted her to kill, she knew she needed it to survive. She was just going to have to accept that this was her new reality.

She turned on the spot, realizing that in the chase she'd lost her orientation. The trees were so thick here she couldn't even see properly through the tops. The tower was nowhere to be seen.

Scarlet's heart began to race as she realized she was lost.

"No, no, no," she muttered under her breath.

Her throat was constricting with panic. How could she be so stupid? To have gotten lost when she was just a stone's throw from a possible cure for Sage. If he died now, it would all be her fault.

She turned on the spot, looking wildly around her, trying to decipher the path she had taken to get here. But the trees were too thick, the branches too many, and there was no way of knowing which way she had come or which way she needed to go. In her panic, she couldn't help but think of Sage lying there, cold and in pain, his breath shallow. If he died alone she would never forgive herself.

She couldn't help but let the tears fall.

Then suddenly something changed. The gloom around her seemed to lift. She cleared the blurry tears from her eyes with the back of her hand and realized that her locket was glowing once again. The light coming from the hinges banished the shadows around her.

"Of course," she said aloud, "my tears open the locket."

She clicked open the two halves. Instead of showing her the image of the tower this time, a thin thread of light came out, floating through the air like seaweed tendrils under water. Scarlet realized immediately that the light was guiding her.

She ran, following the strange threadlike glow through the thickets. Branches snagged her, tore at her clothes, but she ignored them. Her mind was entirely focused on reaching her destination.

She heard the sound of breaking waves in the distance and realized she must be close. Then all at once she had burst from the forest, leaving behind the shadows and replacing the pungent aroma of trees with the sharp, salty smell of the ocean.

She found herself at the bottom of a row of steep steps that led up to the tower.

She staggered back, her breath stolen from her lungs by the sight of it. The building was so tall she couldn't see the top. The bricks were laid haphazardly and the steps were eroded, bowing in the middle from generations of feet walking up them. Scarlet wasn't sure how the ancient tower was still standing. Like the Leaning Tower of Pisa, it seemed to lilt to one side, lurching toward the ocean.

Scarlet saw that the tendril of light from her locket was winding its way up the staircase. It wanted her to go inside. She swallowed hard, afraid of what might await her.

Then she snapped her locket closed, shutting out the light, and began her ascent up the stone steps.

Her destiny, she knew, life or death, lay before her.

CHAPTER THIRTEEN

Caitlin held on tightly to Caleb as he tore through the countryside on the roaring motorcycle, twisting and turning, leaning so far she nearly thought they would fall. His motorcycle skills were about as terrifying as his plane flying. He twisted the throttle, making the engine roar, pushing it ever faster.

“So how the hell do you propose we get to Egypt?” he cried over his shoulder, his voice swallowed by the wind.

Caitlin chewed her lip. She’d been thinking the same thing. Even though they’d outrun the police in Boldt Castle, that didn’t mean there wouldn’t be more after them. It wasn’t like they could just go to an airport and hop on a plane without someone at customs recognizing them.

“I have an idea,” Caitlin said.

“Go on,” Caleb replied.

But Caitlin didn’t get a chance to explain because just then, coming from behind, a strange shape appeared on the horizon.

“What is that?” Caleb gasped, his wide-eyed gaze fixed in the rearview mirror.

Caitlin turned around in her seat and squinted at the shape. It looked like a storm cloud or a swarm of birds. That’s when she realized it wasn’t birds at all. It was people. Immortalists. They were flying and they were headed straight for them.

“Caleb!” Caitlin screamed in her husband’s ear. “You’ve got to go. Go, go, go!”

Caleb twisted the throttle and the bike began to accelerate even more, picking up a terrifying speed that made Caitlin’s stomach churn.

Still, it wasn’t enough. The Immortalists pursuing them were gaining, coming closer and closer, until they were close enough for Caitlin to make out some of their features. Their eyes flashed with murderous intent.

“Why are they following us?” Caleb cried against the roaring wind.

“Scarlet,” Caitlin replied. “They want Scarlet. And they think we’ll lead them to her.”

“Then we’d better make sure we don’t,” Caleb replied.

He jerked the handlebars left and the bike careened sharply down another winding path. Caitlin gasped, her stomach doing somersaults as Caleb threw the bike from one side to the next. They started to pick up speed as they raced down the hillside.

Finally having caught her breath, Caitlin looked behind her again. The Immortalists were closing in.

“We’re can’t outrun them,” she cried, desperately.

“Yes we can,” Caleb returned.

Caitlin looked ahead and saw that they were fast approaching a tunnel. A sign above it proclaimed that it had a low ceiling and was unsuitable for trucks. Caleb raced toward it.

The tight squeeze had a funneling effect on the Immortalist swarm. Some burst through with no problem, but there was only enough room for them to fly three abreast and the others

had to slow. The crowd bottlenecked around the outside of the tunnel, some flying too fast to stop and careening into the others at great speed. Despite the wind rushing in her ears, Caitlin could make out the sound of their pained yelps and groans as they smashed into one another.

“Amazing!” she cried to her husband.

But they weren’t out of danger yet. A strong crowd of at least ten Immortalists had made it into the tunnel and were gaining on them. It was clear to Caitlin, however, that without room to soar and without the less dense air to glide along they were struggling to keep up pace. Flying through the tunnel was hard work for them.

“It’s just like with an airplane,” Caleb said. “It’s easier to glide in thinner air.”

“So we make sure they stay low?” Caitlin replied. “See if we can tire them out?”

“I’ve got a feeling that the bike will give out before they do,” Caleb replied.

The tunnel came to an end and the motorbike bumped back onto the roads. Caitlin looked back and realized that some of the Immortalists caught in the bottleneck had flown up over the tunnel and were ready to rejoin their pack. Their group was stronger again, and now they had the open air to glide through.

“Now what?” Caitlin cried, her heart leaping into her throat.

The road was beginning to widen, indicating they were

approaching civilization of some sort—a village or town. But first there were rows upon rows of fields and farm yards.

Caleb twisted the handlebars and the motorbike veered into a field of corn. Caitlin realized what he was doing. He was heading straight for an open barn. He was hoping to maneuver the Immortalists through difficult terrain.

The bike whizzed into the first barn.

It was filled with cows. They lifted their heads and moored their disapproval as the bike roared through. But, Caitlin noted, the Immortalists weren’t behind.

“They’re not stupid enough to follow,” she cried. “They’ll just fly over the roof.”

“I know,” Caleb replied.

Then he hit the brake and twisted the handlebar, making the motorbike screech and turn sharply on its side. Caitlin gripped on for dear life. When the bike righted itself again, she looked up and saw that they were back facing the way they had come. Caleb was trying to outsmart the Immortalists.

They raced back out the barn. Caitlin glanced over the roof top. Sure enough, the Immortalist swarm was racing over the roofs in the wrong direction, expecting them to emerge from the other end of the barn. She watched as they realized their mistake and came to a sudden, angry halt, before doubling back on themselves and racing back the way they had come. They were still coming for them, but Caleb’s maneuver had brought them a little bit of breathing space.

Caitlin held on tight as Caleb steered toward another barn. This one was full of pigs. The stench was unbearable.

"You can't trick them twice," Caitlin shouted in Caleb's ear.

But this time, Caleb didn't turn the bike around. This time, as he drove through the barn, he knocked open the gate locks of the pens. The pigs were smart enough to know that an unlocked pen meant freedom, and they rushed for the gates, causing a stampede.

Caleb burst out the other end of the barn. Sure enough, the Immortalists had been expecting him to pull the same trick as before. They were all waiting to pounce at the entrance of the barn. But instead of Caitlin and Caleb, they were confronted by a herd of pigs.

Caitlin couldn't help but laugh at the sight, as she turned back and watched the Immortalist army grounded by nothing more than a gang of stinking pigs.

"Have I told you recently how much I love you?" Caitlin called into Caleb's ear.

Caleb laughed gleefully and maneuvered the bike back onto the main roads, heading once again in the direction of the village, and leaving their pursuers behind in the wrecked farm yard.

"So you were going to tell me how to get to Egypt?" Caleb said to Caitlin once they were driving steadily again.

"Actually," Caitlin said, "I was thinking of a detour."

There was a pause. Then Caleb said in a strained voice, "A

detour?"

"Yes." Caitlin cleared her throat, feeling a little awkward. "To Florida."

In the pause that followed, Caitlin could almost feel Caleb's frustration radiating off him. First she makes him fly to Boldt Castle to find Scarlet, then she changes her mind and tells him they have to go to Egypt to find a cure for vampirism, and now she was talking about Florida. She was putting her poor husband through the wringer and pushing his trust to the maximum.

"Should I even bother asking why?" Caleb muttered.

"We need to get to my grandmother's attic," Caitlin replied.

"Why?" came Caleb's clipped response.

"When I was talking to Aidan about the sphinx, something triggered a memory inside of me," Caitlin replied. "I can't quite put my finger on it but I know that my grandmother had all kinds of artifacts in her attic. I have this feeling that she'll have something to help us locate the vampire city."

"Right," Caleb replied wearily. "So we're still going to Egypt. Just via your grandma's attic. Because of a hunch. And how much time exactly do you think we have to find this cure for our daughter?"

Caitlin tensed. She hated it when Caleb couldn't see her point of view, or when it felt like he suddenly wasn't on her side anymore. This was their daughter they were talking about. Surely he understood that she only had Scarlet's best interest

at heart. Hadn't he learned to trust her yet? If she could sense that their daughter was in danger from miles off, surely Caleb could accept that going to her grandmother's was more than just a hunch, that she had some deep, primal instinct inside of her compelling her to go there.

"I'm sorry, but you're just going to have to trust me, Caleb," she replied tersely.

"Like I trusted you with the whole ejecting out the airplane thing?" he shot back. "Do you have any idea how useful it would be right now to still have an airplane at our disposal?"

No sooner had he said the words than the village they'd been heading toward materialized before them at the bottom of the valley. It looked like the typical backwater farming town, with a gas station and an auto salvage yard filled with rusty cars and retired tractors. All of a sudden, Caitlin saw something that caught her eye.

"Caleb, I don't believe it!" she cried, grabbing her husband's arm.

Caleb looked left. And there it was. Amongst the wreckage of beat-up pickup trucks and crushed vans stood an old biplane.

"I don't believe it," Caleb said.

"Do you think it still works?" Caitlin asked, feeling elevated by hope.

"There's only one way to find out."

Caleb steered into the auto salvage yard and raced past the

rows of cars. He drew to a halt beside the biplane. Caitlin leapt from the motorbike. Her legs were trembling from the vibrations of the bike. It felt good to be on solid ground, though she hoped she'd soon be off it and airborne.

Caleb wasted no time inspecting the aircraft.

"I haven't flown one of these things since my training days," he said, looking in awe at the relic. "We got to fly them in air displays at the weekends sometimes. Beautiful machines. Amazing to handle."

Caitlin smiled.

"So?" she said. "What do you think?"

"It's in good condition," Caleb cried.

"Can it get us to Florida?" Caitlin asked.

Caleb looked up and smiled at his wife.

"Do you know what? I think this might just work."

He pulled open the driver's door. It creaked and bashed against the side, the hinges rusty and loose. He looked at his wife as he climbed inside.

"Just promise me you won't change your mind again," he said, settling into the seat.

Caitlin hauled herself up and crossed her heart.

"I promise," she said as she settled herself behind him. "As long you promise not to crash this thing."

Caleb turned the biplane on and the engine spluttered and coughed. Once the engine was turning over nicely, he began to taxi through the auto salvage yard, heading for the open fields.

“I don’t know if I can promise that,” he said, lining the plane up for takeoff.

He pushed the thrusters forward. The biplane picked up speed. With a stomach-churning sensation, they left the ground and took to the skies.

CHAPTER FOURTEEN

Vivian twirled the broken shard of wood in her hands. Jojo’s blood stained the jagged tip. On the floor before her lay a pile of dust; all that was left of her former friend.

She was furious. How dare Jojo think she could kick Vivian out of the gang? Vivian had been the undisputed queen of the cheerleaders when she was alive and she sure as hell intended to be queen of them now she was a vampire! She’d kill every last one of them before she got demoted from the cool gang.

Vivian shoved the makeshift weapon into her back pocket. If there were as many vampires out there as her friends seemed to think there were, she’d need a way to give herself the upper hand. That was something vampire Vivian shared in common with her former human self—the constant need to win.

There was one thing she hadn’t won in her previous life and now, as a vampire, the thought of it was driving her crazy. Blake.

She had to find him. She had to turn him and make him hers forever.

As Vivian bolted down the high school’s corridors she couldn’t help but note how much enjoyment she’d gotten out of killing her former friend. All those sleepovers and pizza parties meant nothing to her now that she was a vampire. It was as though the human life she’d once lived had vanished, along with all the old human emotions she’d once felt. She was

transformed, and felt all the better for it. There was no need for friendship in her new form. But there was a need for love, and it was Vivian's desire for Blake that forced her through the school halls.

Smears of blood stained the floor and bloody handprints ran the length of the walls. If it weren't for the delicious metallic scent in the air, it would be easy to assume a kindergarten class had rampaged through the corridor with red paint. And though Vivian couldn't be sure what had happened inside the school whilst she'd been transforming into a vampire beside her pool, she was certain that whatever had gone down had been absolutely spectacular. She thought of all those miserable goths and stoner types who would have met their doom at the hands of Kyle and smiled to herself.

She was just passing the locker room when something made her stop. Noises were coming from the other end, echoing along the corridor toward her. Voices. Male voices.

Vivian cocked her head to the side.

Though a fire burned inside of her, telling her to find Blake no matter what, something else was compelling her to walk toward the voices. She realized as she went that it was that same primal drive that told her when to feed and when to mate. And right now, it was telling her that several potential mates were nearby. It was almost as if she could smell the pheromones in the air.

Without hesitation, Vivian entered the boys' locker room.

She was confronted by a crowd of jocks in full gear, sweaty and mud-stained from a game. The second she waltzed in, every head snapped up to attention and every single pair of eyes locked on her. Vivian felt like a doe breaking a twig underfoot and alerting a whole field of stags to its presence.

Immediately, Vivian realized that the boys' uniforms weren't just stained with mud and sweat. There was blood on each of their shirts, turning one of their shoulders red. The blood, congealed now, had come from two neat puncture wounds in each of their necks.

So the football team had been turned into vampires, too.

That meant one thing. That those same burning basic instincts she felt—to feast, to kill, to mate—were burning in them too. They had needs, and they were expecting her to satisfy them.

Vivian looked from one pair of hungry eyes to the next, counting five in total. She could tell just from their expressions that they wanted to devour her. The drive that had led her to this place existed in every single one of them, and whatever instinct inside of her was telling her to run, their own instincts were strong enough to match, telling them to do everything in their power to stop her leaving.

But instead of feeling fear, Vivian was swept up in a cool-headed rage. She stood, poised, her chin tipped upward confidently, her hands on her hips. The football jocks were idiots when they were alive, they were sure to have lost a couple

more brain cells in the transition. She could outmaneuver them.

“Vivian,” one of the boys snarled.

Vivian tipped her head to the side coquettishly.

“How can I help you, Malcolm?” she said in a syrupy sweet voice.

Malcolm stood. He was well over six feet tall and muscular. Vivian knew his vampire body would be even stronger than his human one had been.

Malcolm advanced.

“You’ve been turned,” he said.

Vivian noted the way his lip curled as he spoke, and the way his nostrils flared as though he were taking in her scent. The way he moved was animalistic, wolf-like.

She squared up him, keeping her composure, not letting him rattle her.

“So have you,” Vivian replied, keeping the playful lilt to her voice, using it a weapon to subdue him.

Malcolm prowled closer.

“It suits you,” Malcolm said, the dangerous tone in his voice as sharp as the edge of a blade. “I always did prefer the pale and interesting type.”

Vivian barked out her laughter and tapped one of her manicured fingernails against her crossed forearm.

The mood instantly darkened. Behind Malcolm, the other four jocks stood, as though her laughter had affronted them

all. They were a pack, she realized, even more so now that they were vampires than they had been as humans. And they were getting bored of this game.

“What do you think happens now?” Malcolm said, tipping his head down so that dark shadows shook across his face. “Now that we’re all vampires?” He smiled devilishly and twirled some of her hair in his pale fingers. “Do we have to obey the same laws like we used to? Or will it be anarchy?”

Vivian let him bring his face right next to hers. He sniffed her skin, taking in the scent of her. Slowly, his deathly cold fingers began to wrap around her neck.

Vivian locked her eyes on his as she slid her hand into her back pocket and grasped the jagged edges of the stake she’d used to kill Jojo.

“I hope not,” she said. “Because I just killed one of my best friends.”

She wrenched her hand from her pocket and before Malcolm had even a second to react, she jammed the sharp wooden stake into his heart. The look of astonishment that flickered across his face caused a thrill to run through Vivian. He let out a horrendous growl before his body went slack, crumbled to pieces, and vanished in a cloud of dust.

The four other jocks began to cry and howl. They snarled and paced, snapping their jaws at her like feral beasts.

Vivian held the stake up.

“Who’s next?” she demanded.

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All four of them flew at her once. Vivian leapt, using her super strength to leap over their heads. She landed on the bench the other side with such a force it snapped in half. Vivian grabbed the broken bench, wrenched it above her head, and charged at the four jocks. Each one was speared through the heart by one of the protruding jagged bits of wood.

Vivian grinned, showing her fangs, as she reduced the four of them to nothing more harmless than piles of dust.

“You never were that bright,” she said, chucking the bench against the wall with enough force to make it splinter into a thousand pieces.

Then she grabbed her makeshift weapon and stashed it into her pocket again.

The killings had made her feel invincible. She set to the sky to resume her search for Blake.

Kyle stood in the entrance hall of Columbia University. How useful, he thought, for them to display all the faculty members neatly on the wall like that. Kyle scanned the row of photographs, some depicting smiling faces, other studious faces, all in black and white. He read the names, each as innocuous as the last. Lyndsay Jones—Professor of Mathematics. Sarah Gee—Professor of Psychology.

What boring little lives these women must live, Kyle thought. How much more exciting it would be for them to join the vampire race. A couple of professors would make interesting contributions to his army. And if they didn't, he was certain the football team he'd recently turned would find ways to enjoy their company.

Kyle shook his head. He was getting distracted. He was here to get information on the girl. The priest had said to find the mother first, and that meant finding Aidan.

Just then, Kyle's eyes rested on the prize, the name he'd been looking for all this time.

Kyle scoffed. The man looked every inch the geek he was expecting, with round little glasses and an effeminate face. Kyle cracked his knuckles. He was going to have a great time.

Luckily for Kyle, the university had not only provided a lovely wall of faculty names and photos, but they'd gone as far as to display a detailed map of the campus. Kyle used his

super-sensitive sight to scan and memorize the map in a matter of seconds, then set off, quick as a flash, in search of Aidan.

The campus was in darkness. Several lamps cast pools of yellow light onto the walkways, which crisscrossed through a series of square lawns. A slight drizzle of rain gave the campus a hazy quality. But Kyle's sensitive eyesight wasn't hampered in any way. He could see the huge white stone building with columns and a domed ceiling before him as clear as day. The library, the place that Kyle was heading.

He zoomed across the lawns, his feet floating several inches above the ground, and made it to the bottom of the library steps in mere seconds. He enjoyed using his flying abilities so much he hovered up to the double doors instead of taking the stairs. Stairs were for humans, he thought. Stairs were for convicts, like the men he'd been locked up with in prison. He was superior to them now, superior in strength, power, and agility.

The library doors were locked but that wasn't going to stop Kyle. He grabbed the handles in each of his hands and heaved with such might the doors splintered. He laughed and dropped them to the floor. They landed with a loud thud.

Once inside the library, Kyle sensed that the building wasn't fully empty. The handy map at the entrance had informed him that students had twenty-four-hour access with a swipe card. Kyle thought it was likely that he would come across a few hunched figures, furiously scribbling dissertations as if their lives depended on it, and that he would end their lives if the

urge took him. But before that, he needed to get to the top floor where some of the faculty offices were located, including Aidan's. Some instinct told him that the professor would be hard at work, oblivious to the time of night it was.

He found the stairwell and sprung up the banisters, jumping from one to the next like a monkey, until he was on the landing of the top floor. Another handy sign pointed him in the direction of Aidan's office. Or, from the sign, one of his offices; but if he wasn't in this one, Kyle could go to the other buildings and check elsewhere.

Kyle's anticipation mounted when he saw, as predicted, light spilling out from beneath the old professor's office door. Kyle opened it quickly and swirled inside.

Aidan was sat at his desk. He swiveled in his chair and gasped when he saw Kyle standing there.

"Can I help you?" he said, adjusting his glasses.

Kyle pulled up a spare chair and sat himself down, his face uncomfortably close to Aidan's.

"As a matter of fact, you can," he said.

He smirked as Aidan leaned back, trying to get some space between them. It was then that Kyle noticed the book that lay open on Aidan's desk. He hadn't been able to read all that well in his human days, but he could still recognize the word *vampire*.

"Doing a bit of light reading?" Kyle said with a smirk.

Aidan snapped the book shut.

“What do you want?” he demanded.

Kyle didn’t answer him.

“Vampires, eh?” he said, his eyes still transfixed on the closed book on Aidan’s desk. “You believe in all that stuff, do you?”

Aidan looked flummoxed.

“For some reason I don’t think you’ve come here for a philosophical debate,” he said.

Kyle threw his head back and let out a short, sharp laugh.

“You’d be right about that, prof,” he said. “I’m no philosopher, I can tell you that much for free.” He put his feet up on Aidan’s desk, making bits of dried mud fly onto the surface. “But vampires? I don’t need to read a history book to educate me.”

Kyle watched the minute changes in Aidan’s facial expression, the ones that revealed that he’d caught on to the situation. Though Aidan tried to remain impassive, a small crease formed between his eyebrows, one that was perceptible to Kyle’s super-sensitive vision. He knew he was sitting face to face with a vampire. He knew he was in danger. And Kyle just loved watching him squirm.

“What do you want from me?” Aidan said, his voice clipped.

Kyle dropped his boots back down to the ground and leaned forward on his knees.

“I’ll make this easy for you. Scarlet Paine. Tell me where I can find the girl, and I’ll leave your windpipe intact. Do we

have a deal?”

Aidan blanched, the color draining entirely from his face.

“What do you want with her?” He trembled.

“Well,” Kyle began. “See, the thing is, the girl is my sire.”

Aidan’s frown intensified. “You’re the one she fed on?”

“Yup.” Kyle thumped a fist into his chest. “She made me. And I, in turn, have made others. A whole army, in fact.”

Aidan began shaking his head, a look of grief etching across his face.

“And,” Kyle continued, “I intend to unleash my army on the world pretty soon. You see, I’m not well known for my patience. And if I don’t find Scarlet Paine soon, I’m going to tell my army to start feasting. We’ll kill every human we come across until we find the girl. So, why don’t you save some souls, prof? Why don’t you just tell me where she is?”

Aidan stood, wobbled, then held onto the desk edge to steady himself.

