

*Darkness
and Light*

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Part One

Portrait of the Past

Prologue

Life in New York City in 1828 was one of opportunity and economic expansion. Settlers from abroad came to the city with a spirit of pioneering to make their mark on the unsettled land and shape what was becoming a melting pot of different cultures. This was just the type of environment that brought Jacob and Arianna Nayah, natives of Barbados, to the city having traveled from Cairo, Egypt. It represented a chance to start anew and to give their only daughter, Sage, a chance to see new things and meet new people. This, however, was not the only reason for Jacob and Arianna coming to the city. They were also on the run from the hunters that were hot on their trail. The Nayahs were not ordinary people. They were vampires.

Sage, whose exotic beauty would strike a living man dead, had sharp features, dark eyes, waist-length dark brown hair, and olive skin. She would soon turn twenty-eight, an age signifying that she would inherit the vampire throne—the same age her parents were when they became vampires right after her birth. She was to continue the family tradition of vampire royals that expands centuries. Because she was the last of her generation, it was up to her to continue the bloodline. However, trouble arose with the plan

after the family moved into a wooden house a block away from the furniture store when Sage met and fell in love with Cristian Thomas, the son of the owner of Thomas Furniture. This would soon set off a chain of events that no one could have anticipated.

The day began as a typical day when Jacob and Arianna, with Sage in tow, wanted to look at handcrafted furnishings and had heard from some of the townspeople that Thomas Furniture, run by Jonathan Thomas, was the best in the business, and that both father and son were carpenters by trade. The store was located downtown in a brownstone building that also had wood houses next door, one in which Jonathan and his wife Carolyn lived with their son. Because portions of the land were unsettled, some streets were made of cobblestone, others of dirt. They rode to the store on a horse-drawn carriage. Stepping out of the carriage, they looked at the people bustling about on the street. Sage noticed, to her surprise, that no one seemed to notice them as they walked on the street. The stench of horse manure permeated the air.

“There it is!” Sage exclaimed. “Thomas Furniture.”

They knocked on the glass door as a short woman with curly black hair and a day gown with a round, ruffled linen collar came to the door. She frowned upon seeing them. “Hello,” she said sharply. “Hello,” Jacob replied. “We were told that this is the best place for handcrafted furnishings,” he said. She semi-nodded her head as she stood, still looking at them scornfully.

“What is it!” said the voice of the unseen man on the other side. She widened the door so the man wearing full-length, light-colored trousers, a linen shirt, and curly hair with sideburns could see what had her attention. “How can I help you?” he asked. Arianna and Sage could see the disdain on his face. “I wanted to inquire about your handcrafted furnishings,” Jacob said with unease. “I don’t think we have anything that fits your...uh...your...,” the man stammered.

Jacob was all too aware of the bigotry that he and Arianna had received because of their caramel complexion, having fled from Barbados when the slave traders came. He knew that in parts of this young country, people of his skin color were enslaved and that coming to America would be a risk for that reason, but with the hunters closing in on them, he had no choice but to make this move and take the hostility he knew they would face. He tried to warn Sage that they would face scorn because of their ethnic background.

“Mother, I decided that...,” Cristian stopped dead in his tracks upon his first glance at Sage. He stood still, looking at her, not uttering a sound, completely besotted by her beauty. Sage caught her breath at her first glance of Cristian. He was handsome with pale skin and medium-length, dark brown hair tied back in a ponytail, penetrating dark brown eyes that could look deep into the soul, and a deep, raspy voice. They both stared at each other for what seemed like an eternity while both parents stared at each other uncomfortably.

“Well, uh, thank you for your time,” Jacob said, ushering Sage away who kept looking back at Cristian. The woman shut the door swiftly.

That night, Sage was in her room praying. She knew that her parents wanted her to continue the vampire tradition, but she didn’t want to be a vampire. She wanted to live a normal life, get married, and have a family. Her mind raced to thoughts of the handsome young man she saw earlier that day in the furniture store hoping that she would see him once again. Her parents warned her about getting involved with someone not of their kind. They told her it was best for her to stick with her own, because it would be nothing but trouble to think of getting involved with someone not of the same race. At the same time, Cristian’s parents were giving him the

same warning of not making trouble by wanting to see the Negro girl again by the way he stared at her. They didn't want him to bring embarrassment or scandal to the family. His mother even tried to tell him about the girl down the street named Susie who had a crush on him, whom he at one time considered dating. Nevertheless, Cristian couldn't forget the mysterious beauty and wanted to see her again. Being a skeptic, he never believed in love at first sight, but from the moment he saw her, he knew he loved her and he had to see her again.

The following morning, Sage dressed in a ruffled day gown, snuck out of the house determined to find a way to see Cristian who had also snuck out of his house to try to find her.

She stepped into the horse-drawn carriage just as Cristian boarded it. They looked at each other astonished.

"Hello," she said, smiling shyly.

"Good morning," he said with a grin. "I was coming to try to find you."

"You were?" she asked, batting her long eyelashes. "So was I."

They both laughed. "What's your name?" he asked.

"Sage," she replied. "And your name is...?" she asked.

"Cristian," he said. "Cristian Thomas."

"It's nice to meet you, Cristian," she said, extending her hand.

"Pleased to meet you," he said, taking her hand and kissing it.

Sage felt her face flush. They stepped out of the carriage and walked alongside the dirt road toward the Hudson River. "It's beautiful," she said. "You sure are," Cristian said, staring at her with twinkling eyes. "I was talking about the river," she said with a nervous laugh.

"Where are you from?" he asked.

"I've lived in Egypt, but I was born in Barbados," she replied.

“So what brought you to New York City?” he asked. “My parents wanted to see something different,” she replied. “Well, I’m glad you came,” he said. “So am I,” she said, smiling.

They watched the sunrise, which was a magnificent sight of gold, yellow, and orange hues. Impulsively, he leaned in and gave her a kiss. She looked at him stunned. “What was that for?” she exclaimed, feeling like her heart was going to leap out of her chest. “I couldn’t help myself,” he said, looking into her eyes. “You had better get going,” she said, looking around, nervous that they brought attention to themselves. “I don’t want you to get in trouble for being with me.” “I’ll be fine,” he said, flashing a smile. “What about your parents?” “My parents are resting,” she said tongue-in-cheek. “So, I’ll see you tomorrow?” he asked. She nodded her head “yes.” He smiled. “So, tomorrow it is,” he said as he got in the carriage and waved good-bye.

Sage felt like she was on top of the moon, as if she were floating in the air. She had instantly fallen in love. As she walked through the door of the wooden house, the door slammed shut behind her. “What did I tell you about seeing that boy!” her father demanded, his eyes turning red. “I didn’t see the problem...” He silenced her with a swift slap in the face, the impact nearly knocking her to the floor. “He’s not our kind,” he said, his eyes glaring. “He doesn’t belong in our world.” “I forbid you to see him again,” he said, his lips pursed. “Soon, you will be one of us, and he has no place in your life.” Sage wiped the tears from her eyes. “There’s no way I’m becoming a vampire,” she thought as she rubbed her stinging face. “No way!”

The next morning, Sage once again snuck out of the house, this time packing her belongings along with a newspaper clipping that she tore out about Thomas Furniture that featured a hand-drawn picture of Cristian. Resolved that nothing and no one was going to keep her

apart from the man she loved, she got onto the carriage and waited for Cristian to appear. He ran up and got on the carriage with one suitcase in his hand. “What happened?” she asked. “My parents and I got in an argument over . . .,” he sighed heavily, “over you,” he said.

He noticed the bruise on her face. “What happened!” he exclaimed. “My parents and I got in an argument over you,” she replied. “That’s it!” Cristian said, “Let’s run away together.”

“We can run away to Europe,” he said, “anywhere but here.” He shook his head appalled by the narrow-mindedness of people. Remembering the strange visitors the night before, he mentioned, “Some people showed up at the store last night. They were looking for people that fit your parents’ description.” Sage became alarmed. “Did they say what their name is?” she asked, afraid of the answer. “Yes!” he replied. “They said their name was Pearson.”

She grimaced and covered her face with her hand. “What’s wrong, Sage?” Cristian asked. “I need to go back and warn my parents,” she said. “Why? Why are those people after your parents?” he asked, seeing the fear in her eyes. “It’s a long story and I don’t have time to explain it to you,” she said. “I’ll meet you at the river, okay?” she said. “But, Sage!” “Please just meet me there,” she said.