“I don’t know where the girl is,” he said. “Her mother is trying to find her.” Then he glanced over his shoulder. “But I do know where they live.”

Kyle clapped his hands together and smiled.

“I knew you’d do the right thing!” he bellowed.

Aidan shuffled past his desk chair.

“I’ll fetch my address book,” he mumbled.

Kyle chuckled to himself as he watched the old man walk to the other side of the room and open a drawer. That had been

too easy! The old fool hadn't even put up a fight.

But when Aidan turned back round, Kyle realized it wasn't an address book he was holding in his hands. The old man had retrieved some kind of weapon. It looked like a cross bow.

Kyle leapt to his feet and put his hands in truce position.

"Now, now. Let's not do anything hasty," he said.

Aidan was trembling, the strange weapon quivering in his hands.

"You said you didn't need a history book to educate you on vampires," Aidan said, trying to keep his voice strong. "Well, maybe if you had, you'd know how dangerous holy water arrows can be to vampires."

With that Aidan pressed his finger on the trigger and a small arrow burst out of the weapon. It lodged itself in Kyle's shin. He roared in pain.

"Did I say dangerous?" Aidan said. "I meant to say lethal."

He fired again and a second arrow burst forth. This one hit Kyle square in the shoulder. He screamed in agony and ripped it out of his flesh.

Kyle shrieked. He crossed the small room before Aidan had a chance to blink and wrenched the weapon from his hands, snapping it clean in two across his knee. He grabbed the professor around the neck and slammed his back against the wall. With one hand around the old man's throat, he leaned down and plucked the arrow from his shin.

He held it up to the light, right between his face and the ter-

rified face of Aidan. The metal tip glinted in the lamp light. Kyle began to laugh.

"I think you would have been better off with a wooden stake," he said.

Aidan's face crumpled at the realization of his failure. Kyle held the sharpened arrowhead up to the professor's eye.

"Now," he said between gritted teeth, "tell me where Scarlet Paine lives before I blind you."

Aidan whimpered.

"Please," he whispered. "Her mother is going to turn her back. You can all turn back."

"You think she *wants* to be human again?" Kyle yelled, slamming Aidan's back against the wall. "Why on earth would anyone want that? Go back to walking instead of flying? Go back to being weak and defenseless? The girl has powers beyond her imagination. Mark my words, being turned will have been the best thing that ever happened to her and she will kill anyone who tries to take it away."

Aidan whimpered and shook his head.

"You're wrong," he stammered. "Scarlet's not like you. She wants to be good."

"And yet she still feasted, didn't she?" Kyle barked. "She still killed!"

He raised the arrowhead to eye level again and Aidan yelped. A bead of sweat rolled down the old man's forehead.

"Now, I'm losing my patience with you," Kyle said. "Tell me

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where the girl lives or I'll make sure you never get to read one of your precious books again."

Tears began to streak down Aidan's cheeks. Kyle held the dart a mere millimeter from his eye. One slip, and the old man would be blinded.

"All right!" Aidan cried at last, his voice etched with agony. "I'll tell you. I'll tell you."

Kyle let him down. The old man was trembling all over. He wobbled over to his desk and pulled out a leather-bound book. He flung it across the room at Kyle.

"It's in there," Aidan said, his voice drenched with regret. "That address will lead you to Scarlet Paine."

Kyle clutched the address book in his hands. Just to make sure the old man hadn't tricked him, he flicked to the correct section and scanned the page. At the top, in neat, flowery, academic handwriting was the word *Paine*. Several names and an address were scrawled beneath.

Kyle snapped the book shut.

"Good man, professor," he said. "Don't worry: one day I might just turn you, too."

He turned and swirled out of the office, leaving Aidan a hunched, weeping heap in his office chair.

Scarlet didn't know how long she'd been ascending the stone staircase. Shadows ebbed and swelled around her as she took one careful step after the other, her hand running along the rough stone wall to help keep her balance. After having followed the tendril of light inside the tower, she'd found herself in an empty, chamber-like room, with nothing but a zig-zagging staircase before her. With no other options, she'd begun to climb.

As she went, it occurred to her that the tower shape and strange, winding staircase design made it impossible for her to fly. She wondered whether it had been designed that way specifically; a vampire-proof structure, built to ensure that whatever—or whomever—was residing at the top would have plenty of time to prepare for the approaching intruder.

The further up Scarlet went, the darker her surroundings became, until it was so black she couldn't even see her hand in front of her face. The only sounds she could hear were the soles of her sneakers scuffing against the stone steps, the squeaky noise mingling with her ragged, anxious breath. She had no idea what would be awaiting her at the top of the staircase, though every instinct inside of her told her that the uncertainty and fear would be worth it in the end.

Suddenly, without warning, there was no extra step to take. Scarlet's foot plunged to the leveled ground, filling her with a

horrible falling sensation. Though she couldn't see a thing, she knew that she had finally reached the top of the tower.

She took another step forward and stretched her hands into the dark, empty expanse before her. All at once, she heard the sound of a roaring wind striking up outside of the tower. It sounded like a fierce storm had sprung from nowhere, though Scarlet had seen no indication on the journey here that one was brewing. Scarlet couldn't help thinking that something mystical was afoot.

The wind continued to howl. Then, suddenly, the tower lurched and began to sway. Scarlet's stomach flipped as she felt the floor move beneath her. The walls groaned. Scarlet stumbled and tried to steady herself on the walls but lost her footing and crashed to her knees.

Even in her terror, Scarlet could think only of Sage, and of the way she had left him out there alone. What if he wasn't strong enough to survive the battering of a storm? What if he died out there alone? She would never forgive herself.

Just then, a loud crack of thunder sliced through the air. It was so loud that Scarlet covered her ears. Then a mere second later came the flash flash flash of lightning, bright enough to burst through the cracks in the stone brickwork. For a moment, the whole room was illuminated.

It was then that Scarlet realized she was not alone.

Though the room had been alight for no more than a second, she had gotten a good look at them. Three old women,

each with a long white shawl hanging over her shoulder. Their eyes were glazed over with age, clouded by cataracts. Scarlet wasn't sure if they could even see her at all. They were standing side by side serenely, smiles on their wrinkled faces as though oblivious to the storm and the shaking tower. They looked like they could be a thousand years old.

Scarlet was on her knees, looking up at the blank space where she'd seen the women.

"Who are you?" she cried, her voice rising a notch to compete with the screaming wind outside.

The tower shook as another rumble of thunder sounded out. Scarlet pressed her hands to the ground, trying to find something solid and unmovable, and failing. The ground shook like the aftershock of an earthquake and Scarlet felt her stomach roiling.

"Please!" she shouted. "I've been led to this place! I think you can help me!"

The women didn't say a word. Scarlet began to worry that she had made them up entirely.

She dragged herself to her feet, battling against the swaying ground, and began to stumble toward the place the women had been, hands outstretched. She'd gotten no more than two paces when lightning struck again. The women were no longer there.

Scarlet was plunged back into darkness. She span round, groping, trying to get hold of something, anything.

“She seeks answers, dear sisters,” came a wizened voice from behind Scarlet.

There was something about the voice that made Scarlet feel uneasy. It was beyond old, beyond ancient. It was a voice from the beginning of time.

She swirled on the spot but couldn't see a thing. She couldn't even make out their silhouettes.

Another explosion of light burst through the cracks in the walls, revealing the three women now surrounding her. She screamed, startled by their sudden reappearance, by their closeness. She felt fingers slide into her hair and shuddered. Her skin crawled.

When lightning illuminated the room again, Scarlet caught another glimpse of the three strange, white-haired women. She realized that they were pacing in a circular motion around her. She reached out and tried to grasp one of the women's arms, but they moved too quickly for even super vampire speed.

“She is in love,” another voice said, distinct from the first but equally as disconcerting.

“It is an obsession,” the third voice contested. Her voice was the most terrifying of them all. It was raspy, painful just to listen to, like acid burning flesh.

Scarlet's throat constricted.

“It's not an obsession,” she stammered. “Sage and I are in love.”

The women ignored Scarlet, speaking not to her but instead

to one another over her head, as though she weren't even in the room.

“A vampire in love with an Immortalist!” the horrifying third woman was saying, her cackling, rasping laughter making Scarlet shudder.

Scarlet squeezed her hands into fists and swallowed the bile in her throat. The third woman enraged her. How dare she make such snap judgments about her and Sage?

Just then the ground shook violently, flinging Scarlet to the floor. Her palms slammed into the cold stones, making pain race up her forearms.

Now the voices of the women floated above her. Their ancient, rasping words seemed magnified, as though each syllable filled the entire room, until Scarlet felt like she was filled with the very sound of them.

The first woman was using a sing-songy voice. “A vampire in love with an Immortalist, dear sisters. Have you ever heard of such a thing?”

“And when their races bring our world to the brink of war!” added the second.

From her position on the floor, Scarlet shook her head in confusion.

“What are you talking about?” she pleaded. “I don't understand! What war?”

From all around her came the sound of the women laughing, echoing off every wall, swirling down through the entire

tower and back up again, multiplying fifty times over. Their laughter grew louder and louder until Scarlet's head pounded from the noise. Their cackles merged with the roaring wind, with the rocking building.

Scarlet could take no more. She slammed her fists into the ground. She felt the stone crack beneath them.

"Why did you bring me here?" she screamed.

All at once, everything went silent. The women stopped howling with laughter. The wind stopped roaring. The floor no longer shook.

Scarlet breathed hard and deeply, trying to calm her frayed nerves.

"You brought me here," she added, "because you can help Sage. I know you can. I just want a cure."

There was a long moment of silence. Then, from the center of the room, a small yellow light began to glow.

Scarlet swept the hair from her eyes and peered up. The light radiated warmth, and for the first time since she'd entered the tower, she got a real sense of her surroundings. The Mayan-style stones exposed on the inside were a warm beige color. There were no windows. The roof pointed up, culminating in a huge peak. Dust covered cobwebs criss-crossed across the length of the ceiling, thick and ancient.

And, more importantly, Scarlet got her first proper look at the three strange women. In the yellow light they appeared much younger. Their white shawls looked golden, and the

mistiness had disappeared from their eyes, revealing that each had a different colored iris.

"Who are you?" Scarlet said.

"We are the beginning," the first woman said. Her voice no longer cracked but was as smooth as honey. Her eyes sparkled azure.

"We are the end," the second sister said, her emerald eyes glinting.

"We are all time and no time," added the third. She had deep black eyes like pools of oil.

"I don't understand," Scarlet said.

The blue-eyed sister ran a hand down her silky gold shawl and paced across the floor, her steps as light as snow.

"We have been here since the first spark of life," she said. "And we have seen the end of time. We exist always and forever, and always have, and always will, for ever more. We have seen the birth of the Earth and its death. We have seen it a thousand times over, backwards, forwards, and all at once. We know everything."

"We are knowledge," the second sister added. "All understanding. We can stand on atoms. We hold planets in the palms of our hands. We are the wind and the water, the fire and the earth. We are everything that has ever been or ever will."

"We are sorrow" added the third sister. "We are joy. We have felt every tear that has been shed. We have breathed every

breath. We are pain and forgiveness, anger and sin. We are intangible and everything that can be felt at once.”

Scarlet shook her head and tried to calm her rapidly beating heart.

“And you can help me?” she stammered.

The blue eyed sister turned to the other two.

“Dear sisters,” she said. “She cares deeply for the dying Immortalist.”

“It is a powerful love, indeed,” the second sister said. “But what of her mother and father? They chase her across the Earth.”

Scarlet finally managed to collect herself and stood.

“What about my parents?” she asked.

The third woman, the one who had reviled Scarlet so much, turned her dark black eyes on her.

“They risk their lives chasing after you,” she scoffed. “Searching for a cure to save you. Putting themselves in mortal peril.”

Though her voice no longer turned Scarlet’s stomach, her attitude still enraged her.

“Please, I just need to save Sage. Then I can help my parents, or find a cure, or stop a war, or whatever it is you think I should be doing instead of saving the man I love.”

The third woman was about to issue a rebuke when her emerald-eyed sister laid a hand on her arm.

“It is not her fault that she cares only for the dying boy,” she

said. “She will do anything for him. We ought to help.”

“I care about my family, too!” Scarlet protested. “And my friends! I just...” her voice quieted. “I can’t live without Sage. And that’s the truth.”

The black-eyed sister flashed a fierce expression at Scarlet.

“Care about your family and friends?” she hissed. “Is that why you leave your best friend to languish in a mental institute?”

Scarlet staggered back, the woman’s words hitting her like a fist. Had something happened to Becca, Jasmine, or Maria? She couldn’t bear to think about it. The thought of her friends in danger hurt her to the core.

“Please, just help me save Sage,” she begged. “You brought me here for a reason, didn’t you? Or was it just to torture me?”

She could feel the tears creeping up and hated herself for them, hated her weakness. But everything was overwhelming her. These women had told her that her parents were in peril, that a war was coming, that one of her friends was in a mental institute. The only thought that gave her any comfort was that this was some kind of test.

The blue-eyed sister’s gaze softened.

“She will do anything for him, dear sisters,” she said. “Just look at her.”

“I will,” Scarlet said, gasping through her emotion. “Anything.”

She pulled her hands into prayer position.

"She does not care about the great suffering that is to come," the black-eyed sister sneered. "She sees only what is before her. She thinks only of the boy."

Scarlet's tears turned to anger. She swirled to face the black-eyed woman and gritted her teeth.

"So what?" she challenged. "So what if all I want is Sage! So what if I'd happily die to let him live!"

The black-eyed sister paused. A smile turned up the corners of her lips.

"You would die?" she said, arching an eyebrow.

Scarlet clenched her fists.

"I will."

The black-eyed woman spun round to face her sisters, moving so effortlessly it was as if she were made of air. The other two women looked at her with mournful expressions on their faces.

"She said she would die," she said. "Then, dear sisters, let us tell her, that die she must."

Scarlet felt as if she'd been punched in the stomach. The whole world seemed to end in that moment. All this time she had been hoping, praying, holding on to the slimmest possibility that somehow she and Sage could live happily ever after. And now they were telling her it couldn't be? That she would have to die to let him live?

"I... I have to die?" she stammered. "So Sage can live?"

"There is no other way," the third sister said, cruelly. "An

Immortalist can be made human by draining a vampire of their blood."

Scarlet could hardly breathe. "You mean he'd have to kill me?"

The black-eyed woman smiled even more devilishly. "Of course. But this can only happen whilst in the vampire city. And an Immortalist can only enter the vampire city of their own free will."

"He will do it," Scarlet said passionately. "If I tell him what he needs to do, he will do."

"They must be willing to be mortal," the sister added with vicious glee. "And they must do it for love or they will perish."

"We are in love!" Scarlet cried. "Sage will want to become a human, I know he will."

The black-eyed woman turned her gaze from Scarlet to her sisters.

"How can she be so certain, dear sisters?" she said lazily. "She knows not what the boy must sacrifice. She does not understand how it feels to have immortality flowing through your veins."

Before Scarlet had entered the tower, she'd have thought there was nothing in the world she could face that would make her question her and Sage's love. She'd been certain that Sage would consent to any conditions that meant they would be together. And yet now, in a heartbeat, the women had put a seed of doubt in her mind.

She shook her head. It could all be a game, a mental trick. She couldn't let this woman deter her.

"Where is the city?" Scarlet demanded.

The black-eyed woman turned to her sisters.

"Tell her what she needs to know if you wish," she said.

And in a swirl of black smoke, she disappeared into the ether.

Scarlet stared at the space she had once filled, feeling, in spite of herself, a profound sense of loss.

The blue-eyed sister approached.

"The vampire city resides beneath the Sphinx in Egypt."

Scarlet's mouth dropped open. "I'll never get there in time! Sage will die before I reach Egypt!"

The green eyed sister came up beside them.

"Take this," she said.

She held up a small glass vial. It had a glass stopper in the top, and a long dropper that stretched down to the bottom.

"What is it?" Scarlet asked.

The green-eyed woman removed the stopper. The glass glittered and Scarlet saw then that the point was as sharp as a needle. The woman jabbed her finger. A drop of blood bubbled to the surface of her skin. She held her finger over the vial. The red drop fell into it.

"A drop of immortality," the woman said, smiling. "For the Immortalist. It will keep him alive until you reach the lost vampire city."

Scarlet took the glass bottle in her hand. It was so small, so delicate, and yet contained something irreplaceably important.

All at once, a green swirling smoke appeared, and Scarlet realized that the second woman was disappearing into the ether like her black-eyed sister had.

Only the blue-eyed woman remained.

"Why did you help me?" Scarlet said.

The woman rested her hand on Scarlet's arm. Right before Scarlet's eye, the hand became smaller. When she looked up, she realized the woman had turned into a child, small and innocent.

"We are the mothers of all," she said, her voice sweet and childlike. "We do not want our children to fight and die and kill each other."

"But you've seen everything," Scarlet says. "You know how it ends."

The girl smiled.

"We have seen everything. Every outcome. Every possibility. Everything that could be. Not everything that must."

Scarlet shook her head.

"I don't understand."

"We have lived all lives, all possibilities. But you, dear daughter, can make your own destiny."

A blue smoke rose around the girl. Then all at once, she disappeared, leaving Scarlet standing in the room alone, her fingers wrapped around the precious tincture.

In her hands, she held life and death.

CHAPTER SEVENTEEN

Lore was up to his ankles in mud and pig slop. As the dirty creatures rushed around his legs, he clenched his fists. He was furious with himself for being tricked, and even more furious to be in a stampede of stinking animals.

Lore's rage reached a boiling point. He grasped one of the pigs rushing past him and threw it fifty feet into the air. The pig landed with a dull thud in a cornfield two fields over. He stomped forward, catapulting the creatures out of his way, feeling his anger pulsing through his veins.

The Immortalists who had followed him looked perturbed by their new leader's emotional outburst. By the looks on their faces, Lore could tell that some were starting to doubt whether following him was a good idea after all, or whether Octal had been right to entrust Lore with this mission.

The raven-haired woman approached Lore carefully. He was facing away, trying to get some space from everyone's stares, and so she came up behind him and rested a hand on his shoulder. At first, he shook her off. She tried again. The second time he let her fingers wrap gently around his shoulder, which was rising and falling rapidly with each one of his angry breaths.

The woman leaned toward his ear. Her hot breath tickled his earlobe as she spoke.

"Do not lose faith, Lore," she said.

He turned to face her, taking in the beauty of her face all over again. Her appearance was striking, making something stir deeply inside of Lore. It was an emotion he couldn't place, one that seemed so out of place amongst all the anger and bitterness he usually carried deep within him.

"How can I lead them?" Lore said under his breath. "They have lost faith in my abilities. I've led them here, to this wretched farm in the middle of nowhere. I promised them a war."

The woman's eyes sparkled.

"Then give them one," she said. "Command them in their next mission. Do not let one failure stop you."

Lore turned away and shook his head. The disappointment he felt was too much to swallow. The pressure was too intense. His family, his race, they were all relying on him. For the first time, he didn't know if he could lead them to victory, and that doubt was eating him up.

"Now is not the time for a crisis of confidence," the woman continued, her tone a little sharper, as though she too were losing patience. "You brought Sage to us before. I know you can do it again."

At the mention of his cousin's name, Lore felt a deep pit of unhappiness open inside of him. Sage. This was all because of Sage. How could he not have seen how selfish his actions were? Falling in love with a stupid little girl? Lore had spent time with Scarlet and her friends. He loathed them. They dis-

gusted him as much as the pigs milling round his feet. And yet Sage had gotten so inexplicably wrapped up with that one girl that he would put them all through this hell? It just didn't make sense to Lore.

The other Immortalists were beginning to mutter to themselves, clearly reaching the end of their rope.

"Shall we try to find the parents?" one of them asked, the irritation in his voice unmistakable.

Lore gritted his jaw. He didn't know. Should they follow the parents, who would undoubtedly lead them to Scarlet but who seemed able to easily shake off his Immortalist army? Or change tactics?

"Yes," he said. "Follow them. Find them again. They'll lead us to the girl."

Relieved to have finally been given orders, the group took to the air, flying off in the direction that the motorbike had disappeared.

Lore watched them go, a sense of bitter disappointment filling him. He had no intention of going with them. He had failed in his mission. It was someone else's turn to lead.

It was then that Lore noticed the raven-haired woman had remained behind. She looked at him placidly.

"You're not coming, are you?" she said.

Lore shook his head.

"I've failed," he said. "I'm no leader."

"And yet," she replied, "here I am, willing to follow. Isn't

that what makes a leader? Someone whom others follow?"

Lore frowned at her. He didn't understand why she was so insistent in making him lead the army, or why she was constantly trying to bring him back from the brink of his anger.

"Why?" he demanded. "Why are you following me?"

The woman's eyes sparkled again.

"I'm drawn to you," she said. "You have a power. An energy."

"You don't even know me," Lore contested. "We had never met before tonight."

The woman smiled.

"Then let me introduce myself," she said, holding out a hand. "I'm Lyra."

Lore looked at her outstretched hand like it offended him.

"What do you want me to do with that, Lyra?" he scoffed.

"I want you to shake it," she said with a small, haughty laugh.

With a huff, Lore took her hand in his and shook. The moment their skin met, a current like electricity ran through the length of his arm. Lore's throat became very dry. He let go of her hand immediately.

"Now what?" he said.

Lyra smirked. "You tell me, leader."

Lore was about to once more tell her how futile her trust in him was, when all at once, the wind began to whip up around them. The sky darkened, blocking out the moon and star light.

In the distance, the farm animals in their barns began to protest, mooing and cawing.

Lore watched as wind raced through Lyra's long, raven hair, tousling it. Her black clothes flapped in the gale force of the wind. He reached out and grabbed her at the top of her arms to steady her.

"What's happening?" he cried over the noise.

Lyra tried to say something but the wind caught in her throat. She shook her head. Then Lore saw her eyes widen with surprise.

He glanced over his shoulder, fixing his gaze on the point in the distance that had caught her attention. A white column of light was bursting through a layer of thick, black cloud, far, far in the distance.

"What is that?" he cried, turning back to face Lyra.

"I don't know," she managed to shout. "But I believe it's a sign. It's for us."

"How can you be so sure?" he shouted back.

"I just am," Lyra replied. "And I've been right about everything so far."

Lore could hardly believe how arrogant she was being considering the circumstances.

"You want to fly there?" he contested. "On a hunch?"

Lyra flashed her eyes at him and grinned. Rather than answering, she took to the skies. The wind forced her off course. From Lore's position on the ground, he could tell the

journey would certainly be rough going.

Yet he leapt and began to fly, following Lyra into the unknown.

*

Lyra and Lore flew side by side through the treacherous storm. Below them, the ocean waves churned, black and vengeful. Thunder rumbled in the distance, coming from the same direction as the mysterious column of light. Lightning flashed, too close for comfort. For the first time in a long time, Lore felt the danger of death lurking at his shoulder.

As he flew, Lore couldn't help but glance over at the beautiful woman. He felt a pull toward her, a magnetism. He admired the way she had remained level-headed when it had seemed all hope was lost. And now, as she glided through the air, he admired her fixed determination, the way she had not wavered for a moment in her decision to follow the strange light. For the first time since his cousin had run off with the vampire girl, he had an inkling as to why. The sensation wasn't one that could be controlled. It was above reason, above logic. Lore realized, his heart pounding, that he may be falling in love.