She got out of the carriage and ran back to her house. “Mother, Father!” she yelled, running inside the house. “We need to get out of here now,” her father said, grabbing her. “The hunters have found us.” “That’s what I was going to tell you,” she said. “We have to go now,” her father said. “There’s no time.” She pulled away from him. “I’m not going with you,” she said.

“What do you mean you’re not going with us? You’re really trying my patience, child,” he said raising his voice. “We’re leaving together as a family,” he said. Suddenly, they heard the sound of glass breaking at the door. “Where’s my son?” said Jonathan Thomas, holding a pistol in his hand and coming through the door.

“How’d you know where we live?” Jacob asked.

“Well, I hate to state the obvious,” Jonathan said. “But it wasn’t that hard to figure out. Now where’s my son?” he repeated. He looked at Sage with rage in his eyes. “What did you do to my son!” he demanded. “She didn’t do anything to me,” Cristian said, coming up behind him, holding his, along with Sage’s, suitcase. “I left on my own.” “Go home, boy,” the elder Thomas said. “I’ll deal with you later.

As for you,” he said, looking at Sage and cocking the trigger. “I’m ending this for good.” “No!” Cristian yelled as he ran in front of Sage just as his father pulled the trigger, and they both fell to the ground. Sage, unharmed, turned Cristian over. He was mortally wounded, bleeding from the chest. “No,” Sage cried. “Please don’t die,” she said tearfully. Cristian took his last breath, and he was gone, his motionless eyes staring into hers.

Jonathan stared at the pistol in his hand, in shock, trembling.

Jacob looked at Jonathan Thomas with incredulity that he would kill his own son. Filled with rage, he grabbed him by the neck, lifting him off the ground, and began to squeeze tightly.

“No, Father!” Sage cried. “Don’t kill him.” Jacob tightened his grip on Jonathan’s neck as his face turned beet red. “Please,” she pleaded. He loosened his grip and Jonathan dropped to the ground. Sage knelt down beside Cristian’s lifeless body. “We need to go now,” Jacob said, grabbing their suitcases and jerking her away. “You’re not human,” Jonathan Thomas said, coughing and wheezing. “You’re not human!” “We need to get to the steamboats,” Jacob said. Sage could hear the screams of Cristian’s mother as the carriage rode away. He looked at Sage who was crying as they were riding in the carriage. “I told you to stay away from that boy,” he said, shaking his head. “But you didn’t listen to me, and now you have to pay the price.” “This happened before,” he said, staring at

her. “It’s spoken of as the fate of Amerie and Lance.” “Tell me,” Sage asked. “I don’t have time to explain it now,” he said gruffly.

She looked away as the carriage arrived at the Hudson River. Jacob and Arianna looked around, suspicious of anyone who stared at them. Their powers greatly diminished because of the daylight; they knew they had to act quickly. Arianna looked at Sage, then whispered into Jacob’s ear. He looked at her. “You’re right,” he said. He looked at Sage. “We have to turn you now,” he said. “No, please!” she pleaded. “We have no choice now, Sage,” Jacob said. “This is for your own good.” “Not even your prayers can save you now.” He threw his head back as the fangs in his mouth grew. The veins protruding from his neck frightened Sage as she reached for the lever to run. He grabbed her as she protested and sank his fangs into her neck. She felt her body weakening as he nearly drained her of all her blood. Next, Jacob slit his wrist with his clawlike fingernails and forced her to drink, holding his wrist against her mouth. The last thing that Sage remembered was the excruciating pain she felt as her physical body died.

It was nightfall as Sage began to awaken. Her senses heightened, she could hear the sounds of the roaches scurrying thunderously across the floor of the steamboat. Focusing her eyes, she could see things well in the distance with her night vision, such as a man and woman kissing in a carriage in town. She sat up, looking around and trembling. “You’re a vampire now,” Arianna whispered. “You are the last of this generation.” Sage felt hungry, as if she hadn’t eaten in ages. “I’m famished,” she said. “That’s normal,” said Jacob, smiling proudly. He looked around at some of the passengers on the steamboat. “There’s plenty to feast on,” he said. The thought of drinking blood from a human made Sage feel ill. Jacob noticed men in the far corner who’d been watching them. He averted his eyes over to Arianna who had noticed the same thing. It was the

hunters. “Sage,” he said to her telepathically, startling her, “I want you to get off this steamboat.” “But,” she started. “Do as I say,” Jacob demanded. “Get off now! Don’t ask any questions.”

Sage got up and walked over to the door with her suitcase as Jacob closed it behind her, pretending to leave as she peered through the window. The hunters, taking out their silver stakes, got up and began to approach Jacob and Arianna as the terrified passengers took cover. Arianna began to fly toward them as one of hunters drove the stake into her heart with one hand and in one fell swoop with the other, decapitated her with the silver hunting knife, silencing her ear-piercing cry right before Sage’s horrified eyes. Jacob grabbed the other hunter and tried to snap his neck, but the hunter overpowered him, driving the stake into his heart, and decapitated him as he fell to his knees. Sage, overwhelmed with grief, opened her mouth to scream, but no sound came out. In a matter of hours, she had lost the man she loved and her parents. She peered into the window again as the hunters made their way to the door, to her horror. With only seconds to spare and not fully aware of the power she had inherited, Sage tucked the newspaper clipping into the bosom of her dress and changed her form into vapor, escaping just before the hunters came through the door. Fleeing back to Egypt with just the clothes on her back, she mourned her lost love and her parents, aligning herself with a faithful coven that affectionately referred to the reclusive vampire as “Queen V.”

Now one hundred and eighty years later, Sage felt a pull to return to New York City, for some unexplained reason. She felt as if Cristian’s soul were calling out to her—but how? Although well aware that there were still hunters searching for her, she was willing to take the risk of going back to the place where she met and lost her first love.

Chapter One

The rock music blared from the iPod as the unseen man, wearing earphones, worked energetically on the last touches of his masterpiece painting. Each stroke of his paintbrush brought to life the image that he'd seen in his mind so vividly of an exotically beautiful woman. "Cristian!" His manager said, tapping him on the shoulder. He took off the earphones. His manager was a man in his forties, tall, lean, with salt and pepper hair. "How long are you going to work on that oil painting?" he asked. Cristian turned the painting over. "Until I'm satisfied with it," he said. His manager looked at his watch. "Well, it's late and the gallery closed hours ago," he said. "You can finish it tomorrow," he replied. "Besides, the exhibit isn't until next week. That should give you time to finish it." He told Cristian that he would meet him at the entrance. Cristian turned the painting over and stared at it. He didn't want to leave it, for some unknown reason. He covered the painting and went to wash his hands, stopping to look at his reflection in the mirror and noticing that strands of his blonde hair had fallen out of his ponytail onto his face.

Putting on his leather jacket, he met his manager outside while the security guard locked the door. "I swear sometimes I think you live as a vampire," his manager joked, looking at Cristian's black

attire. “Vampire!” he remarked. “Yeah,” his manager replied. “You only work at night, you always dress in black,” he started to laugh. “But I don’t drink blood,” Cristian joked. “Isn’t that what vampires do?” he asked. “C’mon, let’s go,” his manager said, chuckling. “The night awaits.” “Anything can happen during the witching hour,” Cristian said with a laugh. They hailed a taxi to go over to SoHo. Having achieved early success as an artist afforded Cristian West the luxuries of a celebrity lifestyle. He had his adoring fans that mostly lusted after him because of his youthful good looks, and of course, his being wealthy made him a great catch. However, he felt emptiness in his life. There was something missing, but what was it? The last girlfriend he had—it wasn’t serious; it was more of a fling. Then, there is the image of a woman that he sees in his mind every minute of the day. He sees her in his sleep and in his dreams. “Why can’t I get this woman out of my mind?” he wondered. “Does she exist, or is she just a figment of my imagination?”

Sage sat on her private plane staring out the window. This was the first time that she was coming back to New York in centuries. She had been to California and New Orleans numerous times, but she couldn’t bring herself to return to the city where she had lost Cristian. Nonetheless, something that was beyond her control was pulling her there. It was something greater than she was. The coven sat behind her seat, excited about leaving the Middle East for awhile and ready for a new adventure.