A crack of lightning exploded right beside the two Immortalists, and they swerved just in time to save themselves from being hit, diving down so that they were soaring just inches from the surface of the water. Lore felt ocean spray on his face

and tasted salt. The cold wind raced through his clothes, making him shiver down to the bone. But the whole thing felt exhilarating.

"Look!" Lyra suddenly cried.

Lore broke his gaze from her and looked in the direction she pointed. Looming out of the darkness was a crooked tower. It stretched up to the heavens, and seemed to lean toward the ocean at a strange angle. The light they'd been following was coming from the tower, bursting through its peak.

"What is that?" Lore said.

By the excited expression on Lyra's face, he had an inkling that she knew.

"I can't believe it," she said. "I can't believe the legend is real."

"What legend?" Lore cried, fighting to make himself heard over the wind.

"They have no name," Lyra shouted back. "They appear in the texts under several aliases. The Sisters. The Mothers. The Daughters. Sometimes, they are known as Trinity."

"Who are they?"

Lyra flashed him her beautiful smile.

"They come in times of need. They exist to help all non-human races, to keep our species from going extinct on the Earth."

"You mean, they appeared because we needed them?" Lore asked.

“Not us,” Lyra cried. “Someone else. Another being.”

“Another Immortalist,” Lore gasped. “You mean Sage?”

“I think so,” Lyra replied.

Her smile was so wide, her eyes so bright, that Lore felt his own facial expressions mimic hers, moving the muscles in a way that he wasn’t entirely sure he ever had before. Could they really have found his cousin?

“I knew I was right to follow you,” Lyra laughed. “You will have to learn to trust me.”

Without even thinking, Lore reached out for Lyra. Their fingertips connected and he felt that pulse of electricity race through him. Lore knew then that there was no denying it. What he felt for Lyra was beyond anything he could control.

She laced her fingers through his and began to pull him into her until they were close enough for their lips to meet.

Lore had never experienced anything like it before. In all the two thousand years of his existence, his encounters with women had been purely functional, a way to get what he wanted. He had used people, like Maria, Scarlet’s awful human friend, for his own means. He had never realized what it felt to connect with another being on such a deep and powerful level.

In that moment, lost in his kiss with Lyra, Lore decided to show Sage an ounce of compassion. He realized now that the poor fool was in love, and he understood what that meant. Sage was as weak as a newborn kitten, enthralled by Scarlet. He realized then that Octal had gone about it all the wrong

way. By torturing his cousin, he had done nothing more than drive him closer to the girl. He’d made Sage passionately territorial. If Lore wanted to save his race, he had to make sure Sage believed that Scarlet would be safe. He had to trick him into thinking they were on the same side. Suddenly, in that kiss, everything became clear.

He was going to save his race. The Immortalists would not go extinct.

*

Finally, Lore and Lyra reached the island with the crooked tower. Lightning flashes showed them a thick canopy of dark trees. The second they had passed over the water line, Lore could sense Sage’s presence on the island.

“He’s here,” he said, breathlessly. “And if he is here, so is she.”

He could hardly contain the sensation of glee inside of him. Lyra, too, look overwhelmed with joy.

They touched down gently under the forest canopy. The winds still battered them, and it was difficult to make their way through the thick foliage. The sound of the wind through the trees was deafening, and leaves and twigs spiraled round them, torn from their branches. The very trees swayed dangerously, as though the whole forest was being ripped up from the roots.

"This way!" Lore cried, following his senses, the senses that told him Sage was nearby.

They ran together, dodging the forest's missiles, and suddenly came to a clearing. There, as though in the eye of the storm, lay Sage. He was sleeping, and looking perfectly serene. The wind didn't even seem to touch him; it was as though a barrier were surrounding him, protecting him.

Lore and Lyra approached.

"Where's the girl?" Lyra said.

Lore looked about him but there was nothing to see but trees.

"She can't have left him," he said. "Their love was too powerful."

Lyra glanced at the shard of light coming from the tower.

"Perhaps she is in there," she said. "Perhaps that's where the Trinity are."

Lore nodded, then turned back to the prone figure of his swollen, beaten cousin.

"We'll wait for her return," he said.

But Lyra didn't look certain.

"What is it?" Lore questioned her. "What do you know?"

Lyra paced away from him, twisting her hands as she walked.

"The legends say they can bend time," she says. "That a second for them is a thousand years for us. Or that a thousand years for us can be a second for them. There's no way of know-

ing how long the girl will be gone."

"Then we'll get her," Lore said, immediately taking a step toward the tower.

Lyra held a hand out to stop him.

"No," she said. "It doesn't work that way. Once they have been called, they are protected. No one else can enter while they are in session."

Lore felt his hopes fall.

"Time will bounce back into shape once their council is over," Lyra continued. "But whilst we're caught up in the magic, there is no way of knowing."

"Then what do we do?" he said. "We cannot stand here for a thousand years!"

Lyra looked at him, a perturbed expression on her face. It was one that told him she was all out of ideas. It was one that told him that he must make the next decision, that the ball was back in his court. He needed to be the leader once again, and she the follower.

"We'll take him," Lore said. "And leave a message for Scarlet. If time bounces back, like you said, then when she finds the note it will be back at this time and place. The Immortalists will still have time to be saved."

Lyra nodded though she didn't look too certain.

"If the texts are accurate, I believe that is true," she said. "When Scarlet returns to this moment, it will be as though no time has passed for her at all. Our timeline, too, will continue

at its normal trajectory once we are out of the clutches of the magic.”

Lore set his jaw firm, resolved, at last, in his actions.

“Then we will leave a message for the girl,” he said.

He knelt down on one knee and scratched an image into the mud with a stick. When he was done, he stood back up and wiped the dirt from his pants.

“Where is that?” Lyra asked.

“Our estate on the Hudson River. Scarlet will recognize it immediately.”

“And you’re certain she’ll come?”

Lore tipped his eyes to meet Lyra and knew, beyond any shadow of a doubt, that Scarlet would come for her missing love. She would follow him to the ends of the Earth. He knew, because that was how he felt toward Lyra. For the first time in his two thousand years of life, Lore was in love.

He reached down and picked Sage up in his arms. For the first time, his anger at Sage’s betrayal dissipated slightly. Now he felt sorry for his cousin. He had fallen for the wrong girl, at the wrong time. He would have to sacrifice his love for the good of his race. Perhaps one day he would learn to forgive Lore for what he had to do, though Lore had a suspicion, now that he had felt the power of love, that Sage would never get over the loss of Scarlet. Lore was certain that even two thousand more years of life would do nothing to diminish the grief Sage would feel once his precious love was destroyed. But Lore

had no choice. It was that, or let his race, and the woman he now loved, die.

“Cousin,” he whispered to the unconscious Sage, “your sacrifice will not go unrewarded.”

And with that, he took to the sky, Lyra following behind them.

It was time for the final reckoning.

CHAPTER EIGHTEEN

The biplane landed roughly in a field near Caitlin's grandmother's house, Caitlin spending the whole two-hour flight gazing anxiously out the window. At one point, she thought she had seen shapes on the horizon—Immortalists chasing them—but these had just turned out to be the silhouettes of birds on the horizon. There had also been a fierce storm raging in the distance behind them, and a strange glowing light that had made Caitlin's stomach twist and turn. She had ignored all her worries and tried to focus on what was to come.

As the wheels of the plane touched down and it taxied to a halt, Caleb looked over at his wife.

"What are you thinking?" he said.

"Nothing," Caitlin said distantly. "I'm just thinking."

"About Scarlet?"

Caitlin nodded and chewed her lip.

"I feel terrible for having left her behind," she said.

Caleb reached out and stroked his wife's hand.

"I know," he replied. "I do too. But if you think you can save her, can cure her, then we will be helping her in the long run." He looked up at the dark, clear sky and twinkling lights. "Whatever danger she is in now, it will all be over once she's cured."

Caitlin wanted to nod, to feel comforted by his words, but she just couldn't bring herself to hope.

"Come on," Caleb said. "Let's get inside."

They climbed from the biplane and crossed the barren field toward Caitlin's grandmother's house. As they went, Caitlin thought of the small leather box that had led her to come here, the one that sat in her grandmother's attic. She remembered the symbol on top of it, the circle inside a flower of alternating scarlet and blue petals, and the surreal drawing of a face at its center. The very same picture had turned up in the Voynich manuscript when she'd been searching for a cure for Scarlet. The sight of it had made her gasp. The fact that Caitlin's grandmother had never let her touch the box suggested to Caitlin that it was of great importance. And now here she was, ready to find just how important the box, and the symbol, really was.

Caitlin had been so lost in her thoughts she'd hadn't noticed Caleb lagging behind. She turned back to face her husband.

"What is it?" she asked.

He shook his head, but there was a grave expression on his face.

"Something's wrong," he said.

Caitlin felt her heart rate increase. It wasn't like Caleb to sense things; that seemed to be a trait that she had exclusively to herself. Seeing him like this made her nervous.

"What's wrong?" she asked with trepidation.

Caleb seemed on edge. He kept looking over his shoulder as

though expecting something to appear from the shadows. He tugged at the neckline of his shirt, seemingly uncomfortable with the hot Florida air.

"Caleb, you're scaring me," Caitlin said. "Please tell me what's wrong?"

"Just go on inside," Caleb said hurriedly.

"What about you?" Caitlin asked.

"I'll keep an eye on things."

Caleb's eyes darted from left to right. He was wound up so tightly it seemed as though he could explode any second.

"Come inside," Caitlin said, calmly, softly, trying to coax Caleb out of his strange episode.

Caleb flinched, as though he had heard the rumble of thunder. But there was no storm to be seen or heard, and the one Caitlin had seen on the horizon from the windshield of the plane had been left behind hours ago.

"If I'm in the house, how will I protect you?" Caleb said.

Caitlin frowned.

"Protect me from what?" she asked.

She felt as though she were talking to a child, a stranger. She had never seen Caleb behave like this.

It was then that she saw something in the sky approaching them. Her heart leapt into her throat. It was the Immortalist army. They had found them. They had followed them across the east coast, trailed them for hours to this place. She'd been right when she thought she saw shapes following them. She

should never have doubted herself.

"Caleb, quick, they're here!" Caitlin screamed.

Caleb immediately broke from his strange trance. He raced forward and grabbed hold of his wife's hands. Together, they bolted up the steps and began pounding on the door.

The second Caitlin's grandmother answered it, they flew inside. Caleb immediately began double locking it, and wedged a chair against the door knob.

"Do you have a gun?" he said to the frail old woman.

"A 'hello' would be nice," she replied.

"There's no time, Grandma," Caitlin replied. "Give Caleb a gun if you have one."

The old woman seemed bemused. She shuffled off in her nightdress then reappeared with a hunting rifle. Caleb took it from her and positioned himself at the living room window.

"What's going on?" Caitlin's grandmother asked.

Caitlin took the woman's frail hands in hers and began leading her up the stairs.

"I need to see the box, Grandma," she said.

"I don't know what you're talking about," came her grandmother's reply.

"Yes you do," Caitlin said with a note of warning in her voice. "The time for secrets is over. Scarlet is a vampire, Grandma, and I know you know what that means."

The woman twisted her lips as though she were considering challenging Caitlin. In the end, she decided otherwise.

"It's dangerous," she said simply.

"I know," Caitlin replied. "But it might be the only way I can help Scarlet."

The two women had reached the second floor now. Caitlin tugged down the cord for the attic stairs to descend. She gestured for her grandmother to climb up first but the old woman shook her head.

"You'll know what to do when you get there," she said, gently, patting Caitlin on the arm.

"There's an army coming," Caitlin told her grandmother. "You need to come up here with me."

The old woman just shook her head.

"My place is here," she said. "This is your adventure to be had."

Caitlin squeezed her grandmother's hand, feeling as though it may be the last time she saw her alive, then turned and climbed the steps.

The attic was dusty and piled with boxes, old furniture and bags of discarded clothing. Mice had nibbled holes through the cardboard and left their droppings in a trail across the floor. Caitlin crinkled her nose in disgust as she tiptoed over to the place where she leather box should be.

It didn't take her long to find it, and the moment she saw it, she felt a strong sensation inside of her, telling her that coming here had been the right thing to do. But she was also filled with apprehension. Whatever happened next would be diffi-

cult, life-altering, even.

As she reached a hand out for the box she heard the first crack of the rifle. Through the small window in the attic she saw the Immortalist army just on the precipice of the lawn, approaching slowly. Though Caleb was an excellent shot, the Immortalists could move with such lightning speed, none of his shots reached them.

Caitlin turned and grabbed the box. Its strange patterned flower design seemed so familiar. She had looked at this box many times in her youth but had never gotten the chance to open it.

From downstairs came the sound of glass smashing. Caitlin swallowed hard and pulled open the lid.

Everything happened at once. A light burst from the box with such force Caitlin was thrown backwards. At the same time, footsteps pounded in through the house, ascended the staircase. People were shouting, Caleb was shouting, her grandmother was crying out.

Caitlin had to fight her urge to run to them and help them. She pulled herself to standing and threw herself toward the light.

At the same moment, the Immortalists burst into the attic. Bathed in the yellow glow from the box, Caitlin felt as though she were looking at them through a filter. It was as though she were on the other side of a waterfall. They raced toward her but as their hands outstretched, trying to grab her, nothing

happened, they could not get her.

The attic backdrop began to fade away. The last image Caitlin saw was of Caleb wrestling his way up the stairs and engaging in hand-to-hand combat with an Immortalist. Even Caitlin's scream didn't sound out.

Then, all at once, everything went black. Everything was silent.

What have I done? Caitlin thought desperately.

There was nothing to see, nothing to hear. Caitlin had no idea what had happened.

Then a small white light appeared before Caitlin's eyes. The light flickered, and Caitlin thought it resembled an old black-and-white movie reel, shaking as the images moved before her. There was no sound, just a flickering image of a cemetery and a mob of angry villagers.

"I know this," Caitlin said aloud. "I've seen this before."

She watched on, entranced, as the image bled away and was replaced by the ancient cloisters of Assisi, in the Umbrian countryside. Then it changed again, and Caitlin found herself looking at a bird's-eye view of a grand ball.

"Venice," she said.

The strange image changed again, this time showing her eighteenth-century Paris from the air, before swooping into a medieval castle near the ocean, and in through a window, pausing only on a face that made Caitlin's heart race. Caleb.

And there they were, in Versailles, feasting and partying,

attending concerts, falling more deeply in love. Then the Paris flickering before Caitlin's eyes transformed into London.

"It was 1599," Caitlin said, feeling the memories being pulled from deep inside her mind.

The image roved from amazing medieval architecture, to breathtaking countryside and castles. It hovered over a Shakespeare play being performed at the Globe theatre, before coming to rest on another face.

"Scarlet!" Caitlin cried out, her heart aching.

This was the moment they had found their daughter. Right before Caleb proposed.

Caitlin's emotions roiled inside of her. She couldn't understand what was happening or what she was seeing. Somehow she knew that the images were real, that she was looking back at events that had truly happened, that she had really experienced. But it didn't make sense. How could she have forgotten all of this? All these adventures? All the danger and beauty?

The next image was of the Isle of Skye, a remote island off the western coast of Scotland.

"We married here," Caitlin said, as tears pricked at her eyes.

The memories she thought she had, of her ordinary wedding to her ordinary husband, were suddenly replaced with the ones being shown before her. How had she ever forgotten such an amazing moment, when she and Caleb had exchanged vows in an elaborate vampire wedding? The memories that had replaced them seemed dull in comparison, and Caitlin could

hardly believe she'd let herself be tricked into believing them.

Then a final image appeared. Ancient Israel, a place of holy sites and synagogues, labyrinthian streets and mazes of alleyways, secret pagan temples, and the Holy Temple of Solomon in its capital of Jerusalem. Caitlin watched on as the city of Nazareth appeared before her, then Capernaum, and the Mount of Olives. She knew every image intimately, leaving no doubt in her mind that she had seen them with her very eyes.

The light faded out, returning Caitlin to absolute blackness. Caitlin was so stunned by what she had just witnessed, she could hardly breathe.

"It was real," she said aloud. "It was all real. Everything in my vampire journals really happened."

Yet where did that leave her now?

Finally able to take in her surroundings, Caitlin first became aware of the intense heat, then the smell of sand and decay in the air. She could hear the distant sound of dripping, coming from what seemed like a long, long way away, echoing as though from the walls of a cave. Caitlin realized then that she was deep underground.

She stepped forward and heard the distinctive sound of sand scraping against her shoe.

Up ahead there seemed to be light coming from somewhere—a room, or a crack in a doorway. As Caitlin approached, she noted the flickering, the tell-tale sign that it was a flame. A candle, or torch, perhaps.

She rounded a corner and the light grew stronger here, sending shards of light up the walls.

Caitlin gasped as it dawned on her where she was, and where the leather box had taken her.

It can't be, she thought, not daring to let herself believe it.

But it was true. As she peered through the gloom, she realized she was standing on the edge of cliff face, staring down into a city carved into stone.

She was beneath the Sphinx in Egypt.

And staring down at the lost vampire city.

CHAPTER NINETEEN

Vivian lurked in the shadows outside of Blake's house, concealing herself behind a tree. From this angle, she could see that inside the house there was a single light on, in an upstairs bedroom. She decided to try her luck and, with a quick glance around her to make sure no one was looking, flew up to the window.

She landed on the sloped porch roof with a soft thud and peered in through the glass. There was Blake. The sight of him made a sensation like electricity buzz through her veins. She was so close to owning him, to beating Scarlet. Her heart fluttered with anticipation.

Blake was facing away, seated on his bed with his shoulders hunched. Vivian deduced from his posture that he was unhappy. Somewhere, deep in the recesses of her brain, she felt that old human emotion of sympathy. But it was nowhere near as strong as the power of her vampire desire, her need to consume him.

She tapped on the window with one of her perfectly manicured fingernails.

Blake flinched and looked around, surprised. When he saw Vivian crouched on his porch roof, his eyebrows drew together.

He stood from the bed and paced over to the window, pulling it open.

"What are you doing here?" he asked, glancing at either side

of her as though trying to work out how she'd climbed onto his roof.

"You weren't at school today," she replied. "I was worried about you."

"Worried, huh?" Blake said, clearly not believing it.

"Are you going to, like, let me in?" Vivian said seductively. "Or do I have to stay out here all night?"

Blake sighed with irritation.

"Fine, come in," he said. "But be quiet. My parents will kill me if they find out I have a girl in my room."

Vivian stretched one of her lean legs through the window, reveling in the way Blake's eyes skimmed over them. Then she ducked the rest of her body through the window and stood there in Blake's room.

"So?" he said in a grumpy tone. "What do you want?"

Vivian tried to play it cool and sympathetic, but that human emotion seemed so far from her now it was almost impossible to recreate.

"You didn't hear?" she said. "There was a shooting at the school."

Blake's face paled.

"This better not be a trick, Vivian, because if it is, you're totally sick."

Vivian widened her eyes, trying to portray her innocence.

"I swear on my life," she said. "You can check the Internet. It will be all over the news."

Blake did just that, and when he saw the news reports of the shooting at the high school he slumped back in his chair, stunned.

"I guess my grandma chose a good day to keel over and die," he said.

Vivian reached an arm around his shoulder.

"Is that why you weren't in school today?" she said. "Because your grandma died?"

Blake's gaze tipped to his lap. He nodded.

Vivian knew she was so supposed to feel something—empathy at his loss—but all she really felt was opportunity. Blake was vulnerable right now, which made him ripe for the taking. And with his head bowed like that, his long, pale neck was on display, practically inviting her to taste him.

"Blake," Vivian began, "I don't know how to tell you this, but a lot of people died today. The football team. The cheerleaders."

Now it was Blake's turn to be the empathetic one. He swiveled in his chair to face her, then threw his arms around her and pulled her into him.

"Oh God, are you okay?" he said into her hair.

She nestled into him, feeling his broad, strong chest, and the pulse of his heart beating against her cheek. With her heightened vampire senses, Blake smelled even more amazing than he had when she was human. She fought the compulsion to breath in his scent.

"I'm in shock, I guess," Vivian said, trying her best to feign upset.

"Do you know what happened?" Blake asked, moving back and taking both her hands in his. "I mean the news reports aren't saying much, just that the police had cordoned off the school because of an incident involving firearms."

Vivian twirled some hair through her fingers and tried to make her face look innocent.

"Someone said there was an escaped convict," she said. "And that these two guys were after him in retribution, or something, and that a load of kids got caught in the crossfire."

She was playing with the truth now, patching together bits of information she knew and embellishing it in ways that would garner the most sympathy from Blake. She even managed to squeeze out a tear, though her ability to induce theatrical crying was far less than when she'd been human.

"Jojo, Malcolm..." she said, and then she succumbed to her fake tears.

Blake wrapped her up tightly in his embrace and pressed a kiss on the crown of her head.

"I'm so sorry, Vivian," he said. "I wish I'd been there to protect you. You must be in shock, you're freezing cold. Here, let me get a blanket."

As Blake turned away from her, Vivian licked her lips. Her fangs had descended, the vampire in her ready to devour Blake and make him her own. But this game was too fun to cut short.

He returned and wrapped her up, sitting her on the bed. He wrapped his arm around her and she snuggled into his side.

"We were good together, weren't we?" Vivian said.

Blake was silent. Their brief romance had been intense but ultimately destructive. Human Vivian had enjoyed causing pain in much the same way vampire Vivian did, though before it had been psychological rather than physical.

"I guess," he said.

"I mean, we had *chemistry*," Vivian added, prodding him. "Not like with you and Scarlet."

She felt Blake straighten beside her, his arm around her no longer comforting but stiff and formal. She sat up and glared at him.

"Don't tell me you still have feelings for her?" she snapped.

Blake raised his eyebrows.

"Are you sure you want to talk about this right now?" he said incredulously. "After everything that's happened today?"

Vivian couldn't hold back her jealousy.

"I can't believe it!" she snapped. "I can't believe after everything you'd still rather be with that freak than me!"

Blake's expression darkened.

"Scarlet's not a freak, Vivian. I messed around with her, is all. But there's something special about her. Something I can't put my finger on."

Vivian turned her face away from him, disgusted by his words.

"Gross," she said. "You're making me want to throw up."

Blake clearly grew angry.

"What do you want from me, Vivian?" he demanded. "You want me to love you? Is that it? Well, can you just accept that I don't and I won't? Ever. I don't feel that way about you."

His words cut Vivian to the core. Without looking at him, she responded in a small, pained voice.

"But you do feel that way about Scarlet?"

Blake threw his arms up in exasperation.

"I don't know!" he cried. Then his voice softened. "I'm sorry, okay? I just don't feel towards you the way you feel towards me."

Vivian finally faced him. She was fuming, her eyes narrowed to slits filled with malice.

"Do you know what, Blake?" she hissed. "You don't get a choice."

Blake frowned, looking deeply confused.

"And what the hell is that supposed to mean?" he said.

Vivian exposed her fangs, relishing the terrified, confused expression that appeared on Blake's face.

"It means you're going to love me, for eternity, whether you want to or not."

And with that, Vivian leaned forward, grabbed him by the shoulders, and sank her fangs into his neck. The last thing she heard, before he went limp, were his pathetic cries, trying to apologize—and way too late.

*

Vivian knew from experience it would take Blake a while to turn. In the meantime, she had to destroy her competition. She had to eliminate Scarlet. If Blake awoke with the same insatiable desires she'd woken with, Scarlet would surely be his target. But if she could destroy her nemesis once and for all, Blake would be hers forever.

Vivian left Blake prone on the bed, tucking him up in his covers so that if his parents should think to check on him it would just look as though he were sleeping. She kissed his deathly pale lips and stroked his hair. Then she leapt from the window and soared into the sky, heading in the direction of Scarlet's house.

The streets below her appeared normal. There was no sign yet of Kyle's vampire army. But Vivian knew chaos would soon ensue, and the thought excited her.

She landed a block away from Scarlet's house and walked the rest of the way. When she reached Scarlet's house, she found it in darkness. She jumped into the air and peered into each of the bedroom windows, but there was no one there.

Frustrated, she landed again, and was just about to leave when she heard the click of the front door latch opening. She froze.

"Hey!" a male voice called out. "Are you one of Scarlet's

friends?"

Vivian raised an eyebrow and smiled to herself. Then she made her face neutral again and turned. There was a man standing on the porch, his face knotted with anguish. The door now stood ajar, revealing that the house beyond was in total blackness. A husky appeared on the step beside him and Vivian felt her stomach growl with hunger. Blake had made a great meal, but the husky would be a wonderful dessert.

"Yes," she said to the man, forcing herself to focus. "I'm Becca. Who are you?"

"I'm Scarlet's uncle, Sam," the man replied. He patted the husky's head. "This is Ruth."

"I know," Vivian lied. "Hey Ruth, girl."

Ruth growled. Vivian narrowed her eyes.

"We have a complicated relationship," she said to Sam in an attempt to explain away the dog's hostile behavior.

Scarlet's uncle didn't seem to pick up on Ruth's warning. He was too distracted by peering anxiously out into the night. Looking for evil, without realizing it was standing right in front of him. He opened the door wide.

"Come in, Becca," he said to Vivian, beckoning to her. "It's not safe out tonight."

He seemed jittery, completely on edge. Vivian strode up to the door and waltzed confidently over the threshold. If he only knew: you should never invite a vampire inside.

"You weren't at the high school today, were you?" Sam

asked as he led her into a kitchen at the back of the house.

Vivian noted that a small tealight was lit. There was a gun propped up against the back door, a stool, and a mug of half-drunk coffee. Someone was on lookout duty, she realized.

"No," she said. "I heard there was a shooting. That's why I'm here. To see if Scarlet's okay."

The man began to worry his hands, rubbing them together.

"I wish I had something to tell you," he said. "But I don't. I was hoping Scarlet would be with you. That's what her mom said, that if she was anywhere, it would be with Maria, Becca, or Jasmine."

Vivian kept her face neutral but beneath her calm veneer she was inwardly grinning. Had Scarlet's fool of an uncle just given away her whereabouts? Had he just signed her death warrant?

Vivian shrugged. "She's not with me. I guess that means she's with one of the other two."

"Do you have their numbers?" Sam asked.

Vivian had to think quickly.

"Um...yeah, but they're on my cell. Which is in my locker at school. So I can't get it."

Sam looked distracted but nodded. He was so wound up that he couldn't even see through Vivian's lies.

"Kids today," he said with a tsk. "So reliant on technology. When I was younger, we knew our best friends' numbers by heart."

Vivian pulled her face into a faux smile.

"Tell me about it," she agreed. "We're the worst."

From beside Sam, Ruth the husky began to growl again. Vivian shot her a death stare and the dog shrunk back.

"Don't worry about her," Sam said. "She's on edge."

He went to pat Ruth but she moved out of the way of his affection. She began to bark, her teeth bared and her gaze fixed on Vivian.

"I don't know what's gotten into her," Sam said, taking her by the collar and pulling her back.

But Ruth was strong, and she'd clearly sensed that Vivian was not to be trusted. She strained against her collar, making Sam struggle to keep her still.

"I'll go," Vivian said. "Me and, um, Rose, don't see eye to eye."

Sam frowned.

"Rose? Don't you mean..."

He paused, and Vivian noted in a split second the changes in his facial expression that alerted her to the fact that she'd been outed. Sam froze, his suspicious gaze locked on Vivian.

Ruth began barking feverishly.

There was a second where everything seemed to stand still, then, all at once, Vivian moved, quick as a flash, leaping into the air to keep the distance between her and the snapping jaws of the canine. She kicked off the kitchen wall and slammed her foot into the side of Sam's head. He fell, unconscious, in a

heap on the floor.

Ruth, now loose, charged.

Vivian landed on the kitchen table with such a force it cracked beneath her. She leapt, soaring over the dog's head, and catapulted through the corridor. She burst out into the street, splintering the door as she went. The dog chased after her and then stood in the street, yapping, watching as she zoomed up into the sky.

The howling dog grew smaller and smaller as Vivian soared higher into the air. As she did, she felt a sense of triumph. She knew where to find Scarlet. She would be with Becca, Jasmine, or Maria. She smiled to herself. Before the night was over, Scarlet Paine would be dead.

CHAPTER TWENTY

Sam felt something rough, warm, and wet against his cheek. He groaned. There was a splitting pain in his head. His eyes fluttered open and he realized he was staring up at Ruth. She barked, making him wince.

He pulled himself to sitting.

"Okay, girl," he said to the husky, who was licking his face all over. "I'm awake."

He pushed her down and looked around. He was alarmed to find himself in Caitlin's dark kitchen, on the floor.

Memories came back to him in fragments.... There had been a girl, worried about Scarlet. But what had happened next? He couldn't quite remember. He must have fallen or blacked out or something.

The pain in Sam's head was unbearable. He finally got to his feet and poured himself a glass of water. Ruth fussed round his legs, almost tripping him over.

"Will you give it a rest?" he said to the dog.

He patted her thick fur and took a deep sip from the glass. Then his memory flooded back to him, so quickly and with such clarity he dropped the glass. It smashed in the sink, sending glittering shards into the air.

"She was a vampire," Sam said aloud, grabbing the side of the sink to steady himself.

But if the girl was a vampire, that meant it was spreading.

Scarlet had turned a man and either he had continued and turned another, or Scarlet had continued. The thought was too much for Sam to bear.

He staggered back, his head swimming, and grabbed the phone from the wall. He punched in Polly's number and slumped his back against the wall as he listened to the ring on the other end.

Finally, she answered.

"Polly," he said, hurriedly. "Something's happened. Something awful."

"What?" Polly said on the other end, a tone of concern in her voice. "Is it Scarlet? Did she come home?"

Sam tightened his grip on the receiver. He felt too ashamed to speak but knew he had to. Scarlet was in danger because of him and he had to make it right.

"There was a girl," he said, quietly, calmly. "She came to the house looking for Scarlet. She said her name was Becca. I thought she was her friend."

"Okay..." Polly said disconcertedly, as though she knew there was a "but" coming.

Sam sighed heavily. He couldn't put it off any longer.

"She was a vampire," he said in one large exhalation.

He listened to the sound of Polly gasping on the other end of the line. She started speaking quickly, the words pouring out of her in a great gush.

"Are you okay? What happened? Did she hurt you? Did she

get inside the house?"

Sam squeezed his eyes shut and pressed his forehead against the cold kitchen wall. He had to come clean. Polly needed to know he'd put Scarlet's life in danger.

"I'm not hurt," he said, trying to reassure his wife. "She kicked me in the head and knocked me out but she didn't bite me or anything like that."

He touched his neck as though to check for himself whether that were true. He was relieved to discover no puncture wounds.

"Good," Polly said. "Is the house secure? Have you made sure she can't get back in?"

"She's looking for Scarlet," Sam said, interrupting his wife's barrage of questions. "And I think I accidentally might have given her a clue as to where she is."

Polly's stream of words stopped suddenly. There was a long pause, during which Sam felt his self-esteem plummet.

"What did you say?" Polly said sternly.

Sam sighed, trying to collect his thoughts.

"I thought she was one of Scarlet's friends. She said her name was Becca. She didn't... look like a vampire." His voice grew more timid as he realized how stupid it sounded when he said it aloud.

"Of course she didn't look like a vampire!" Polly cried. "I can't believe this."

Sam could practically hear her pacing on the other end of

the phone. He could imagine her in their living room pulling her hair out because her dimwitted husband had failed in the one thing he was tasked to do—protect Scarlet.

When she spoke again, it was with a forced calmness.

“I’ll go to the high school,” she said. “Pretend I’m a worried parent and see if I can get phone numbers or addresses for Scarlet’s friends.”

“No,” Sam said instantly. “It’s too dangerous. There are at least two vampires on the prowl now and my bet is it won’t be long until there are more.”

“What do you suggest?” Polly replied curtly.

In Sam’s mental image of her, she had her hands squarely on her hips.

“I’ll go,” he said. “I got us into this mess, I should be the one to get us out.”

“No way,” Polly argued. “You have to stay there in case Scarlet comes home. And what if the police see you—you’re still a wanted man, you know, after you and Caleb ran around with your guns out!”

Sam tried to interrupt, but Polly wasn’t letting him. She just raised her voice to be heard over him.

“And,” she bellowed, “you’ve just been knocked out by a vampire! How far do you think you’ll be able to get with a concussion?”

“I don’t have a concussion,” Sam protested.

“How would you even know?” snapped Polly.

Sam could hear her angry breathing down the phone. He felt terrible for having made her so annoyed, but moreover, he felt terrible for having put Scarlet in danger.

When Polly spoke again, she was considerably calmer.

“Will you please just stay safe and keep your eyes open for Scarlet like you’re meant to?” she said. “And let me handle getting those girls’ addresses. Okay?”

Sam shook his head but he agreed with a sigh and hung up the phone. His conversation with Polly had made his head pound even harder, so he went off in search of aspirin. Ruth trotted up the stairs after him.

Sam found what he needed in the bathroom cabinet and swallowed two pills with water. In his reflection in the mirror he noted a large red welt on the side of his face. It was the perfect imprint of a shoe.

“That’s going to be a lovely bruise,” he said, wincing as he prodded the red flesh.

He stared into the reflection of his tired eyes. The events of the last few days had exhausted him. All he wanted was for Scarlet to be safe, for his sister to have her daughter back, and for everything to go back to normal. But there was no chance of that. Scarlet was a vampire and Caitlin was off on some crusade to save her soul. Vampires were prowling the streets. He was a wanted man. Nothing would ever be simple again.

Sam trudged back downstairs and took up his position by the back door with his rifle. Ruth sat on guard beside him, gaz-

ing out across the dark, dewy lawn.

Sam tried to focus, but his mind was frantic with worry. His sister and brother-in-law were out there searching for Scarlet, and his wife was heading toward danger. Was he really going to just sit here waiting?

With a sudden surge of resolve, Sam stood. Ruth tipped her eyes up to him, her eyebrows drawing together in a quizzical expression.

“You can keep an eye on the place, can’t you?” Sam said to the dog.

She barked.

Sam grabbed the notebook by the phone and scrawled Scarlet a message, pleading with her that if she came home to stay put. Then he grabbed his car keys and rushed to the door.

Ruth was hot on his heels, barking her annoyance.

“I know,” he said as he stopped at the open front door. “But I can’t let Polly be alone out there!”

Ruth barked again.

Sam sighed. The door had been damaged by the vampire girl but he was able to shut it securely, keeping Ruth inside. He felt a sting of guilt as he raced toward his car, hopped in, and revved the engine.

He drove as fast as he dared to the high school. He still felt woozy from the kick to his head and didn’t want to put himself into any more danger by driving recklessly, but at the same time he wanted to get to Polly as quickly as possible.

All at once, a group of people appeared in the road ahead. Sam slammed on the brakes and his car skidded to a halt.

In the headlights, Sam made out the back of a varsity jacket, worn by a dark-haired boy who was facing away. There were others kids with him. High schoolers, Sam thought. They were standing in a group in the middle of the road, as though without a care in the world.

Sam blasted his horn.

“Get out the way!” he cried.

The boy in the varsity jacket turned slowly, as though he’d hardly even noticed his life was a split second away from ending. When Sam locked eyes with him he shuddered.

The boy was a vampire. There was no doubting it. From the paleness of his skin to the evil glint in his eye and his penetrating stare.

It’s spreading, Sam realized, feeling coldness wash over him.

He slammed the car into reverse, accelerating so fast the wheels screeched. He swerved round the group who watched him go with dead-eyed stares and menacing smiles, and raced down the road. He didn’t care about his dizziness anymore—all he cared about was getting away as quickly as possible.

He raced round a corner, his gaze constantly flicking to the rearview mirror as though expecting a group of vampire high schoolers to appear behind him. Then all at once he heard the wail of police sirens and saw flashing blue lights.

“Oh no,” he said aloud.

He was so close to the high school it was painful. He couldn't stop now.

He slammed down on the gas and accelerated down the road. But the police weren't letting him get away. They sped up beside him.

Just as the high school came into view, the police car swerved and blocked Sam's path. He was left with no choice but to slam on the brakes. The car screeched to a halt, flinging Sam forward against his seat belt, then throwing him back again with a thud.

Rubbing his whiplashed neck, Sam saw a police officer leap out of the squad car ahead and raise his gun.

"Get out the car!" he shouted, approaching as though Sam were a dangerous criminal. "Hands on your head where I can see them!"

Sam groaned aloud. He was in pain and beyond frustrated. He opened the car door and stumbled out, pulling his hands into a truce position.

"You guys have no idea what's going on," Sam protested as the police officer raced over and bent Sam forward over the hood of the car.

The police officer began frisking him, searching for a weapon. Satisfied he didn't have one, he allowed Sam to stand and turn around.

"Do you know why I pulled you over, sir?" the police officer said in a harsh, military-sounding voice.

"Dangerous driving?" Sam offered.

"Correct. Five points," the police officer said with a sarcastic smile. "So what were you doing speeding up like that? Never been pulled over by a cop before?"

Sam shook his head in exasperation.

"I have somewhere I need to be. Now."

"Lemme guess, the wife's in labor? Your pop's in the hospital? Whatever excuse you've got, I've heard it before."

"You don't understand," Sam began, but he shut up when the police officer glared at him.

"Do you think this is funny, sir?" the police officer snapped.

Sam shook his head.

"No," he said. "If anything it's tragic. You're wasting your time on me when there's a whole gang of kids just round the corner who are about to wreak havoc."

The police officer's frown grew stronger.

"You have information on a crime that's about to be committed? Because if you do I could have you arrested for aiding and abetting."

"No, no," Sam said. "That's not what I meant."

His head began to pound again, made worse by the violent braking in the car. And now his painkillers had kicked in.

"I mean," Sam began, but his voice was woozy.

"Have you been drinking, sir?" the police officer demanded.

"No, I—"

The police officer cut Sam off with a stern hand. He spoke

into his walkie-talkie, asking someone in the station to check Sam's number plate for him. Sam could hear the crackle of a response but couldn't make out the words. But by the look on the officer's face, whatever information he'd just been given was not good.

"Turn around!" the police officer shouted. "Hands on the hood!"

"Not this again," Sam grumbled.

The officer drew his gun.

"Turn around before I shoot!" he screamed.

Sam did what he was told. The officer approached from behind and cuffed him.

"What's that for?" Sam protested.

"You're a wanted man," the officer said, dragging Sam to standing. "Wanted for a firearm incident at this very school." Then, with relish in his voice, he added, "You're under arrest."

Sam's insides clenched. He was shoved roughly toward the squad car by the police officer. Just as the officer pushed down on his head to get him inside the vehicle, Sam saw Polly emerge from the high school. Their eyes locked for a moment, then it was too late, and he was trapped inside the car heading toward the police station, leaving Polly a mere street away from a gang of vicious vampires.

CHAPTER TWENTY ONE

Kyle watched from the sidewalk as the door to the little suburban house flew open. A man ran out, a man he recognized. Kyle realized with a burning sensation of rage that the man was one of the people who'd tried to shoot him at the high school.

So this is the right place then, Kyle thought to himself. *Scarlet's house.*

Kyle had a sudden urge to end the man's life there and then. But he held himself back. This pathetic human wasn't worthy of becoming part of his army, of being sired by him. Kyle watched in disgust as the man tripped over his own feet in his haste to get to his car. He didn't want an army full of idiots, and a man who tried to shoot a vampire with bullets was clearly a dimwit.

So Kyle let the man leave, knowing full well that he would be confronted by a vicious vampire army in the not too distant future, who would do with him what they desired.

He waited until the car had raced away before strolling casually up the garden path toward Scarlet's house. He could hear a dog barking from inside. Something for the boys to snack on once they got here, he thought.

He found the front door damaged. It looked as though someone had got here before him. Perhaps someone else was on the hunt for Scarlet Paine?

Kyle wedged his shoulder against the door. It swung open with such force it banged against the wall. The house was in darkness, but Kyle's super vision could easily see through the gloom. He found himself staring into the bright blue eyes of a husky. The creature bared its fangs and emitted a low growl from deep inside its throat. Kyle's vampire instincts immediately recognized that the dog was warning him away, squaring up to him, and so he flashed his own teeth at the dog and began to growl in response. The two stood there, neither moving, neither blinking, until the dog finally realized she was no match for a vampire, whimpered, and scurried away.

Kyle smirked and stepped over the threshold and inside the house. So this was Scarlet Paine's cozy little suburban home. This is where the girl he was so intent on destroying had grown up.

He listened, using his super-sensitive hearing, and deduced that, apart from the dog, the house was empty. Which meant all he had to do was sit and wait, and Scarlet Paine would come waltzing straight up to him.

He decided to climb the stairs. Nothing would be more terrifying for the girl than to come home and find him sitting on her bed, waiting for her. If luck was on his side, she'd get to see a town in chaos first, her nearest and dearest lying dead in the streets, the roads stained with their blood. Kyle wanted nothing more than for Scarlet Paine to hurt.

He began snooping in each of the rooms, scoffing at their

domesticity; their floral wallpaper and vases of flowers, their walls filled with smiling photographs in gilded frames. Happy families disgusted him and he was glad to have a starring role in ruining this one.

The next door revealed a room that Kyle decided must belong to Scarlet. It was painted purple, and was strewn with pairs of jeans and stripy tops. Pictures of pouting teenage girls and brooding teenage boys were stuck all over the walls in artistic configurations. Kyle paced toward them and recognized a few faces from his rampage at the high school. How wonderful, he thought, that half of these kids that Scarlet knew were already turned.

Just then, Kyle heard a noise coming from the streets outside. He paced over to Scarlet's window and peered out. Down below, people were running, scattering in all directions. Some were leaping into their cars and taking off, others were screaming in blind panic, frozen, unable to make a decision as to what to do. A car rounded the corner, its engine spitting out fumes, and sped past the house.

Kyle smiled to himself, realizing that his vampire army was on the prowl and causing chaos. It was all going exactly to plan. Then he saw them, the jocks from the football field, turning the corner at the far end of the street. They strolled arrogantly along, leaping onto cars and smashing windshields, wrenching street lamps straight out of the sidewalk. To Kyle it looked like the most fun in the world. He decided then that he

didn't want to miss out on all the action.

Kyle went back downstairs and out the front door. He beckoned to his army. They recognized their sire at once and went straight to him obediently.

"You," Kyle said to a dark-haired boy in a varsity jacket. "What's your name?"

"Marcus," the boy replied.

"You're in charge."

The boy nodded. He was well over six feet tall and broad-chested. The perfect person to keep his army in check whilst he was otherwise engaged, Kyle thought.

"Watch this house for me," Kyle ordered. "If Scarlet arrives, keep her here and send someone to fetch me."

"Anything you say," Marcus said, mindlessly obeying his leader's command.

Kyle leaned in close and spoke in a hushed voice.

"Don't let them get their hands on her," he said, tipping his gaze toward the rest of the jock vampires. "Understand? The girl is mine. Kill them if you have to."

He leaned back and glared into Marcus's eyes. The boy looked perturbed.

"But they're my friends," he said.

Kyle sneered.

"If I come back and find out any of them has laid so much as a finger on her I'll kill them myself. And then I'll kill you for failing my orders. Got it?"

Marcus knew better than to argue with his sire.

"Of course," he said finally.

Kyle clapped a hand on Marcus's shoulder so hard the boy flinched.

"Good," Kyle said. "In that case, I'm off for a night on the town." He smiled to himself. "I've got some old friends I need to pay a visit to."

*

Satisfied that the Scarlet situation was under control, Kyle decided that the first stop on his tour of chaos would be the jail where he'd spend years languishing. A vampire army made of healthy young athletes was one thing—but a vampire army comprised of violent, brutal convicts was quite another.

He chose to fly, this new ability being the one he was most excited to utilize. After years locked up inside a tiny cell, being able to swoop and soar through the clouds was exhilarating. It felt like freedom to him, and the sensation was as powerful as a drug.

Kyle saw the prison in the distance and shuddered. Even from here, it looked like a horrible place. It was built with drab gray cement and was surrounded by two separate wire fences, each over twenty feet tall and topped with spikes. It was one of the highest security prisons in New York, and most of the recreational space outside was comprised of caged areas to

keep inmates apart from one another. Kyle remembered his one hour of outside time a day, which he used to work out and keep himself strong. It was hardly a life. But look where he was now. Look what he'd become. It was like the devil himself had rewarded him for his patience all those years behind bars.

Kyle flew over the fence and landed on the flat roof of the main prison block. Even though it was nighttime and a solid layer of cement lay between him and the inmates below, he could still hear their calls and shouts. Prison was never quiet. Noise was a constant. There was no such thing as a good night's sleep in jail.

Kyle strode over to the roof's door and wrenched it open. He leapt down the stairwell, bouncing from wall to wall until he reached the floor below. The prison was built on two levels. The top floor was a row of cells that went around the perimeter of the prison so that each had a window to the outside world. The watery-green-colored steel doors faced inwards and there was a walkway connecting one to the next. In the center was an open plan area with tables for socializing. Another row of cells were on the ground floor, directly beneath the ones above. Then the prison split off in different directions, leading to the dining room, the TV room, the chapel and the guards' area.

Kyle wasn't interested in anything but the cells. He had no need to stake out the guards; once he'd opened the cells, the guards would come right to him.

Kyle went up to the first cell and slid back the metal rectangular flap that covered the viewing window. Inside the cell was a bald, heavily tattooed man lying on his bed, sleeping. He hadn't been part of Kyle's crew when he'd been inside.

"Hey," Kyle said.

The man flinched, then opened his eyes.

"What?" he said with hostility, assuming that Kyle was a guard.

"You wanna get out of here?" Kyle said.

The man frowned then turned in his bed so that his back was to Kyle. He clearly thought Kyle was just goading him.