The coven consisted of seven members. Anna, the first member, with jet-black, long hair with a bang and white skin like snow, and an English accent, was already a vampire when she and Sage met after she fled from New York when her parents died. The two women instantly bonded over Sage’s tragic story and became friends. More like sisters. Especially protective of Sage, Anna would not let anything happen to her even if it meant sacrificing her life. Another member brought

into the coven was Billy, an eyeliner- and lipstick-wearing glam-rock vampire. He was turned by Anna in the 1980s and has been stuck in the decade ever since. From his hair, clothes, and musical taste, Billy is completely obsessed with all things eighties. Lisa, baby-faced with shoulder-length, light brown curly hair, is another member of the coven. The only thing known about her, besides her being very timid, is that she was a runaway with nowhere to go when Samuel turned her and Sage took her in. Pedro, a Mexican of Egyptian descent, joined the coven after Lisa turned him. Exotically handsome with raven black curly hair, Pedro looked as though he'd stepped from the cover of a romance novel. Daniel, a native from Barbados, with brown skin and a chiseled physique, joined the coven when he came to Cairo. Samuel, pale faced with effeminate features and black hair that cascaded down his back, joined the coven in Egypt when Anna turned him. Cody, the last member of the coven, with boyish features and a Southern twang, was a farmer's son before Lisa turned him.

Sage only wanted to know the coven on a first name basis, since they had all left their former lives behind and joined her family. She didn't feel it was necessary to know what their lives were like before they became vampires. She herself didn't discuss her life before she became a vampire with the others, because it didn't matter anymore. The man she loved was dead, and there was no use rehashing the past; although there wasn't a day that went by that she didn't think of Cristian. She sometimes would try to imagine what their life would have been like had they been able to run away together, but quickly dismissed the thought because she knew it was nothing but a fantasy. "If I were a fly on the wall, I would love to see the look on Pearson's face," Anna grinned wickedly, snapping Sage out of her wandering thoughts. She began to smile, thinking of the wild goose chase they led him on. The Pearsons have been centuries-old archenemies of

hers since before Sage was born. She has been able to outlive all the successors since then, and this would be no exception. Rafael Pearson, the latest vampire hunter, would not get his life's wish of killing her, no matter how hard he tried. Not if she could help it.

Rafael and his assistant, John Fisher, stormed into the suite of the Scottish bed and breakfast armed with his crossbow, crucifix, and water gun filled with blessed holy water only to find it empty without one vampire sighting. "Damn it!" Rafael yelled, kicking the chair over. Rafael stood tall, with a strong build and long ash-blond hair that he kept in a ponytail. He stared out the window. "I thought vampires couldn't move around in sunlight?" John asked. Rafael stared at his young assistant who was short with thick glasses and spiked hair, and wearing a striped shirt and trousers. He was a geek in every sense of the word. "Vampires can move around in daylight," he said. "It's just that they're more powerful at night, which is why they're night creatures." He chuckled to himself. "You win this round, vampire queen," he said. "But I will catch up with you, and I will kill you. That's a promise," he smirked.

Cristian arrived at the club and ordered a Bloody Mary as a joke for his manager, teasing him about him living as a vampire. He left his manager at the bar while he walked toward the back of the club and got comfortable in the lounge chair. The whole place pulsed with the beats of the music. He noticed, from the corner of his eye, a scantily clad woman watching him as he took another sip of his drink. She began to approach him. "You're Cristian West, aren't you?" she asked. "I'm whoever you want me to be," he answered sarcastically. "Can I sit next to you?" she asked. "Sure, why not," he said. She sat down and began to giggle and squeal, which Cristian found to be annoying. "What's your name?" he asked. "Kelly," she said. He extended his hand. "Nice to meet you, Kelly" he said. She shyly took his hand and shook it, not realizing that she hadn't let his hand go. "My hand," he said. "Sorry," she said, blushing. He grinned at her awkwardness.

Sage and her coven arrived at the JFK airport, got their luggage, and hailed a taxi. Having a penchant for planning ahead of time, she had had her agent look for a home before her arrival so she wouldn't have to go through the hassle of having to stay at a hotel for months on end. Her agent was able to find a loft for her in Tribeca that suited her needs for privacy; so she purchased and furnished the tall, brick building that also contained multiple hidden passageways. This was so that she and her coven would be able to come and go as they pleased without the murmuring that usually accompanied them when they were together. Upon seeing their new digs, the coven gave Sage their seal of approval. "I'm ready to go out and party," Billy said, adjusting his black, puffy pirate shirt and applying eyeliner, lipstick, and hairspray to his platinum-blond, bob hairstyle while listening and dancing to new wave music on the CD player. "I like New York already," Anna said. "It's a great city," Sage said, her booming, commanding voice resonating off the walls with an echo. "The weather is perfect," Anna said. "This is what is known as Indian summer," Samuel said. Sage felt sadness within her. Being back in the city reminded her of Cristian and made her wonder if Thomas Furniture was still in existence after the tragic day he died. "Let's go explore the city," Cody said. "C'mon, Queen V!" "What do you say?" "Alright," Sage said. "Let's go." "Cool!" Billy exclaimed as they went out into the night to see what the city that never sleeps had to offer.

Cristian and the woman he picked up at the club were kissing wildly like animals in heat. Both were intoxicated after drinking several rounds of Jack Daniels. "Let's go somewhere else," she said breathlessly. "Your place or mine?" she said. Sage sat in the dark corner of the nightclub watching as the coven tracked their prey. Being a woman with physical needs, she would occasionally take a lover. She reasoned that there was no use saving herself, since the man she wanted to give herself to was dead. The first night she took a lover was in Egypt with a man more

beautiful than she ever could've imagined. A bald man with a strong build approached her, interrupting her thoughts. She could tell from his scent that he was a fellow vampire.

"You must be the infamous vampire queen that I've heard so much about," he said, checking out her physique. "They didn't lie. "You are beautiful." "How did you hear about the vampire queen?" she asked eyeing him. "It's common knowledge amongst the vampires about the legendary, reclusive vampire queen," he said. Bored, with nothing better to do, she stood up and grabbed his arm. "I'm not one for small talk," she said. "Let's go."

Cristian and the woman got a room at the grand hotel. Falling into the door, they continued kissing as they both fumbled with each other's clothes, trying rapidly to undress. "Wait!" she said, trying to catch her breath. "Do you have any protection?" she asked. He whipped out some condoms from his pocket. She grinned. "I never leave home without them," he said. They went back to kissing and undressing, falling onto the bed. Sage and the vampire she picked up at the club slammed into the wall of one of the many rooms in her loft. The impact cracked the wall up to the ceiling. Their vampire senses heightened from arousal, they bit and clawed each other as they fell to the floor with a crashing boom.

After a night of animalistic vampire mating, Sage stepped into the shower and let the water rain on her, while at the same time, Cristian stumbled into the shower at the hotel room after his sexual encounter with the woman he had met at the club. Placing her hands against the wall, Sage closed her eyes as the water poured on her. Her thoughts were once again of Cristian. Looking at the shower door, she could see what appeared to be his manifestation in the steam, while just at the moment he stepped out of the shower, Cristian saw the likeness of the mysterious, beautiful woman reflected in the steam on the mirror.

Chapter Two

Rays of the early morning sunrise flickered into the spacious bedroom as Sage awakened in her queen-sized bed. Sitting up, she thought back to her encounter the night before with the vampire she had picked up at the club. During the encounter, she imagined Cristian's face, wishing it were he she was intimate with, but knowing that it wasn't possible. Cristian was dead and she would never see him again. She had all of eternity to miss him, mourn him. Her biggest regret was never getting the chance to tell him that she loved him. He died never knowing how deeply she loved him.

Cristian awoke in his bed at his loft in Greenwich Village. His head throbbing from a hangover, he slowly climbed out the bed and groggily stepped into the bathroom to splash water on his face and take aspirin. After taking a shower and brushing his teeth, he walked back into his bedroom and noticed that he had two missed calls flashing on his cell phone. He picked it up to check his voicemail. "Son, I wanted you to know that your mother and I will be at the exhibit next week. So set some tickets aside for us, alright? Love you." He checked the second message. "Hey, West, hope you had a good time last night," his manager said. "Very

funny, Robert,” Cristian thought. “Just a reminder that the press will want an interview with you before your presentation of the masterpiece, but no worries, ok? I’ll talk to you later.” Hanging up the phone, Cristian thought of how a reflection of the mysterious beauty appeared in the steam of the mirror while he was showering last night. How was that possible? Was his mind playing tricks on him? He didn’t know what to think.