"I'm serious," Kyle said.

And to prove his point, he grasped hold of the door handle and twisted it. The metal screeched as he levered it up and snapped the lock.

The man was suddenly on his feet, his eyes wide with interest. Kyle hauled the door open and stood there, facing the man. He was a big guy, a good few inches taller than Kyle and definitely heavier. Without pausing, he thundered forward, barging Kyle out of the way.

"Hey!" Kyle shouted after the man. "Where's my thank-you?"

But the man was just running. He'd seen his opportunity to escape and he wasn't going to lose it. He bolted down the stairs, making the metal steps clang with each of his heavy footfalls, and into the main recreation area.

Kyle rolled his eyes as he watched him run from one locked exit to the next. Then he strolled casually over to the railings, climbed over them, and jumped.

He landed perfectly on one of the picnic tables in the recreation area. It creaked under the weight of him, making the bald man turn on the spot with surprise. He looked at Kyle, open-mouthed.

“How the hell did you do that?” the man said.

Kyle hopped down from the table.

“If I told you, you wouldn’t believe me,” he said.

The bald man frowned.

“Am I having another one of those hallucinations?” he said.

He sounded quite dim. Kyle felt a little sorry for him.

“No, my friend,” he said. “You’re having the best day of your life. You get to choose whether you leave this place a man, or a warrior.”

The bald man just kept frowning. Kyle wondered if perhaps he wouldn’t make the best addition to his army after all. He seemed a little dumb. So, Kyle wrenched open the main door and gestured for the man to leave. He ran, almost tripping over his feet in haste.

Kyle watched him go, shaking his head at how pathetic he was.

He went along to the next cell and peered inside. There was a young man in there that Kyle recognized, a guy called Shady whom Kyle had known during his time inside.

“Shady,” he called through the viewing window.

Shady’s eyes widened with surprise when he recognized who was standing on the other side of the door.

“Kyle, man,” he said, standing and coming to the door. He peered out the gap. “Is that you?”

“Yup.”

“You back in?”

Kyle laughed. “No. I escaped.”

“I know,” Shady said. “I heard. So what you doing standing there then? You should be in the Caribbean by now.”

Kyle smiled.

“I have some unfinished business here,” he said. “Want to help?”

Shady looked puzzled.

“I’d love to, man,” he said, shrugging. “But I’m stuck in here.”

Kyle wrenched the door handle up, snapping the metal clean in half, then pulled the steel door open.

“Not anymore you’re not,” he said.

Shady’s mouth dropped open.

“What’s happened to you, man? You got a dose of radiation or something? Turned into a superhero?”

Kyle tipped his head back and laughed.

“Something like that,” he said. “Want in on the action?”

Shady’s eyes widened like he’d just been offered a million dollars.

“You mean you can make me strong enough to bust out of a prison cell?” he cried. “Damn straight I want in on that action!”

“Then close your eyes,” Kyle said. “It will only hurt for a minute.”

Shady dutifully did what he was told, and Kyle sank his fangs into his old friend’s neck. Shady went limp in his arms and dropped to the floor. Kyle wiped Shady’s blood from his lips then turned to look at the cells behind him.

One down—one hundred to go.

*

It didn’t take long for Kyle to find his old prison friends and turn them. After he’d located the fifth member of his gang, the noise began to disrupt the prisoners. They began hammering on their doors and crying out. Kyle laughed, thinking that the guards were likely just to ignore the commotion, being not exactly being out of place here.

He took his time, lining up the bodies of his limp friends so that they would be comfortable when they woke up turned. If they were anything like him, they would immediately recognize the powerful feelings rushing through their veins and realize that something amazing had happened to them, rather than freak out.

To the backdrop of noise and shouting, Kyle prowled from

one cell to the next, turning men who’d been loyal to him inside prison, and letting others escape through the busted open doors. Letting loose a vampire army was one thing—but randomly allowing some of the country’s most dangerous men to prowl the streets again added a whole new level of excitement.

Finally, the racket in the prison summoned the guards. They came out from their room, batons at the ready, expecting to follow a protocol on getting the loudest trouble makers to calm down. Usually that involved transporting them to a solitary room and leaving them there. But this time, the guards entered the main recreational room and halted, surveying the neat row of limp bodies lying on the ground, the open cell doors, and the smears of blood.

Kyle looked up from the man he’d been feasting on and wiped the blood from his lips. He dropped the body to the floor.

“I wondered how long it would take you guys to react,” he said.

He recognized that amongst the guards were some of his absolute least favorites, the ones who had made his life in here hell, the sadistic ones who revelled in the small slither of power their jobs gave them. They were bullies and Kyle wasn’t going to let a single one of them live to see tomorrow.

One of the guards approached, slowly.

“Kyle,” he said. “You shouldn’t have come back here. You’re

a wanted man.”

Kyle shook his head.

“That’s where you’re wrong. I’m not a man anymore. I’m a vampire.”

The guards exchanged glances, clearly thinking he’d lost his mind.

Kyle noticed one of the guards at the back was trying to peel off from the group unnoticed, undoubtedly to raise the alarm while the rest of them tried to subdue the situation.

“You think backup is going to help?” Kyle scoffed. “I’ve already turned 10 men. Once they wake we’ll outnumber you. That’s not to mention how many of these men I can let loose just like this.”

To iterate his point, Kyle grabbed the door handle of one of the cells and heaved it. The door came off its hinges and Kyle held it above his head like a trophy. The man who’d been inside the cell stood there, unable to comprehend what he was seeing.

The guards looked terrified.

“I bet there’s quite a few men in here who have a bone to pick with you,” Kyle added.

Then he threw the heavy steel door through the air at the guards. They just managed to duck out of the way in time, before the door hit the ground with a clang.

“What do you want from us?” one of the guards cried.

Kyle shrugged.

“Nothing in particular,” he said. “I just want to make you suffer. I want payback for all the pain you put me through while I was in here. And so do they.”

Kyle pointed to the row of bodies. Shady was starting to wake. He groaned and touched the puncture wounds in his neck, wincing. Then his senses seemed to come back to him and he sat up in a rush, looking about him dazed.

“Kyle man,” he said. “What’s going on?”

Kyle beckoned for Shady to stand.

“You’ve been reborn, my friend,” he said. “You’re probably hungry.” He gestured to the group of trembling guards. “Want a snack?”

Shady’s eyes widened. He leapt to his feet and pounced across the room, grabbing the first guard he could get his hands on and sinking his fangs into them. The rest of the guards scattered, searching for somewhere to hide.

Shady fed greedily. When he was done, he dropped the guard’s body to the ground.

Kyle snapped a chair leg from the table and chucked it to Shady.

“When he turns, kill him,” Kyle said. “I don’t want guards in my army. They don’t deserve it.”

Shady nodded.

“I want to see the sky, Kyle,” he said. “I want to remember what freedom feels like.”

Kyle led Shady to the open door. Several convicts had

already escaped this way and the wire fences ahead had been shredded. Vehicles had been destroyed, turned upside down and smashed.

Kyle and Shady walked out into the courtyard. The younger man seemed in awe, as enthralled by the sight of chaos as Kyle himself was.

“You have powers now,” Kyle said. “Strength. Agility. You can fly. You can kill.”

Shady was taking the whole thing in his stride. He went over to a police car, one that had just been transporting a recently arrested man to the overnight cells when it had been surrounded by escaped convicts. Shady elbowed them out of the way and grabbed the car. He held it high above his head, spinning it round and round in circles. Then he threw it the length of the courtyard. It hit the ground nose on, crumbling.

Shady turned to Kyle, his eyes wild with a desire for destruction.

“Thank you,” he said, his voice filled with emotion.

Kyle slung his arm around his old friend.

“What do you say we go paint the town red?” he said. “Red with blood.”

Shady nodded, and the two men waltzed away, leaving the prison in utter chaos. What they didn’t notice as they went, was the man in the back of the police car that Shady had thrown. It was Sam.

He survived the impact and crawled out of the crumpled

wreckage, slipped through the gap in the wire, and out into the night.

CHAPTER TWENTY TWO

Scarlet ran down the stairs of the tower as fast as her legs would carry her. She held the precious vial of immortal blood tightly in her fist, and prayed that when she found Sage he would still be alive.

Her mind was swirling from her encounter with the three sisters. The experience was like nothing she'd ever had before and it left her reeling, feeling disconcerted and confused. Part of her felt like she couldn't trust the women but the other part of her felt she had no other option. If she didn't get Sage to the vampire city then he would die anyway, so she may as well cling onto the last sliver of hope the women had given her.

When Scarlet burst out of the tower door, she found that the forest was in complete disarray. The storm had torn up leaves and branches, strewing them haphazardly around. It was almost impossible to find a path through the dense foliage, and Scarlet was frequently blocked by a fallen tree. The stream she'd leapt over on the way here had burst its banks to become a swollen pool of dirty water and she used her vampire strength to leap over it. She landed in the mud on the other side.

As Scarlet raced through the thick foliage, her clothes were torn on the branches and her sneakers grew soggy, drenched with mud. Hair struck to her face.

Finally, she made her way into the clearing where she'd left

Sage. Everything was exactly as she had left it. All but for one crucial thing.

Sage was missing.

Scarlet felt a scream of despair rip from her chest but she was so distraught she hardly even heard it. She raced forward and dropped to her knees, touching the empty space where Sage had been lying, running her fingertips across the muddy ground as though searching for clues. There were no footprints to be seen, which told Scarlet that Sage hadn't wandered away to die.

As she stood, she noticed that the ground had been disturbed. She spotted a drawing in the mud.

She stepped back to survey the image more clearly. Her heart fell as she recognized a drawing of Sage's estate on the Hudson river. The picture was so intricately drawn it couldn't have been made by Sage—he was close to death when Scarlet had left him. There was no way he could have had the strength to draw this picture.

Scarlet realized that someone else had been on the island. Someone else had drawn this picture, someone who knew what the estate looked like in finite detail. There was only one person who fit that description.

Lore.

Scarlet felt waves of desperation crash over her. If Lore had taken Sage back to New York then surely all hope was lost. Sage would never survive the journey. Even if he did, the

Immortalists would torture him to death for his deception.

She looked down at the vial of immortality in her hand and growled with frustration. She'd come so close to saving him, and now all hope was lost.

Scarlet collapsed to her knees and wept. It was all over. Sage was gone, undoubtedly dead. Unless...

She sat up and wiped her tears away. Why would Lore take Sage back to the estate and leave a clue for her? She, Scarlet, was the one Lore wanted. Not Sage. Sage couldn't save the Immortalist race—but Scarlet could. It was her that they needed. Lore had taken Sage to lure her there. Even Lore was smart enough to know she would never come if she thought Sage was dead. If anything, they would go out of their way to keep him alive, knowing full well that as soon as he was dead they'd have no power over Scarlet, no way to make her give up her life in order to save his. Sage was a bartering tool, a hostage, and his well-being was now in their strategic interest.

Scarlet slipped the tincture in her back pocket. Her feet were soaked to the bone, her clothes ripped, her hair caked in mud. Tears stains had made clean lines down her dirty face. But no matter how destroyed she felt, she knew she couldn't give up. Sage needed her, and she was going to save him no matter what.

She took to the sky. She would save him—or die trying.

*

Lore paced back and forth, his heels clicking on the marble floor, feeling anxious. Lyra sat on one of the plush velvet sofas, tending to Sage.

"He'll be alright," she said. "Once Octal arrives he will heal him."

But Lore couldn't settle down. Everything felt too close for comfort. He'd called for Octal as soon as he and Lyra had reached the estate, but time felt like it was dragging on and on. Each second felt like it was bringing them closer to death, to extinction, and Lore couldn't bear it.

Just then, Lore heard the doors to the manor slam open. He raced into the hallway and saw Octal standing there, staff in hand. Beside him stood Lore's mother.

"You came," Lore cried, relieved to be reunited with his leader.

He looked his mother up and down, then raced forward and embraced her. She stroked his hair, making Lore feel like a child rather than the two thousand year old Immortalist he was.

Octal spoke, his deep voice booming through the mansion.

"You've done well," he said to Lore. "I knew I was right to entrust you with this mission."

Lore felt humbled. He nodded his thanks to his leader.

"Sage is through here," he said, leading his mother and Octal through the corridors and into the sitting room.

Lyra looked up, poised with a flannel above Sage's forehead. Sage looked close to death, as though he were barely hanging on by a thread. His skin was pale but glistening with sweat. His breath was shallow.

Octal got to work straight away.

"Move aside," he said to Lyra.

She immediately obeyed. Octal sat his huge frame on the sofa beside Sage. He raised his staff and pressed the wooden cross on the tip gently to Sage's heart. In a matter of minutes Sage's skin began to heal itself, the wounds that Octal had initially inflicted on him beginning to knit themselves closed. The red, gaping wounds turned into thin, silvery scars. Though Sage remained unconscious, his breathing became more steady.

Octal looked up at the three faces staring at him.

"That will give him enough energy to survive until the girl gets here," he said. Then he stood. "Now tell me what preparations you've put in place for her arrival."

Lore hadn't even thought about what would happen when Scarlet got here. His whole focus had been on saving Sage's life long enough to lure her here, and making sure Octal arrived to take over his leadership role.

"I have no plans yet," Lore confessed.

Octal did not seem impressed.

"Where are the others?" he asked.

When he'd last seen Lore, the boy had been leading an army of Immortalists into the night. Now only he and the girl

remained.

"I sent them off to follow the Scarlet's parents," Lore said. "We knew they were trying to find their daughter and hoped they would lead us straight to her."

Octal frowned.

"What about you two?" he said. "Why didn't you follow her parents?"

Lyra spoke up.

"We followed a different lead, my Lord," she said, evasively.

Octal could tell something had happened that the two younger Immortalists weren't telling him. He looked from one to the other, sternly.

Lore's mother placed a hand lightly on her son's arm.

"Tell Octal what you have done," she said, sensing too that Lore was concealing something. "He is your leader. He needs to know."

Lore nodded.

"A number of Immortalists lost their lives in pursuit of the parents," he began. "I sent the remaining army away to continue the chase." He paused and breathed deeply, trying to calm the emotions that were surfacing. "Lyra stayed with me."

Octal and Lore's mother turned their gazes to the Immortalist girl with the striking features and dark black hair.

"We saw the sign of the trinity," she said, taking up the story. "A column of light breaking through the clouds. We thought that they must be helping Scarlet and so we followed."

“That’s how we found Sage,” Lore concluded. “Scarlet was in council with the trinity and Sage was just lying there.”

Octal’s expression was unreadable. But when he spoke, there was no doubt that the revelation was about the last thing he’d wanted to here.

“The Trinity are involved?” he said. “This changes everything. They’ve deemed the vampire girl worthy of their help. They know that we need her to save our race. They had determined that the Immortalists will fail.”

The news hit Lore like a punch in the stomach, winding him. He looked at Lyra desperately. Her expression matched his own.

“But they exist to help all non-human species,” she insisted. “I’ve read it in the ancient texts. Why would they protect the vampire race if it meant the Immortalist race would become extinct?”

Her voice grew desperate.

“The sisters have seen everything,” Octal replied gravely. “They don’t show themselves for nothing. Whatever future they are hoping to prevent, it involves helping the girl. And that means destroying us.”

Lore felt his heartbeat increase with anguish. After everything he had been through, could it really end this way? Because the trinity, or mothers, or sisters, or whatever the ancient texts called them, had decided that it must be that way?

“Then you are just giving up?” he said, his passion bursting from his chest. “Because three powerful witches say that one vampire is more important than the whole great race of Immortalists?”

“Lore,” his mother warned him, but Octal held up a hand to stop her.

The boy’s words had clearly humbled him. His unflagging determination in the face of certain defeat was admirable.

“Good people have lost their lives for our cause,” Lore continued. “I will not let their deaths be for nothing. I will not let people I love die!”

As he said the words, his gaze flicked to Lyra. Octal and his mother noticed and both understood what that meant. Lore was in love, and a man in love would never give up.

Finally, Octal nodded.

“Let us prepare for the vampire’s arrival.” He surveyed the faces of each of them, and added: “This isn’t over until it’s over.”

*

Sage felt nothing but pain. Pain in his body, his head, his soul. The absence of Scarlet was like a knife slicing into his heart.

Though he was too weak to open his eyes, he could just about make out his surroundings. He was lying on something

soft, not a forest floor anymore, but velvet. There were voices echoing all around him, voices he recognized as Lore and his aunt's. Then he heard Octal speaking and recognized the man's booming voice with a shiver. He was back in the hands of the Immortalists. Surely, they were going to finish what they started. They were going to torture him until he gave up Scarlet. He prayed that Scarlet was strong enough to stay away, that she would let him die, let them all die, for her own good.

There were only a few hours left of pain to endure, then it would be over. Once the sun rose, the Immortalists would cease to be and his love, Scarlet, would be able to live out the rest of her life in peace.

The sunrise could not come fast enough.

CHAPTER TWENTY THREE

Caitlin made her way down the cliff path, towards the vampire city. She'd never seen anything quite like it. In all her travels back in time—the memories of which kept flashing back at her in waves—she'd never seen anything like this.

The architecture was unworldly, a combination of ancient Egyptian mud-brick temples and vast columns, all carved into the cave sides like the lost city of Petra. It was breath-taking, and Caitlin felt a strong sense of belonging. This is where her people came from, where they had lived and thrived unharmed for centuries. Along with her flood of memories, Caitlin had realized that the vampire race was not necessarily cruel or evil. There had been good people amongst the vampires, herself included, and she felt a great sense of loss over their extinction.

As Caitlin wandered through the streets of the city, this place felt abandoned, like a giant tomb, an ode to another time. Glancing in awe at the tall buildings, one in particular caught her attention. Something about the vast columns either side of its wide, arched doorway, and steps leading up to it that had been worn away by centuries of footsteps, told her that this was a place of great importance. She felt a pull, a sensation telling her to enter.

The moment she did, she laughed out loud. She'd found herself standing in the large atrium of a library. Of course her

body had been pulling her to this place—there was nowhere she felt more comfortable than within the sanctity of a library.

She could hardly believe that there were still books here in one piece. Many, she realized, were made of ancient Egyptian paper, thick and rubbery. As she pulled down volume after volume, she noted that every different type of alphabet was represented, from Arabic to Cyrillic script, to hieroglyphics. It was like her dream come true, stumbling across a forgotten library filled with books that hadn't been touched for centuries. It made her think of Aiden; he'd love to get his hands on a place like this.

But Caitlin could not bask in the moment. Images of Caleb struggling with the Immortalists as they'd burst into her grandmother's attic kept surfacing in her mind. She had to find a cure for Scarlet, and find it fast; it was the reason she'd been transported to the lost vampire city beneath the Sphinx in the first place. Something told her the cure would be within the walls of this ancient and forgotten library.

Caitlin looked at the marble shelves, stacked with books. If the cure was in one of these books she would surely die of old age before she found it. Unless...

Caitlin closed her eyes and slowed her breath, trying to put herself into the same sort of meditative state that always helped her sense Scarlet. There was no denying that Caitlin herself possessed some kind of ability to sense things, and now that her journals had been proven correct, Caitlin realized why:

because she, too, had once been a vampire. All along, her dormant vampire senses had been guiding her, first to the castle where Scarlet had fled, then to contact Aiden and crack the code of the sphinx, then to her grandmother's attic and the patterned leather box. It was almost as though Caitlin's actions had been written in the stars, as though they were being dictated to her by some force beyond her control. All she had to do was stop and listen, and the world would guide her in the right direction.

And so she did. She stood and breathed, and cleared her mind of all thoughts. She listened to the empty spaces around her and waited for that tugging sensation that told her in which direction she should go.

There it was. A pull like a magnet, weak but just about perceptible.

Caitlin opened her eyes and followed the pull as it led her to a shelf of dusty books. Her eyes skimmed across the spines, unable to read any of the languages. But then she saw one book in English and knew, deep inside of her, that she had found what she had been sent here for.

She pulled the book down and a cloud of dust flew into the air. The book had clearly not been touched for centuries. She had to be careful with it in case the pages shattered on contact with her skin.

She set the book down carefully on the floor and wiped the dust from the front. Immediately, she jumped in shock. There,

on the cover, was the same image she'd seen on her grandma's leather box, and in the Voynich manuscript. Only this time the strange face on the front of the book wasn't so surreal—it was as clear as day. It was an image of Scarlet's face.

Caitlin felt her stomach roll with anguish. How had her daughter's face come to be on this ancient text in a lost vampire library? Once again, she thought of destiny. It was as though everything had already been decided. No, it was more than that. It felt as though everything that was happening now had already happened before, as if they were living in a constant loop with history swirling round and round, repeating ad infinitum. The life she was living was just one cycle, one in which the outcome had been predicted before, but was not set in stone. She could change the premonitions and prophecies. Whatever was *supposed* to happen, she still had control over whether it did or did not.

Caitlin opened the cover and scanned the title page of the book. Looking at it made her heart stop. The title was: *The Last Vampire*. And the author of the book was *C. Paine*.

Could it really be true? Had she, Caitlin, written this very book in a different time and place, during one of the world's many different cycles of history? Had *she* been the very person guiding her all this time?

Before she set foot in this place, she would never have believed it. But after her memories had returned to her, she was certainly more open to the possibility. Time, she remem-

bered, was not linear. She was very proof that people could move through time on completely different trajectories than others. There was no hard and fast law that said tomorrow must follow today. In fact, Caitlin had spent many years experiencing yesterday after yesterday after yesterday. It was possible, it truly was, for her to be the author of her own destiny.

She settled down and turned the first page. The book was blank. Her heart began to thud painfully. It couldn't be. Why would there be no words?

Caitlin ran her fingers along the blank pages, one after the other, turning the pages furiously. There was nothing here, nothing for her to rely on, no advice or truths to turn to. Just nothing.

Tears flooded her eyes. How could it be that after everything she had gone through, she was still without the answer she so desperately sought?

Then, something strange began to happen. A light started to glow from the pages of the open book. The light filled the space before Caitlin, just like the memories of her life as a vampire had appeared before her eyes the moment she'd been transported here. Words began to dance in front of her. At first in a jumble, but then arranging themselves into something she could read:

Time is short. Heed my warning. Every move you make from this moment on will determine your future. Listen. Accept. Scarlet needs her

mother.

The words floated before Caitlin for a moment before burning up and dropping to the open pages of the book like ash. She looked on, frowning, needing more.

Vampire blood holds the key. Heed my warning. Prepare for war. I beg you. Ready yourself. Every move you make from this moment on will determine your future.

Again, the words aligned for a moment before setting fire, burning up, and dropping to the blank page of the book spread before Caitlin. She desperately tried to decipher their meaning, as more words began to formulate before her.

I beg you. Scarlet needs her mother. You are the key. Only you. Ubi amor, ibi dolor.

The last phrase, the words written in Latin, Caitlin knew to mean: *where there is love, there is pain*. But what did it all mean?

Caitlin watched the final words burn up and disappear.

She sat back, her mind reeling. She wanted more time with the words, to spend longer trying to understand them. It seemed to suggest that everything she did from this moment forth would be crucial to whether Scarlet could be saved.

Just then, Caitlin realized that some of the ash from the

words had collected on the page before her. It had retained the shape of letters.

Then Caitlin gasped. Each letter that had fallen spelled a word. Contained within the code was everything she needed to understand what to do. The letters spelled out:

YOU ARE THE LAST VAMPIRE

In that moment, everything clicked into place for Caitlin. The key to saving Scarlet's life was to sacrifice herself. In order to save Scarlet, Caitlin had to die.

No sooner had she come to the conclusion than the world began to swirl around her. Like a vortex, the colors of the library merged and faded away. Caitlin felt sick and tried to hold onto the floor, feeling as though the world were spinning so fast she would surely fly off.

Then the spinning stopped.

Caitlin found herself sitting cross-legged in her grandmother's attic, in the exact point in time where she had left it. The sound of a scream filled her ears and she looked up to see Caleb battling an Immortalist.

She had no time to think.

"Caleb!"

He looked up and she grabbed him, pulling him away from the vicious Immortalist who'd been attacking him. The leather box lay on the floor, having fallen to the ground when Caitlin

was transported and she snatched it up and flipped open the lid.

Before she could blink, she and Caleb were sucked into the box, and the attic disappeared from sight.

*

Caleb stood in the darkness, dazed, too stunned to speak. A second earlier he'd been battling for his life and now he was somewhere entirely different, somewhere that felt ancient and forgotten, even forbidden.

"Caitlin?" he whispered.

He couldn't see his own hands in front of his face, let alone hers, but he could sense her presence, the warmth radiating from her body, the sound of her breathing.

"Just wait," Caitlin said.

"Wait for what?" Caleb replied.

"The memories," came Caitlin's cryptic answer.

Caleb waited. Soon, a strange flickering white light appeared before Caleb's eyes, like an old silent movie from the 1920s. The same images began playing, showing him in Italy, Paris, London and Jerusalem. His own movie reel showed the decadence, the beauty, and the danger. He saw Caitlin, his young love, evolve from his fiancée to his bride, to his wife, and finally to the mother of his precious daughter. The memories hit him like an avalanche, filling him with so many conflicting

emotions he could hardly breathe.

In the soft glow of his memories, he turned to face Caitlin, and in the pale light she was more beautiful than ever.

"It's all real," he gasped.

Tears glistened in Caitlin's eyes.

"Yes," she whispered.

Caleb turned back to the reel of memories as they danced across his vision. How had he lost all of this? How had these amazing, important, incredible memories been replaced in his mind? And why?

"Caitlin," he said, taking his wife's hands. "What is happening?"

Caitlin squeezed his hands.

"We've lived another life before. A life where we were vampires, where we journeyed through time, across the globe."

"But how?" he asked. "How does that make any sense?"

Caitlin shook her head.

"It's too much for us to comprehend. But time isn't a straight thing that goes in one direction. Our lives as vampires prove that much. We travelled, once before, in the direction of time that is supposed to be impossible. And yet here we are, in a completely different era, with memories of a different life returning to us. Time isn't straight. It is everywhere, happening all at once, in a million different combinations."

Caitlin had always had a brilliant mind, had always been able to grasp philosophies far beyond Caleb's reach, but this

was more than anything he could comprehend.

“What does that mean for us?” he said, bringing the abstract back to the here and now, to the real and physical.

Caitlin glanced at the floor and Caleb knew in that instant that whatever she was about to tell him he would not like.

“Right now, on this path of life that we are living, I have to sacrifice myself for Scarlet.”

Caleb stood there, winded by her words, unable and unwilling to believe them.

“Why?” he demanded.

Caitlin held her arm up and traced along the line of her blue vein with her finger.

“I’m a vampire, Caleb. The last vampire. The circle of history begins and ends with me. I can determine whether we exist or whether we don’t, whether Scarlet is human or whether she’s a vampire. The secret of the vampires runs through my veins.”

Caleb shook his head, flooded with grief.

“I don’t want to lose you,” he spluttered.

“Only in this time and place,” she replied. “Elsewhere, I will be alive.”

“That’s not good enough for me!” Caleb cried. “I only have this time and place to be with you. It doesn’t matter if you are alive in another world, or another plain of existence. This is it for me. And I want you by my side.”

But Caleb could tell by his wife’s expression that she was

determined. Nothing was going to change her mind. Saving Scarlet had always been her goal, and nothing was going to stop that, not even her love for him.

“This is bigger than us, Caleb,” she said. “This is about the world and everyone in it.”

Caleb sighed, defeated.

“What do we have to do?” he asked.

Caitlin wiped the tears from her eyes and gazed back adoringly.

“We need to go to Sage’s estate,” she said. “It’s on the Hudson river. Scarlet will be there. Once I am with her, I will be able to cure her.”

Caleb nodded.

“I suppose now is the time you conjure up an airplane for me to fly?” he joked, trying to lighten the dark mood.

Caitlin smiled.

“I have one better,” she said. She held up the box from her grandmother’s attic. “It will take us to where we need to be. Whatever time and whatever place.”

Caleb reached out and held her hand. It broke his heart to think these were among the last moments he would share with her. He wanted to savour them, to remain in the lost vampire city forever. But it was not to be. They had to save Scarlet.

“Let’s go,” he said.

Caitlin flipped open the lid of the box, and together they were sucked inside.

CHAPTER TWENTY FOUR

Vivian soared through the sky, her veins on fire with exhilaration. Thanks to Scarlet's idiot of an uncle, she was within a hair's breadth of ending her nemesis's life. As she flew, she could feel the stake in her back pocket, urging her to kill again, reminding her of just how powerful and addictive that sensation was.

As Vivian flew she wondered whether Blake would have turned yet. Nothing would be sweeter for her than having him by her side as she ended Scarlet's life.

She decided then to take a quick detour past his house. If he had indeed turned, she could bring him along for the ride. That way she'd witness his all his firsts—his first feed, his first flight—just like a good sire should.

When she reached Blake's house, the first thing she noticed was the sprays of blood on the window. She leapt onto his porch roof and peered in through his bedroom window. Her heart dropped. Blake wasn't there. His bed was messy, as though he'd thrown off the covers she'd placed over him in haste.

So he had turned, she thought. But where had all that blood come from?

Vivian pulled open the window and climbed inside. She stood in Blake's empty bedroom and listened for sounds of life. She could hear a slurping sound coming from downstairs.

She paced over to Blake's bedroom door, which was ajar, then stopped dead when she saw a pair of women's feet through the crack in the door. As she maneuvered her sightline into the open gap, the rest of the woman's body was revealed to her. She was dead on the floor, her eyes open and staring upwards, a stream of blood coming from a wound in her neck. Vivian recognized her. It was Patrice. Blake's live-in housekeeper. She was young and strikingly attractive. And now, dead.

Vivian smiled to herself. She had never liked Patrice, always viewing her as competition. What's more, she and Blake were evidently soul mates. That Blake had awoken as a vicious killer caused her no end of delight. She imagined the two of them on a rampage together, prowling the streets, killing whomever they so desired. Nothing made her heart swell more than the thought of a life with Blake, flying across the world, inflicting suffering and pain on the weak and vulnerable.

Vivian stepped over the dead body and went down stairs hurriedly. She followed the drops of blood and each step made her more excited to see Blake as a fully turned vampire.

Vivian pushed open the door and there was Blake, standing there in a daze.

"Vivian," he said breathlessly.

Then, quicker than the blink of an eye, he strode forwards and swept her up in his arms. He pressed his hungry mouth against hers, tasting her, smelling her sweet scent. He wrapped

his arms around her body, pulling her closer and closer into him. The kiss was a thousand times more powerful than the ones they'd shared as humans and Vivian sunk into him, reveling in the new sensations. She never wanted this moment to end. Blake had never been so passionate with her before.

Finally they pulled apart. Blake's eyes were wide with astonishment, as if he were experiencing the epitome of pleasure.

"You're amazing," he gushed, tucking some of Vivian's hair behind her ears. "How can I ever repay you for the gift you've given me?"

Vivian was overwhelmed with emotion. She'd dreamed so often of being with Blake, of being loved, truly loved by him, but the experience of it was more than she could ever have hoped for. The look in his eyes when he gazed at her was so powerful, exciting and enthralling. Blake was hers, and hers forever. She knew in that moment he would do anything she asked of him. She'd won.

"There is one thing," she said.

Blake's gaze burned into her, his eyes roving over her body and setting every single one of her nerves on fire.

"What is it?" he said. "I'll do anything."

Vivian licked her fangs.

"Come with me. We're going to kill Scarlet Paine."

Without hesitation, Blake followed her out the door, and as they leapt together into the sky, it was then that Vivian realized that the human Blake was truly gone.

*

Vivian was delighted to see the town below her in utter chaos. Teenage vampires from their high school roamed the streets, causing destruction everywhere they went. Cars were tipped over and set alight. Houses were broken into, the families living in them rushing into the street in blind panic.

She looked over at Blake and smiled. He returned the gesture, and Vivian thought that nothing in the world would make her happier than she was in that moment. Nothing but killing Scarlet Paine.

The first house on their tour was Maria's. Vivian had hated Maria, not quite as much as Scarlet, but certainly because of her best friend status with the freak she so despised.

"Follow my lead," Vivian said to Blake as they touched down on the garden path.

Together they strolled up to the front door. Vivian knocked loudly.

After a moment, it was answered by a bleary eyed woman. She was clearly Maria's mother, with the same colorings—dark hair, dark eyes.

"What?" the woman said, peering through the crack in the door suspiciously.

"Is Maria here?" Vivian asked.

"Who are you?" came the blunt reply.

"I'm Vivian." She touched her chest then gestured to Blake beside her. "This is Blake. We're friends of Maria's from school."

The woman scoffed.

"If you were friends, you'd know that Maria's been committed. She's in the institute and she's not coming out any time soon. Now get the hell off my property."

She slammed the door in their faces. Vivian turned to Blake, too excited to even hide her grin.

"This day is literally getting better and better," she said with glee. "Maria's gone mad!"

Blake tried to share in his sire's enthusiasm but something about the situation didn't sit right with him.

"Oh come on," Vivian snapped, admonishing him. "Scarlet's best friend has lost it. Isn't it hilarious?"

Blake managed to muster a smile.

Vivian rolled her eyes, frustrated by his lack of enthusiasm.

"Come on," she said, grabbing the front of his t-shirt and pulling him after her. "Let's try Jasmine's house next."

The couple took to the sky. Vivian was still on a high from the news of Maria's mental breakdown. When she finally got to Scarlet and had the opportunity to torture her, she was definitely going to goad her with that nugget of information.

Jasmine's house was farther out of town. Here, the effects of vampirism had not yet taken hold. Everything seemed pretty normal, quiet because of the time of day. A dog barked in a gar-

den. A broken gate clanged in the wind. All the lights were off as everyone was tucked up safely in bed, unaware of the chaos that was going down just a few blocks away.

Vivian indicated to Blake where they were headed and they set down on the ground in unison. Vivian was buoyant, enjoying herself so much.

Blake reached up and touched his fangs, looking almost shocked by their presence and she remembered how it had felt when she'd first been turned. Her initial feelings were anger and fear. She'd been confused, disorientated, and her memories had been patchy. Maybe Blake was still transitioning, or finding the whole transformation uncomfortable? Maybe she just needed to give him a bit of time, and soon enough he'd be filled with murderous intent, her equal in all measures.

"Okay, time to pay a visit to Jasmine," Vivian said, getting back on task.

She strolled up to Jasmine's front door and knocked. The house was in darkness, people in the neighborhood sleeping, oblivious to the danger that was about to be unleashed on them.

After a long moment, the door swung open and a man stood there in his boxers, holding a baseball bat above his head.

"What is it?" he said, lowering the bat when he realized that it was just two kids standing on his doorstep. He glanced over their shoulders at the quiet street. "Why aren't you at home?"

Vivian looked at Blake, then back at the man.

"We're friends with Jasmine," Vivian said. "From school. Is she here?"

The man looked suspicious.

"Of course she's here. It's the dead of night. Can't whatever it is you have to talk about wait until the morning?" He went to close the door, muttering to himself about teenagers and hormones and drama.

Vivian shoved her arm forward, stopping the door from being closed. The man looked stunned.

"Sorry, sir," she said, in her sweet, innocent voice. "This is really important. Jasmine's been hanging out with an older guy. I'm really worried about her."

Beside her, Vivian felt Blake stiffen. He didn't seem to be deriving any pleasure out of Vivian going round trying to wreck Scarlet's friend's lives. But Vivian didn't care about that—she was having way too much fun taking in the sight of Jasmine's dad's horrified expression.

"She's what?" he bellowed.

"I know," Vivian replied. "I didn't want to get her in trouble but the thing is, I'm worried about her. This guy is a total bum. I think he's been to prison."

Jasmine's dad had heard enough. He turned and roared Jasmine's name up the stairs. Lights flickered on from a room upstairs. A woman appeared on the landing wrapped in a white dressing gown.

"What are you screaming about, Hal?" she demanded.

"Get Jasmine!" he shouted. "Get her down here right now!"

The woman disappeared from view. Vivian was filled with excited anticipation, waiting to see what punishment would be inflicted on Jasmine. She looked at Blake but he didn't look back at her.

Instead of Jasmine appearing at the top of the stairs, it was her mom who reappeared.

"She's not there!" she shouted, rushing down the stairs.

When she saw Vivian and Blake on the doorstep, her frown intensified.

"Who are you?" she barked.

"We're worried friends of Jasmine's," Vivian said. "We think she's met a guy, a bad guy. Scarlet Paine introduced them, you see, and everyone knows how messed up *she* is."

Jasmine's mother was becoming increasingly flustered.

"Hal. Hal, where's our daughter? We have to find her!"

Vivian was thinking the same. She was hoping Jasmine would lead her to Scarlet, but it looked like she hadn't made it home from high school today. Either she was out there with Scarlet already, surrounded by Kyle's vampire army, or she'd already been turned. That meant Scarlet was with Becca. Becca lived way out, and though it wouldn't exactly take Vivian long to fly there, she really didn't want to miss out on any of the chaos happening in the center of town. She was itching with her desire to hurt Scarlet then join in the rampage.

“We can help you,” Vivian said to Jasmine’s terrified parents. “Why don’t you call her cell?”

The woman was in such a flustered daze she did exactly as Vivian said. Vivian grinned to herself, loving how powerful she was, how much she could mess with people’s emotions. But Blake was still and silent beside her.

“She’s in town!” the woman cried. “It sounds like there’s a party or a riot. I can hear screaming!”

Jasmine’s mom was working herself up into a panicked frenzy. Hal tried to calm his wife down but she was becoming frantic.

“Is she with Scarlet?” Vivian asked.

But the woman was pacing, too overwhelmed to ask the question Vivian needed answering. She’d hung up her phone before Vivian even got a second chance to demand the answer from her.

Hal started pulling a jacket over his pyjamas. He handed one to his wife, then reached for his car keys.

“We have a quicker way of getting there,” Vivian said.

Jasmine’s parents look confused. Vivian turned to Blake.

“You take him,” she said, nodding to Jasmine’s portly father. “I’ll take her.”

Blake frowned.

“What are you doing, Vivian?” he said. “You’re messing with these people. It’s sick.”

But Vivian didn’t care. She smirked.

“I’m having fun,” she said with a sneer. “You should try it some time.”

With that she sprang forward and grabbed Jasmine’s mom, sweeping her up into her arms and leaping into the air. The woman screamed murder, completely taken by surprise by the speed at which Vivian flew, and the height she climbed.

“What are you?” she shouted.

Vivian laughed manically, enjoying the thrill of causing the woman to experience such absolute terror. She flashed her fangs at the woman.

“I’m your worst nightmare,” she said.

The woman’s face drained entirely of color. When she looked down to see the town lights twinkling below her, she began to scream again.

Vivian was loving every second of this. She looked back to make sure Blake had followed her orders. Sure enough, there he was, holding Jasmine’s father in his arms, following his sire dutifully through the night sky. He did not look happy. Vivian was starting to get really annoyed with him. When exactly was he going to get over himself and start enjoying it? The world was descending into anarchy, with Blake and Vivian at the top of the food chain!

Jasmine’s mother screamed the whole flight to the center of town. But once they reached the main high street, her screams changed.

“I see her!” she shouted suddenly. “I see Jasmine.”

Vivian squinted into the distance and sure enough, there she was. Jasmine was with Becca in a parking lot, crouching behind a row of cars as chaos reigned round them. Vivian assumed that since they were hiding they couldn't have yet been turned. Good. That meant she'd get the pleasure of ending their lives.

However, as they got closer, she realized that Scarlet was nowhere to be seen. Vivian hoped she wasn't too far from her friends. They'd practically been glued together when they were human; she couldn't think of a reason why they'd be separate now.

Vivian turned back and gestured to Blake who was lagging behind. She beckoned him to follow her and together they hovered over the parking lot where Jasmine and Becca were hiding. From beneath her, Jasmine's mom started calling for her daughter.

"Jasmine! Jasmine, sweetheart! Are you okay?"

Jasmine looked up. Her face turned to an expression of utter horror. She leapt up from her hiding place and ran into the middle of the parking lot, looking up the whole time, shouting for her parents. Becca tried to drag her back into the shadows and out of danger but nothing was stopping Jasmine. She ran like a woman possessed and screamed for her parents.

"Mom! Dad!"

Vivian felt a smile tug at the side of her lips. She looked over at Blake, who was stony faced.

"On the count of three," she said. "One, two, three."

And with that, Vivian and Blake dropped Jasmine's parents. They tumbled through the air before landing in the parking lot with a horrible thud.

Jasmine shrieked and raced towards the deathly still bodies of her parents.

Vivian looked at Blake.

"Having fun yet?" she said slyly.

Blake kept his eyes fixed to the ground, on the sight of Jasmine weeping over her parent's bodies. His expression wasn't one of excitement and joy, but of guilt. Vivian rolled her eyes.

"Come on," she demanded, "let's go and talk to the freak's little friends."

She flew down to the parking lot where Jasmine was howling with grief, Becca trying to comfort her.

Blake followed his leader silently, his expression as cold as ice.

*

Vivian coiled her fingers into Becca's hair, making the girl wince. Both Becca and Jasmine had been forced to their knees in the middle of the parking lot, at the complete mercy of Vivian and Blake. Though Blake was executing his torture with lacklustre, Vivian was still having the time of her life.

"Tell us where Scarlet is!" she screamed in Becca's face. "Be-

fore I fly to your house and kill your parents in front of you.”

Jasmine wailed at the memory of her parents’ death being brought to the forefront of her mind by Vivian’s words.

“I told you,” Becca pleaded. “I don’t know where she is. I haven’t seen Scarlet for days.”

“I don’t believe you!” Vivian screamed. “You’re protecting her, I know you are.”

“Protecting her from what?” Becca shot back. “You? You think you’re some big shot vampire now? Well look around Vivian—*everyone* in town’s been turned! You’re nothing special. How exactly would I be protecting her from lying to you about her whereabouts?”

Becca’s words enraged Vivian. She twisted her fingers more deeply into Becca’s hair, making the girl cry out in pain.

“What’s your problem with Scarlet anyway?” Becca cried, not about to give up. “She never did anything to you. She even saved your life once, or have you conveniently forgotten?”

“She stole my boyfriend,” Vivian hissed.

Becca narrowed her eyes.

“And then you turned him into a vampire,” she hissed. “So you won, Vivian. You’ve got a nice little lapdog to follow you around for eternity. So why don’t you just let it go?”

Blake was expressionless beside Vivian, his face unreadable. He didn’t seem to be engaging with the situation at all. It was as though he’d shut down completely.

Vivian wrenched Becca’s head back, exposing her neck.

“You see, I actually *am* a big shot vampire. Just like I was a big shot human. Some people, like me, are just better than people like you. We make better cheerleaders and better vampires. And way better girlfriends. So, yeah, I have won. I was always winning. What I want now is to make Scarlet Paine suffer.”

“God!” Becca cried. “Are you really that petty and jealous? Scarlet doesn’t even like Blake anymore. She’s completely in love with someone else.”

Vivian couldn’t help notice the way Blake suddenly snapped to attention when Becca said that Scarlet didn’t like him anymore. If Blake still had feelings for Scarlet she didn’t know what she’d do.

Vivian wanted to let her rage out on Becca. She bared her fangs, ready to end the girl’s life, when suddenly, something in the sky caught her attention. She looked up and narrowed her eyes. Someone was flying through the sky at top speed, heading in the direction of the Hudson river. Even from this distance, Vivian recognized Scarlet. She felt herself fill with hatred.

She dropped Becca and turned to Blake.

“Come on,” she snapped, all pretences of being in love completely dropped.

Blake rose into the air, following his sire with about as much enthusiasm as a downtrodden husband. Vivian was enraged that he wasn’t in love with her. That even the power of

her siring him was not enough to make him fall in love with her. She was going to take out all her anger on Scarlet. She was going to make Scarlet suffer.

As the two vampires rose into the air, the sun was just starting to reach the horizon. Morning was about to break.

The morning that would change everything.

CHAPTER TWENTY FIVE

Police Officer Sadie Marlow was sitting in her patrol car, preoccupied by thoughts of Maria, the mentally unwell girl she'd met in the hospital, and the police chief's reaction to Maria's premonition of an impending vampire war. After the girl had descended into silence, Sadie and her partner, Brent Waywood, had been ushered away, told to go back to the station and await further instruction. Then it had been hours of silence, of evasion, of Sadie's questions going unanswered. And so, as the night began to draw to an end, bringing with it the last hour of Sadie's shift, she'd found herself in her patrol car with Brent responding to a residential disturbance, none the wiser about what was going on.

She was just pulling up to the curb of the house in question when the patrol car's radio crackled and a voice sounded out. It wasn't the usual emergency call operator's voice, but the police chief's.

"Officer Marlow, I need you in the center of town. Now."

Sadie leaned forward and hit the respond button.

"This is Officer Marlow. I'm already responding to a reported 911, sir, way out in the suburbs. May I request another unit assist you?"

The radio buzzed immediately with a response.

"All other units are already assisting me."

Sadie sat back, a frown across her face. She and Brent

exchanged a glance. He shrugged. Office Marlow pressed the button.

“Sir, can I have more information?” she requested.

The chief officer responded in an angry tone.

“Don’t make me tell you twice, Marlow. Get your butt down here.”

In the seat beside Sadie, Officer Brent Waywood began to laugh. Sadie found her partner’s response inappropriate. The chief sounded harried, and something big was clearly going down. But typically of Brent, he was unable to take anything seriously. Worse, he’d often criticize Sadie herself for taking things too seriously. Sadie had lost count of the number of times she’d told him that, as police officers, it was a pretty key part of their job description to take things seriously.

“Sounds like someone’s having a bad day,” Brent scoffed under his breath.

Sadie gave him a sideways glance but didn’t respond. Instead, she clicked the button on the radio in order to the open the channel to speak.

“Chief, I’m not meaning to be difficult,” Sadie said into the radio. “But I need more information on the situation you’re calling me to. Do you have a code?”

Sadie was a level headed officer. She wasn’t about to dive head first unprepared into a situation just because her chief had threatened her.

“There isn’t a code in the book for this situation, Marlow,”

came his response.

Sadie’s felt her frown grow even stronger across her forehead. What exactly was going on?

“Sir...” she began, but her chief cut her off.

“How about 1-8-7,” he said.

Sadie shivered. A 187 meant homicide. It was just about the last call an officer on duty wanted to hear. Policing a murder was a pretty grim end to what had already proved to be one of the most unpleasant shifts Sadie Marlow had had.

Sadie was about to reply but the police chief hadn’t finished.

“With some 2-4-0, 2-4-2 and a whole load of 6-0-4 thrown in.”

Assault. Battery.

“What the hell is going on, sir?” Sadie said into the radio. “How many perps are we talking about here?”

Through the buzz and crackle of the radio static, Sadie and Brent heard something that made them both freeze with shock.

“Looks like it’s every damn kid from the high school,” the chief said.

The two officers looked at one another. They were less than an hour away from finishing their shift and now they were being summoned to what sounded like a teenage riot. No, not a teenage riot—teenage riots didn’t usually escalate to murder. This sounded more like a teenage rampage.

Leaping into action, Sadie flicked on the siren.

“We’re on our way, chief,” she said as the blue lights flashed above her and the siren wailed.

She hit the gas and the cruiser sped towards town. She didn’t know what she was going to find when she got there, but something told her it would be a scene she never forgot.

*

Sadie and Brent arrived in the center of town to find a line of police cars positioned across the road, blocking access. They screeched on their brakes and parked beside them.

Sadie was shocked. The scene ahead was one of absolute carnage. Teenagers were milling all over the streets, smashing cars, climbing lamp posts, yanking fire hydrants right out of the sidewalk. The chief was right when he said it looked like every kid in the high school. There must have been a thousand of them.

If Sadie hadn’t been looking at it with her own eyes, there was no way she’d believe what was happening. There wasn’t a code in the manual that could cover all the felonies unfolding before her eyes. She saw a young girl, who didn’t look more than fifteen, with heavy black make-up and streaked purple hair swinging a car above her head like it didn’t weigh a thing. Beside her, a couple of grungy looking boys were terrorizing a young woman, letting her run from them, then dragging her back, then letting her go again. She’d lost her shoes, her tights

were ripped, and her hair was a mess from constantly being grabbed. The whole scene filled Sadie with revulsion.

Despite years of training, Sadie found that her hands were shaking. She secured her bullet and stab proof jacket and commanded Brent to do the same.

Unlike Sadie, Officer Waywood was raring to go.

“Time to teach these punks some respect,” he said, clicking a magazine into his firearm.

“Be careful,” Sadie warned him, preparing her own weapon.

But Brent was already out of the car, gun raised, in full battle mode.

As Sadie climbed out of the squad car, she couldn’t help but think again of Maria. Could the chaos unfolding before them be somehow related to what the girl had spoken of? Was this the vampire war she had warned them about? At the time, Sadie had felt a strong compulsion to listen to the girl’s words, to consider that what she was saying may hold an element of truth. But after she and Brent had been dismissed and sent back to the station, she’d had time to reflect, to ridicule herself for getting wrapped up in the moment.

Now, she felt there was a chance she’d been right to heed Maria’s warning all along. If Maria had been telling them the truth, then the vampire war she’d spoken of was starting.

Sadie was about to inch herself forward and join the other police when got distracted by the screeching sirens of army vehicles approaching from behind. Ten big black trucks pulled

up behind the line of police cruisers, as camouflaged men and woman rushed out, carrying riot shields and heavy artillery. Sadie realized with a start that the National Guard had been called in. Why would the military get involved with some teenager thuggery? Unless they knew, too, that they were dealing with the beginning of a war.

If there was any doubt in Sadie's mind they were dealing with something paranormal, it was wiped out by the reaction of the teenagers to the approaching military. Moving as though they possessed a hive mind, the thousand strong crowd of kids leapt up into the air and hovered fifty feet above their heads. The police officers stared upwards in complete shock.

The military, though, sprung into action. They began shooting at the flying high schoolers, the sound of gunfire filling the air.

But the kids, to Sadie's shock, just whizzed around, moving faster than Sadie could keep up with them. They dodged the speeding bullets with ease.

"Bullets don't kill vampires," Sadie said aloud.

But there was no one near her, no one who would listen. She reached down, grabbing the megaphone from her glove compartment and clicking it on. But before she had a chance to say anything, something else caught her attention. Racing along the road, coming from the direction of the city jail, was a group of men in striped prison uniforms.

"Escaped convicts!" Sadie cried into the megaphone,

addressing the officers who were still staring up at the sky. "We have escaped convicts!"

Nothing in her police training had prepared her for this. She watched, numb, horror-struck, as the scene unfolded around her. The national guard stopped firing into the sky and changed tactics, this time charging the convicts who, being human, weren't impervious to being battered by riot shields.

But the vampires hovering above them weren't going to let the police take down their partners in crime. They swooped down from where they'd been hovering, like birds of prey, and pounced. Once again, shots ran out, but Sadie knew bullet were useless against this vampire army. The little metal pellets ricocheted off them, doing little more than slowing them down for a second.

Sadie caught a glimpse of Brent Waywood amongst the rabble. He was wrestling with a vampire in a cheerleader outfit, who snapped her bared fangs at him. Watching her partner grapple with a girl half his height, who couldn't weigh more than 100 pounds, was a sight Sadie could hardly comprehend.

Finally coming to her senses, Sadie realized the best thing she could right now was evacuate the civilians. Many houses and shops were already empty, their doors and windows smashed in. Others were blazing infernos. But somehow, through all the chaos, Sadie heard someone crying.

She raced away towards a parking lot where the noise was coming from. She saw that two bodies were lying on the tar-

mac face down. It was a man and a woman and they were both clearly dead. The crying noises were coming from behind a row of parked cars.

Sadie rushed over. Behind the cars she saw two teenage girls crouching, huddled together. When they saw her, they both leapt to their feet and screamed.

"I'm not a vampire!" Sadie said.

The girls clutched each other and began to tremble. But they seemed to believe Sadie.

"I'm a police officer," Sadie added, trying to calm the girls with her voice, "and I can get you to safety."

Even as she said it, she wasn't so sure she could. What if the vampires had reached the station? What if it wasn't just New York that was overrun with them, but the whole world? Could Sadie be witnessing the beginning of the end of the human race?

Whatever thoughts and doubts raced through her mind, Sadie knew she had to try. She hadn't become a police officer to baulk at the sign of danger. If the only thing she achieved this evening was stopping two young girls from losing their lives in a brutal, violent manner, then she was going to do it.

Sadie gestured to the girls with her hand, palm up and inviting.

"I can take you to my car," she said. "Drive you somewhere safe."

"There is nowhere safe," one of the girls cried. She was

rocking backwards and forwards, her knees tucked into her chest, and her gaze kept darting over her shoulder at the bodies in the parking lot.

"Do you know them?" Sadie asked gently.

The girl dissolved into sobs. Her friend put her arm around her.

"They're her parents," the second girl said.

Sadie felt overwhelmed with sadness. She couldn't get her head round what was happening. It was as though the world as she knew it had been flipped on its head, like she was living a nightmare from which she knew she would never wake up.

"I'm sorry for your loss," Sadie said, trying to be sympathetic. "But we can't stay here. If we leave town we might have a chance."

"I'm not leaving them!" the first girl screamed.

Her friend looked torn with indecision. She didn't want to abandon her friend in her time of need; but she also didn't want to die tonight.

"Look," Sadie said to the girl who wasn't crying. "I'm going to get my squad car. When I get back, you can either come with me or not. If you don't, I'll just find someone else who needs saving. Got it?"

The girl bit her lip and nodded.

Sadie glanced over her shoulder, trying to see if the way was clear. When she turned back to the girl, she said, "Tell me your name."

"I'm Becca," the girl said. "This is Jasmine."

"Okay," Sadie said. "Sit tight, Becca. Keep her calm. I'll be back for you in a minute."

As Sadie raced back across the streets for her squad car, she noted that the chaos had intensified. The national guard were locked in a vicious battle with the escaped inmates and the vampires were piling into the fight. But coming from the same direction as the jail, Sadie saw a man flying through the air. When he landed on top of a police truck, the vampires stopped what they were doing and turned to him. He was clearly some kind of leader, someone important.

The vampires crowded forward, trying to get closer to the man. On the floor lay a heap of injured officers and military personnel, some dead, some dying. Sadie turned away, not able to cope with the images in front of her.

Then she saw the man point towards the direction of the Hudson river, and one by one the vampires took to the sky, following whatever command he'd given them. Sadie gasped as she watched them soar into the air like a flock of enormous, deadly birds. Vultures, she thought. They're nothing more than vultures.

Sadie finally reached her car and leapt inside. The voice of the police chief was sounding out from the radio, frantically asking for information.

"You sent us into a war zone!" Sadie shouted into the radio.

"Marlow?" the chief replied. "Marlow, thank God you're

alive?"

"Yes. I'm alive," Sadie replied emotionlessly. "Which is more than can be said for the rest of the officers you sent blindly into battle." Sadie was livid, unable to hold back her anger. "How could you do it? You knew they were vampires! You knew the girl in the psych ward was speaking the truth! Why didn't you send for wooden stakes and Holy water rather than sending the army out there with guns?"

From the other end of the line, all Sadie heard was the sound of static.

Typical, Sadie thought.

The chief wasn't one to admit to mistakes. Sadie pressed the respond button of her radio again.

"Chief, I'm bringing in two civilians. You might be interested to know that the vampire army is heading towards the Hudson River. So if you want to send any more innocent officers to die, that's the place to go."

She wrenched the radio so hard the wire snapped, then slammed it back into its holster. She didn't hear anything more from the police chief. There was no drill for this, no way of knowing what to do for the best, and so Sadie decided that all she could and would do was rescue the victims. She'd find somewhere safe for them, then one by one she'd search for survivors of the brutality.

She started the car and drove as fast as possible back to the place she'd left Becca and Jasmine. When she got there, she

saw that the two girls had been surrounded by a group of men in prison uniforms.

“Oh no you don’t,” Sadie said, gritting her teeth.

She leapt from her car and raised her gun.

“Step away!” she shouted.

The convicts turned. When they saw they were up against a lone policewoman, they smirked.

“This is your last warning,” Sadie said. “Hands where I can see them or I’ll shoot.”

The escaped men must have felt invincible after walking side by side with a vampire army. They clearly must have forgotten that they were mere mortals.

As they charged her, Sadie squeezed the trigger. One, two, three, four, a bullet for each of them. They fell to the floor like bowling pins.

Becca and Jasmine stood there, wide eyed.

“Get in,” Sadie commanded.

The girls didn’t need telling twice. Gone was Jasmine’s determination to stay with her dead parents, overtaken by her natural instinct to survive. Becca, on the other hand, wasn’t about to argue with someone who’d just shot dead four men in front of her very eyes.

With the two girls safe in her car, Sadie tried to work out her options. At this point in time, they seemed pretty limited. All she could think to do was get as far away from where the vampires were heading, and that was the Hudson river.

She hit the accelerator and steered the car away.

“Wait!” Jasmine cried. “What about Scarlet?”

Sadie looked at her in the rear view mirror. Scarlet. That had been the name that Maria had been babbling about back in the insane asylum.

“Who’s Scarlet?” she said. “Do you mean Scarlet Paine?”

It was Becca who replied. “Yes. She’s our friend. Or at least she was.” She looked at Jasmine. “It’s too late for Scarlet. She’s one of them now.”

Sadie watched the two girls conversing in the mirror, her mind a swirl of thoughts. If Maria had been right about the vampire war, then maybe she was right about the only person being able to stop it being Scarlet. And if Sadie was the only person alive at this point in time who knew that piece of information, then that meant she had to do something with it. She may be the one person who could stop this mess.

Jasmine was shaking her head, not ready to accept what her friend was telling her.

“Scarlet wouldn’t be a part of this,” she cried. “You know she wouldn’t!”

“We have to save ourselves,” Becca said.

“We’ve already lost Maria,” Jasmine sobbed. “We can’t lose Scarlet too.”

Sadie had heard enough. These girls knew Scarlet *and* Maria, the two names that, in the midst of all the chaos, made sense to Sadie.

She slammed on the brakes and made a sharp U-turn. From the back seat, the girls screamed.

“Where are we going?” Becca demanded as the car began to race in the opposite direction, towards danger rather than away from it.

“Sorry, Becca,” Sadie said. “But Jasmine’s right. We need to help Scarlet. She might be the only person in the world who can save us.”

CHAPTER TWENTY SIX

Kyle sauntered along the road. Shady walked by his side, his right hand man. Together they’d turned a dozen men from inside the prison and had let another fifty loose on the streets. By the time they’d finished their rampage on the prison, there wasn’t a single guard left alive.

Now they were ready to unleash terror on the streets of this town. They followed the trail of destruction that had already been left for them by the escaped inmates, passing over turned cars and burning houses on the way, Kyle leading the small band of newly turned vampires. His group comprised all the men he’d been closest to whilst behind bars, the ones who’d backed him in scraps or who had beaten up another inmate on his behalf. They were men who were loyal to him and grateful for the freedom and power he had gifted them with. It was a gratitude that extended far beyond the usual sire bond. These were men who would lay their lives down to serve him.

Kyle wanted to make sure his followers got a good show on the way into battle. He went up to an electrical store and used his super vampire strength to smash the windows with his fists. The crowd roared their approval. Kyle jumped in through the broken window and began wrenching the TVs from the wall, making blue sparks of electricity explode all around him like fireworks. He threw the TVs on the ground and his followers cheered at the mere senseless violence of it all. The store

was aflame by the time they left it.

Kyle decided for his next trick he would show off the flying skills he'd gotten a chance to perfect. He wrenched a street lamp out of the sidewalk and flew up into the air with it in his hands. Then he threw it like a javelin. It arched through the air before smashing through a moving car, spiking it into the ground. The dazed driver stumbled out of the wreck of his car, and his band of followers pounced on the stumbling man and devoured him.

In the sky ahead, a swarm of his vampire children were soaring through the skies. But something caught his attention. In the sky, far in the distance, the other side to where his vampire teen army was flying, he saw the lone silhouette of a girl flying across the sky at the speed of light. She was heading towards the Hudson river. Some instinct in Kyle told him that it was the girl he'd been chasing all this time.

Scarlet.

Kyle raced into the epicentre of the chaos. The inmates he'd liberated earlier were being beaten by the national guard. But the high school vampires were feasting on the police in turn. The whole thing was a beautiful mess.

Kyle leapt onto the hood of a police truck, using it like a stage. It was time to lead his army into battle.

"My children!" Kyle cried, addressing the mob.

The vampires looked up at him, ready and willing for their sire to give them commands. They looked at him adoringly, as

though he were a god.

"It's time for us to start the war!" Kyle continued.

He leapt into the sky and the vampire army cheered and swarmed after him, following their leader. Kyle felt more powerful than he had in his life. As he flew at the front of his army of vampires, leading them into battle, he noticed dawn was beginning to break. It had been the most amazing night of terror and destruction. By the time the sun rose, Kyle would be King of a whole new race and the humans on earth could begin counting down the days to their inevitable extinction.

CHAPTER TWENTY SEVEN

Caitlin felt sick to her stomach as the world swirled around her. Clutching onto Caleb for dear life, she worried that if she let go he may disappear into the ether and become stuck between realms. All around them, lights and colors flashed. It was impossible to tell if they were facing up or down. All they could feel was the terrifying forward momentum and the sloshing sensation as though they were in a boat on the waves.

Then all at once, everything stopped. They found themselves standing on the banks of a river.

"The Hudson?" he asked.

"Yes!" Caitlin cried, relieved that they had survived the journey through time and space.

Then she saw a sight that made her heart lurch.

"Look!" she cried, pointing into the sky. "It's Scarlet! It's really her!"

Caleb watched his daughter race across the sky, heading for the estate on the banks of the Hudson.

"Come on!" he cried, grabbing Caitlin's hand.

They began to run towards the mansion. But they hadn't gotten more than five paces when a swarm of vampires raced over their heads.

"We're too late," Caitlin cried, feeling desperation take control of her senses.

They watched, terrified, as the huge black cloud of vampires

raced over their heads. They were going towards the estate as well. Caitlin knew then that Scarlet was in peril.

Caitlin was about to charge in the direction of the mansion when all at once, the vampire army double backed on itself. Suddenly, it came right for them.

"Caleb!" Caitlin screamed.

The man leading the army landed in front of Caitlin, stopping her in her tracks. Caitlin's heart clenched with terror as she came face to face with the man she'd seen her daughter feast on back at Pete's bar, a time that felt like a million years ago. What was his name?

Kyle.

Kyle sniffed the air like a dog following a scent.

"Mr. and Mrs. Paine," he said, looking Caitlin and Caleb up and down.

He snapped his fingers and the obedient vampire army took to the skies again, racing off for the estate, following unspoken commands that Caitlin could only assume meant danger for Scarlet.

"I've been looking for your daughter all night," Kyle said, pacing round and round Caleb and Caitlin. "I'm pleased to say that her life will be over by the time the sun rises. I'm going to enjoy telling her how you begged for your lives as I killed you."

Caitlin couldn't help but think this was it, that everything was going to end here, now, when they'd been so close to saving their daughter. The thought broke her heart. She felt like a

failure. A failure as a mother and a wife. Caleb was right when he'd said it didn't matter if she survived elsewhere, in another dimension or time. This was the world she lived in, this was the life she was conscious of, and for it to end now was more than she could bear.

Then suddenly, a roaring sound behind Kyle made him spin around. Someone was charging forward, head down like a quarterback. The person barreled into Kyle, knocking him off his feet before slamming him into the ground on his back. Caitlin realized with surprise that the person was her brother. Sam.

She felt a flood of love for him as she watched her brother grapple on the floor with Kyle, clearly risking his life to save hers and Caleb's.

"Go!" he shouted. "Save Scarlet!"

Caitlin didn't have time to argue. Caleb grabbed her hand and together they raced to the mansion, leaving Sam at Kyle's mercy.

CHAPTER TWENTY EIGHT

Vivian chased Scarlet through the skies, right on her tail. Scarlet must have known she was being chased because she kept looking back over her shoulder. Blake was lagging behind but he still followed Vivian dutifully on her quest to cause pain.

No matter how fast Scarlet was as a vampire, she couldn't out fly Vivian, who had been more athletic in her human form than Scarlet. Scarlet had just reached the roof of a mansion when Vivian caught her by the ankle.

The two girls went skidding across the rooftop, scraping a path over the tiles and making them fly up all around them. Vivian was immediately in fight mode. She grappled with Scarlet before pinning her down by her arms. Scarlet thrashed like a woman possessed.

"Let go of me!" she screamed.

Vivian laughed maniacally. This was the moment she'd been dreaming of all along—and she was going to squeeze every ounce of pleasure out of it that she could.

"What the hell happened to you?" she sneered. "You look like crap."

Scarlet was windswept, covered in small nicks and cuts. She had tears in her clothes, mud in her hair, and dirt encrusted on her hands. The sight of her disgusted Vivian.

Vivian reached in her back pocket for her shard of wood and

held it up to Scarlet's neck. Scarlet's eyes widened at the sight of it. Vivian watched her neck bulge as she swallowed her fear.

"Why are you doing this?" Scarlet cried.

"Why?" Vivian sneered. "Because I hate you. You're a freak. And you stole my boyfriend."

"You're pathetic," Scarlet screamed.

The insult enraged Vivian further. She pushed hard onto Scarlet's wrists until she felt the satisfying crack of one of the bones breaking. Scarlet screamed.

"Bet you wished you'd left me to drown now," Vivian replied with a malevolent grin, tightening her grasp on Scarlet so the writhing girl couldn't get away. "Instead, you saved my life. Because you're lovely, sweet, stupid, Scarlet Paine, who wouldn't want to do anything bad to anyone. Thanks to you I got to murder Jasmine's parents in front of her."

Scarlet's eyes widened with horror.

"No!" she cried out, not wanting to believe that Vivian could be so cruel.

"Oh yes," Vivian said with relish. "And my bet is if she's not dead by the end of the night, she'll go mad and be sent to the mental hospital like Maria."

Tears were shining in Scarlet's eyes, clearly from the pain in her wrist, and from the emotional torment Vivian was putting her through.

"What are you talking about?" she stammered.

"Maria," Vivian said with slow, cold calculation. "She's in

the loony bin."

Vivian smiled. She was having so much fun.

"You've really gone to all this effort to hurt me?" Scarlet yelped. "Just because Blake had a bigger crush on me than on you?"

At the mention of his name, Blake shuffled out of the shadows. His hands were stuffed in his pockets, his head bowed. He looked completely dejected.

Vivian snapped her fingers and he trudged towards her.

"Blake's mine now, aren't you baby?" she said.

She handed him the wooden stake.

"And to prove how much Blake loves *me* and not you," she added, "he's going to kill you."

Blake looked at the stake in his hand. Dutifully, he knelt down and held it directly about Scarlet's heart. He looked into her eyes and took a deep breath.

"Go on," Vivian said, urging him on, her eyes flashing with malice. "Kill her!"

"Don't do this!" Scarlet cried. "Please!"

Blake shook his head.

"I'm sorry," he said. "I don't want to do this, but I have no choice."

Then in one, swift motion, he raised the stake and stabbed it forward with all his might.

A scream pierced the night sky. But it wasn't Scarlet who screamed.

It was Vivian.

To her shock, she felt searing pain in her heart, and she looked back to see that Blake had turned the stake on her.

Vivian loosened her grip on Scarlet. She staggered to her feet, looking at the shard protruding from her chest with disbelief and horror.

“Blake,” she said in a pained voice. “How could you do this?”

Blake turned on her.

“You’re sick, Vivian. You left me no choice.”

Vivian’s words came out of her in rasping chokes.

“You... killed... me.”

Then, just like that, she disintegrated, all that was left, her Ralph Lauren shirt and Louis Vuitton shoes, sitting on the roof tiles.

Scarlet lay on her back panting, dazed by what had just happened. She looked up at Blake.

“You saved my life,” she said with disbelief.

Blake extended a hand to her. She took it and he helped her to his feet.

“I’m sorry,” he said. “For treating you badly. I think...” He looked away, rubbed his neck. “I think I always loved you.”

Scarlet stared at him, not knowing what to say or what to do. Once, all she would have wanted in the world was to hear those words.

“I wished that I loved you as you did me,” she said, feeling

sad for him—and grateful.

She leaned forward and slowly planted a gentle kiss on his lips.

He stared back, eyes wide with surprise as she pulled back.

With that, Scarlet lifted up into the air, flying up, not need to look back to know that Blake was standing on the roof, watching her fly away, and thinking, as she was, of what might have been.

CHAPTER TWENTY NINE

Reeling from what had just happened on the rooftop, Scarlet tried to force all thoughts of Blake from her mind. She instead landed on the drain pipe and burst into one of the upstairs windows in Sage's vast estate. Time was short, and she had to stay focused.

Scarlet knew she was walking into a trap, but no longer cared. If she could just give Sage the potion in her pocket, maybe she'd be able to convince him to go to the vampire city with her, to give up his immortality for love. The sisters had made it seem like he would never do such a thing, but Scarlet felt that deep down he loved her enough to make that sacrifice.

She heard voices coming from downstairs and ran towards them, down a huge, stone spiral staircase that opened up into a cavernous, ancient living room. She drew to a halt. There, on a red velvet sofa, was Sage. He was alive. He was awake.

Scarlet bolted towards him.

"Sage!" she cried, flinging herself to her knees.

She felt his arms wrap around her, holding her close to his chest. He was warm, his breath steady. The horrible wounds that had marked his skin before had miraculously healed. She'd been right when she'd thought that the Immortalists would not harm him, that he was only useful to them as a bartering tool whilst still alive. But they'd gone beyond her expectation. Sage looked positively healthy, which was more than

could be said for her.

"Scarlet, what happened to you?" Sage asked with concern.

He wiped a muddy tendril of hair from her face, and ran his thumb along the tear tracks on her cheeks. Scarlet wanted more than anything in the world for Sage to tend to her wounds, fix her broken wrist, clean the mud from her hair and skin. But there was no time.

"Listen to me," Scarlet said, pulling away from his tender affection. "We don't have much time."

She fumbled in her pocket for the vial.

"This is a drop of immortality," she added hurriedly. "If you take it it will buy you enough time to come to the vampire city with me."

"The vampire city?" Sage said frowning. "Why would we go there?"

"Because," Scarlet said. "If we go to the vampire city and you drink my blood then you can become human. Sage, we can be together."

She pressed the vial into his palm and searched his eyes, willing to read in them the relief she'd hoped he would be feeling on hearing her news. But that wasn't what his eyes were telling her. He was looking at her with grief.

"I can't become human," he said with a deep, sorrowful sigh.

Scarlet sat back stunned, frowning deeply. She felt winded, like she'd received a blow to the chest.

“Why not?” she demanded, gazing into Sage’s eyes.

In that moment, it felt as though all her fears were coming true. The sisters had been right; Sage wasn’t prepared to give up his immortality for her. He didn’t love her as much as she thought he did. Everything she’d been through was on a false pretence.

Noticing her dejected expression, Sage reached out and grabbed her hands in his.

“You’re a vampire, Scarlet,” he said passionately. “A vampire and a human can’t be together. Right now we are equals. But if I became human...” His voice trailed away.

“If you became human what?” Scarlet demanded. “You think I’d hurt you?”

He shook his head.

“I don’t think,” he said. “I know.”

“I can’t believe you’d think that!” Scarlet cried, tugging her hands away from him. “I’m a vampire, not an animal, Sage. There is a difference. I know how to control myself.”

“That’s not what I meant,” Sage said. “I meant you’d hurt me emotionally. You’d hurt me because I’d have to age whilst you stayed forever young. Do you really think you’d still love me when I was an old man? Whilst you were young and healthy and beautiful, you think you’d be willing to care for a dying, decrepit man?”

Scarlet was relieved to learn that the sisters had not been correct about Sage not being prepared to give up his immortality.

She was also relieved that Sage didn’t think she was a mindless, uncontrollable human-killer. But his words hurt her nonetheless. How could he even question her loyalty? She’d been to the ends of the earth and back for him—surely he knew her well enough to know she would never be that shallow, that their love transcended the normal barriers faced by mere mortals.

“I will love you for eternity,” Scarlet told him passionately. She gazed deeply into his eyes, imploring him to believe her, to accept what she was saying. “Please. Please drink the potion before it’s too late.”

A noise from behind made Scarlet jump with shock. Standing in the doorway of the room stood the same huge, robed man she’d witness torturing Sage in Boldt castle. She felt red hot anger race through her. The killer in her wanted to make him suffer for what he’d done to Sage.

Behind the man stood Lore, and a woman who bore such striking resemblance to Lore she could only be his mother, and a girl who looked Scarlet’s age, with raven black hair. They were all watching the scene unfolding before them.

“Don’t touch her!” Sage screamed from his place on the sofa.

He tried to stand but he was still too weak. All he could do was watch helplessly.

Scarlet looked at the vial in his hand one last time and accepted in that moment that he was never going to drink it.

But if he thought that would let him off the hook, he was wrong. She would rather die than let Sage die.

"You don't need to fight me," Scarlet said wearily, standing. "I'll give my life so that Sage can live."

"No!" he screamed.

"I'll let every single one of the Immortalist monsters live too," she added, "to make sure he doesn't die."

Scarlet directed her last words at Octal, then Lore. If what Vivian had told her was true, Maria's mental breakdown could only have been caused by him. But whilst Octal stood tall, seemingly proud of the pain he'd caused, Lore looked guilt-ridden.

In the background, Scarlet could hear Sage crying out, shouting his futile protests. But she wouldn't look at him because she knew that, in his hand, he held the vial with the power to stop everything. If he just agreed to become human, this would all be over. She wouldn't have to sacrifice herself. The Immortalists would become extinct.

But he would not drink the potion. And in that moment, Scarlet knew the end had come.

"Just... do whatever it is you have to," she said, finally. "I'm ready to die."

Lore approached Scarlet. Something about his demeanor had changed. He no longer seemed like the arrogant boy she'd met before. He seemed older, wiser.

The black haired woman approached too. She was holding

silver handcuffs. Scarlet let her place them around her wrists.

Scarlet looked up, noting that she had an audience. Octal was watching on with a grave expression. Lore's mom was ringing her hands and looking somewhat terrified as Lore removed a spear like weapon from a box and held it up in the air.

Scarlet paid them no attention. Instead, she looked at Sage.

"I love you," she said. "Even if you don't love me, I love you so much I will die so you can live."

"I do love you!" Sage gasped through his tears. "But I cannot agree to go to the vampire city to drain your blood! Don't you see if I did that you'd die? I'd kill you. I can't do that Scarlet."

But it was too late. There was no turning back now.

Scarlet squeezed her eyes shut, waiting for the final blow to claim her life.

But no blow came.

She opened her eyes.

Lore was standing there, motionless, the spear held so tightly in his clutch that his knuckles were turning white. A silver tear thread its way down his cheek.

The black haired girl studied his face, wearing an expression of empathetic pain. She reached out and wrapped a delicate hand around his.

"You don't have to do this, Lore," she said.

His hands were trembling. He looked at the girl. She spoke

again, her voice as soft as the wind.

“We don’t need an earth to walk upon, you and I,” she said, smiling. “Our love crosses all times, all worlds.”

“We’ll be together for eternity?” Lore asked. “Do you promise me, Lyra?”

Lyra reached up and stroked his hair.

“We were destined to meet,” she said. “Our atoms will be drawn to one another no matter where in the galaxy we are.”

“Do you promise?” Lore said again.

“I promise,” Lyra whispered. “Now do what your heart tells you is right.”

Lore dropped the spear. It hit the ground with a clatter. He swept Lyra up in his arms and their lips met. They held one another tightly.

Scarlet gasped, not believing what she was seeing. Behind Lore, she saw the woman who must be his mother let out a sigh of relief. She was watching her son with adoration, not because he had saved his race from extinction but because he had decided to let them die.

Just then, she heard a roar from behind. Octal. He grabbed the spear up from the floor and charged Scarlet.

She turned, seeing the pointed weapon coming right for her. But before it reached her Octal froze. Right before her eyes, he turned to stone.

In that moment, Scarlet realized the sun had risen. The Immortalists were out of time.

The ritual had not been completed. Their race was dead.

She looked at Lore and Lyra, frozen in place, locked in an eternal embrace. Lore’s mother had her hands clasped, forever gazing at her son who had done, in the last moment, the right thing. Then Scarlet looked back at Sage.

His eyes were open but there was no fear in them. He had turned to stone gazing upon Scarlet, and the look in his eyes could only be described as love.

Locked in his stone hand was the vial of immortality potion, the stopper still in place, not a drop drunk.

Realizing it was all over, Scarlet crumpled forward and wept into her crossed arms.

Sage was dead.

CHAPTER THIRTY

Scarlet was bereft. She was so engulfed by grief she didn't even care when she heard the hammering on the front door of the mansion or the sound of glass smashing. It was only the sound of chaos and anarchy, the jeering, screaming sounds of murderous rage, and the thudding sound of hundreds of boots on the marble floors that made her turn around.

As soon as she did, she took in the sight of a vampire army. Amongst them were kids she knew from high school, the jocks and cheerleaders still in their uniforms, the goth kids from freshman year, the glee club. Then behind them was a savage looking group of thugs, with shaved heads and tattoos all over their faces, necks and arms. They were wearing uniforms, and it dawned on Scarlet that they were escaped prisoners.

Scarlet had no idea what was going on but she knew instantly that it had something to do with her. This army, made up of kids and convicts, was here to kill her.

She sprung into action, leaping into the air and heading towards the vaulted ceiling of the mansion.

The vampire army jumped after her, taking to the air, while the inmates were left to race up the staircase.

The whole scene looked completely out of place within the walls of Sage's opulent mansion. But luckily for Scarlet, she was familiar with this place. She'd been here before, unlike the others, and that meant she could wind her way through the

labyrinthine corridors quickly, gaining precious seconds and distance.

As she rocketed through the corridors with their ornate chandeliers and beautiful gold leaf wallpapers, she tried to think of what to do. Her grief was fast turning into rage. Her death at the hands of the army would be a blessing, the only way to eradicate the emotional pain that had taken up residence in her chest. But her stupid survival instinct was forcing her to keep going, to stay alive no matter what.

She raced past a framed family portrait of Sage and his parents and ripped it from the wall as she went. As she flew, she broke the wooden frame and held it in her hands like a spear. Then she steered herself down a narrow corridor, heading straight for the open door at the end. She burst into the room, turned on the spot, raised her stake, and stabbed it straight through a row of vampires.

They exploded into dust as Scarlet slammed the door in their faces and raced towards the window.

She found herself in a beautiful bedroom with a large four poster bed and tall candles dotted all over the place. It was the sort of room she could imagine spending time in with Sage, and her heart ached as she remembered the fact that she would never ever get to experience that.

Scarlet tried to burst out the window but found it blocked, held firmly in place.

She catapulted off the glass, leaping over the top of four

poster bed. As she went, she grabbed one of the candles and lit the curtains that surrounded the bed. The group of cheerleader girls who had chased her through the posts were trapped by a wall of flames on all four sides. They set alight and turned to dust.

Scarlet flew over the heads of the other vampires who were streaming into the room. As she raced through the corridor, back the way she'd come, she realized that the inmates had now made it to the top of the stairs. She doubled back on herself, racing in the other direction through the dark hallways.

There was a second staircase, Scarlet knew, at the far end of the mansion. Used originally for servants, it was steep and crammed. She probably wouldn't be able to fly down, but if she was going to get out of the mansion alive, that was the only way.

She flew, a group of jocks right behind her, and stretched her arms in front of her, hands squeezed into fists. They slammed into the door, forcing it open. Scarlet felt pain race through her broken wrist but it was more like a dull ache. She was too pumped with adrenaline to feel real pain.

Scarlet landed on her feet and began to race down the spiral staircase. Behind her she heard the sound of more and more people as they raced after her. She reached the bottom of the stairs and ran out, finding herself back in the main hallway where the statue bodies of the Immortalists stood.

She caught sight of Sage lying on the velvet sofa, turned to

stone, and stopped dead on the spot. There was no point going on. There was no point in living.

Scarlet closed her eyes, preparing for the sensation of a thousand murderous vampires descending on her.

Suddenly, the doors to the estate burst open and the police and national guard filed in. The national guard were holding guns and riot shields. The police were equipped with planks of wood. At the front of the group stood a woman in a police uniform holding a megaphone.

"Use the wood to kill the vampires," she was shouting into the megaphone. "Good old bullets will kill the convicts."

The army and police streamed past Scarlet, armed with their planks of wood and guns. Scarlet stood there, stunned. She realized that standing on either side of the woman with the megaphone were Jasmine and Becca.

"Scarlet!" they cried, running forward and grabbing their friend.

Scarlet was overwhelmed with grief. She collapsed into their arms, sobbing uncontrollably. Behind her came the sounds of gunfire. Vampires were shouting, exploding into clouds of dust all around them.

"You're okay, Scarlet," Becca was saying to her friend.

But Scarlet's sobs were uncontrollable. Her grief was all consuming.

"Sage is dead," she wailed. "Sage is dead!"

She broke free from the embrace of her friends and ran

towards where Sage was lying. From somewhere far away she heard someone shout, “No! She’s not one of them!” At the same time, a sharp pain shot through her stomach. She looked down and saw a jagged shard of wood protruding straight through her body. She’d been stabbed with a stake.

She was dying.

CHAPTER THIRTY ONE

Caitlin and Caleb ran through the mansion doors. They’d seen the vampire army descend on the estate, followed by the police and military. But knowing their daughter was inside was enough to make them enter, too. They braced themselves for carnage—but what they saw was far worse than they’d ever imagined.

There, lying on the floor, bleeding, was Scarlet. Her breath was rapid. She was covered in mud and dirt. She looked like she’d been dragged through Hell and back.

Scarlet’s friends were watching her with looks of horror on their faces. A police woman was standing solemnly beside them.

Caitlin screamed in anguish and rushed forward to her daughter. She grabbed her limp body and pulled her into her chest.

“Drink, Scarlet,” she said, offering her arm to her dying daughter. “Drink. Please!”

Scarlet was trying to say no but she couldn’t make a sound at all.

“Listen to me,” Caitlin said sternly. “I’ve read all the prophecies, all the texts and books and literature. I’ve been transported to Egypt, to the lost vampire city beneath the sphinx. I am the last vampire, Scarlet. Not you. Drink my blood and you’ll become human again.”

As soon as Caitlin said the words ‘human again’ a strange look passed over Scarlet’s eyes. It was a look of grief, a mournful sorrow. But the girl took her mother’s arm in her mouth nonetheless. A tear trickled from her eye as she bit into the flesh and began to drink.

Caitlin winced but didn’t want her daughter to see her in pain. She rocked Scarlet back and forth like a baby, trying to soothe her. Caleb stood by his wife, rubbing her shoulders, trying his best not to weep, to look like the strong protector he was supposed to be.

Scarlet drank and drank, and as she did so, she grew stronger. But Caitlin, in turn, became weaker. Then, suddenly, Caitlin lost consciousness. She fell to her side, flopping against the marble floor with a thud. Caleb swooped her up into his arms and settled her into a window seat, holding her limp body tightly against his.

“I’m sorry!” Scarlet cried as sat up and wiped the tears and blood from her face.

She stood and ran over to her parents.

“Mom!” she screamed. “Mom, I’m sorry! Wake up. Please!”

But it was too late, her mother was on the brink of death, and Scarlet knew that if she died, it would be all her fault.

The doors to the mansion burst open and Kyle ran in, covered in mud from his wrestle with Sam on the banks of the Hudson. He surveyed the carnage, took in the sight of his floundering vampire army, and roared in despair.

“You!” he said, seeing Scarlet.

He zoomed towards her as quickly as a bullet from a gun and grabbed her round the throat, wrenching her into the air. Caleb leapt up and pounced at Kyle. He began pummeling Kyle’s back but it was no use. Kyle was far too strong and far too determined to be stopped.

As Scarlet dangled in the air, kicking her feet, Kyle squeezed. The look in his eye was one of murderous intent.

Then all at once, Kyle froze. He dropped Scarlet and staggered to the side as though in tremendous pain. Something was happening. Something strange and mystical.

“You’re human!” he cried, spitting out the word at Scarlet like an accusation.

Scarlet touched herself all over. It was true. Her mother had been right. She’d had taken the vampire out of Scarlet and turned her back into a human.

But that meant that Kyle no longer had a sire. The mystical vampire bloodline that passed from one vampire to the next was gone, evaporating like steam from a puddle. It was as though it had never existed.

Kyle clutched his chest as he was gripped by pain. Elsewhere in the mansion, the sounds of screaming and shouting began ringing out.

“What’s happening?” Scarlet cried.

It was Caleb who answered. His expression was gravely serious.

“They’re reverting back to humans,” he said. “Without their sire, the vampire part of them is disappearing.”

“I don’t understand,” Scarlet said.

Caleb looked back over at Caitlin slumped in the window seat.

“Your mother is an extraordinary woman,” he said. He smiled in spite of his anguish, proud of her wife and that amazing brain of hers. “She’s changed the timeline, changed the course of events. By reverting back to the original vampire, it’s as though you were never a vampire in the first place. And if you were never a vampire, then he couldn’t have been turned.” He pointed at where Kyle was writhing on the floor in agony. “It’s like he never existed in the first place.”

Scarlet watched on, her mouth agape, as the high schoolers who just moments before had been rampaging through the city streets killing innocent people became suddenly conscious of what they had done.

“Stand down,” Sadie Marlow cried into her megaphone.

She went over to Kyle and handcuffed him. Then everyone looked around as the former teenage vampire army dissolved into sobs of grief.

CHAPTER THIRTY TWO

A cold gray morning light settled over the mansion. As the fire fighters trudged out, having put out the large fire that had raged in the bedroom, an eerie sort of calm settled over the manor and the people still within it. The high schoolers were weeping, huddling up together, mourning the loss of friends who had been killed whilst vampires and would not be returning to their human form.

All morning a series of prison vans had come and gone, taking with them the inmates that had remained humans, along with those who’d had the brief pleasure of being vampires before reverting back to human form. A series of undertakers had also come and gone, removing the police and army personnel who’d lost their lives in the fight.

Standing in the middle of the whole thing were the stone statues of Octal and Lore’s mother. Then further into the living room were Lore and Lyra in their lovers’ grip, together forever like a work of art.

Finally, the stone body of Sage lay in his position on the sofa. Scarlet rested her head on his chest. The stone he’d turned into was still warm. If Scarlet closed her eyes, she could almost pretend to hear his heart beating.

What hurt her more than anything was the cruel irony that the reason he hadn’t gone to the vampire city was because a vampire and human could never live peacefully together. And

yet here she was, no longer a vampire, but just a lowly human girl.

Scarlet sat up. She had a sudden idea. It was a long shot but surely it was worth it.

Using the hand that had not been put into a sling, she pried the vial from Sage's hand. The drop of immortal blood glistened at the bottom. Scarlet unplugged the stopper and pulled out the long, thin, tapered glass dropper. She held it over Sage's lips. The drop of blood fell into his mouth.

Nothing happened.

Then, desperate, her heart pounding, tears flooding her face, she leaned forward and kissed his stone lips.

At once, the gray stone that had replaced Sage's skin began to crack. He took in a deep breath, making shards of stone shatter to the ground. His eyes flew open and he sat up in one swift movement. The stone shell that had been encasing him fell to the floor and shattered. He looked more alive than Scarlet had ever seen him.

"Sage!" she cried, not quite believing it had worked.

Sage looked at her, his eyes wide with shock.

"What's happened?" he said, glancing at the debris and carnage that surrounded him.

"We have a second chance," Scarlet said, too happy to hold back her tears. "A chance to both live normal mortal lives."

Sage's eyes widened with emotion.

"I don't understand," he said. "How?"

Scarlet gestured to where Caitlin was resting in the window seat. Hours had passed but she was still pale and weak. She hadn't regained consciousness. She was being tended to by Caleb. Her uncle Sam was there too and even Polly had turned up to support her family.

"My mother found a way to turn me back into a human," Scarlet said. "She took the vampire blood out me completely."

Sage could hardly speak through his joy.

"You mean we could still go to the vampire city?" he said. "And I could become a human?"

Scarlet nodded.

"But the last vampire," Sage said. "Wasn't that part of the spell? Didn't I have to drain the blood of the last vampire?"

"There are no more vampires," she said. "Everything has changed. Fate itself has changed."

Sage laughed and shook his head, so shocked he didn't know what to say.

"When do we leave?" he asked.

Scarlet stood and offered her hand to him.

"Right away," she replied.

"And how do we get there?" he said, taking her hand in his. "I thought the vampire city was lost."

Scarlet looked back at her mother.

"She told me she had been there. She must know a way."

Together, Sage and Scarlet walked over to where her family were tending to Caitlin. Caleb pulled his daughter into an

embrace.

“Is mom going to be okay?” Scarlet asked.

“I don’t know,” Caleb replied. “How are you feeling?”

Scarlet smiled.

“Human,” she said. Then she looked up at her father. “Dad, I need to ask you something. Mom told me she’d been to the lost vampire city. I need to go there too.”

Caleb frowned.

“Why?” he asked.

Scarlet glanced over at Sage.

“We don’t have much time,” she said. “But if Sage and I go to the vampire city, he can become human too. He can become mortal, like me.”

Caleb eyed the man who’d stolen his daughter’s heart. Then he pulled the leather box from his pocket and handed it to Scarlet.

“This will take you where you need to go.”

Scarlet took the box and ran her finger over the flower design on the front.

She knelt beside her mother.

“I can’t go if she won’t live,” Scarlet said, wiping back a tear. “Mom? I love you mom.”

Caleb lay a reassuring hand on her shoulder.

“Go,” he said. “She will live. And she would want you to go.”

Scarlet kissed her mother slowly. Then she turned to Sage.

The couple held hands, walking away to find some privacy and begin their journey to the lost vampire city beneath the sphinx.

Caleb watched his daughter go, then turned back to his wife. She’d made the ultimate sacrifice for the love of their daughter. She’d given up her humanity, possibly even her life. Only time would tell how much of a sacrifice she had truly made.

Caleb sat with his wife the whole morning through, until the sun was high in the sky. Though it was a cold day, it was bright, and light glittered off the Hudson river. The others filtered out, and soon it was just Caleb and Caitlin left.

Caleb stroked his wife’s pale hand and watched the river rippling from the window. He was exhausted and couldn’t even remember the last time he’d slept.

Just as he was nodding off, he was startled by a voice. His eyes pinged opened and he looked down. Caitlin’s eyes were open.

Caleb pulled his wife into an embrace and let the tears he’d been holding up fall freely.

“I thought I’d lost you forever,” he said.

Caitlin held her husband tightly.

“I’m not going anywhere,” she replied.

Caleb let go and moved back. He studied his wife’s face.

“Are you human?” he said. “Or vampire?”

Caitlin smiled, showing off a tooth that was somewhere between normal and a fang.

“I think,” she said, “I’m a bit of both.”

He leaned in and they kissed, and that kiss transported them both back. Back in time, back through all the places they had been and lived. Back through their relationship, from the day they’d met, to having Scarlet, to now. Back through everything they had been through. So many obstacles had come in their path. So many people, vampire, human, immortalist, had tried to tear them apart. But none had succeeded. After all this, all they had been through, here they were, still together.

And they would, they both knew, be together forever. No matter what.

Her vampire journals, after so many centuries, could finally be sealed.

It was time for them to start living again.

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But one day, all that changes. On her 17th birthday, one of the popular boys falls for her. At the same time, a mysterious new boy, Elijah, arrives at her school, and their connection is undeniable. All seems to be turning her way—when a terrible accident turns her life upside down.

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