The doorbell rang as the deliverers brought crate upon crate of the mysterious, sealed, shipments marked “Fragile” to the door of the brick building. The door creaked open as the deliverymen looked at each other frightened when they didn’t see anyone. “Hello,” one of the deliverymen said. “Hi,” Anna said standing behind him, seemingly appearing from thin air, startling him with a jump. She grinned. “We... ha...have a...a... del...delivery for a...a...a... Nayah,” the man said, stuttering. “Yes, I know,” Anna replied. “You can bring them inside,” she said, smiling. As the men brought in the crates, they heard an echo of indistinct, strange sounds. The frightened men picked up the pace unloading the crates. Once their task was completed, they hurriedly got on the delivery truck and sped off. Anna laughed as Sage appeared from the darkness. “You smell that?” Anna asked. “Yes,” Sage replied. “I smell fear.”

After dragging the crates into the insulated walk-in storage area, Sage began to open them, cutting the seal with her claws. “Animal blood!” Anna exclaimed. “Yuck,” she said, wrinkling her nose. “You know I don’t like to drink human blood,” Sage said. “I know, but animal blood...,” Anna said, frowning. “You drink human blood, yet you’re squeamish about animal blood?” Sage said, incredulous. Anna shrugged her shoulders.

Rafael, a devout vegan, feasted on a meal of tofu and pasta made from whole wheat while his assistant munched on a ham sandwich. “I don’t see how you can eat that,” John said wiping

mayonnaise from the corner of his mouth with a napkin. "I don't see how you can eat that," Rafael said, watching him eat the ham sandwich, with disgust. John looked around at the people eating at the dinner tables in the bed and breakfast. "So what do we do now?" he asked. "We wait," Rafael answered. "She'll make another move, and we'll take it from there." "So is she really a vampire queen, or is that just a nickname?" John asked. "She's a real vampire queen born of royal blood," Rafael said. "Her parents were a vampire king and queen." "But if her parents were vampires, why wasn't she born a vampire?" he said. "Shhh, lower your voice," Rafael said, looking at the people staring at them strangely. "Her parents were human before they were turned, and they were only turned after her mother gave birth to her." "Ok," John said, confused. "Her parents became vampires after Sage was born," Rafael said. "Oh!" John exclaimed. "The story is that when Sage was supposed to be turned, she fell in love with a carpenter, but it ended badly and then she was turned, and it's been a game of cat and mouse to hunt her down and kill her ever since." "So she's the last royal vampire?" John asked. "She's the last of the Nayah family; so in a sense, she is the last royal vampire," Rafael said. "So why kill her?" John asked. "Kill the head and the rest of the body dies," Rafael said plainly. "She's the top dog, so to speak," he said. "She has to die." He smiled. "Sage has become like an enigma." "A fable, if you will." He became serious. "But it's time to bring this story to a close, and what a fitting end for good to triumph over evil," he said smirking. "This is the weapon I'm going to use to dispatch her," he said opening his jacket, discreetly revealing the silver stake that was used to eliminate her parents. "This will be my crowning achievement," he said.

Sage stared out the window of the grand living room as Pedro stood watching her, wishing it was he that consumed her thoughts. "Buenos días, mi reina," he said. She smiled at him. "Good morning,

Pedro,” she said. He walked over to her and stared into her eyes. Leaning in as if he wanted to kiss her, but instead brushing his hand against her cheek. “I saw you leave with that vampire last night,” he said, feeling jealous. “I had an itch that needed to be scratched,” she said. Pedro’s jaw tightened. He didn’t like when another man, be it human or nonhuman, touched Sage. He wanted to be the only vampire to touch her, to make love to her, but she kept him at a distance. Anna walked in, giving him a curious look as he excused himself. “This arrived,” she said placing the newspaper on the mahogany table. “On page five, there’s an article about a showing at the art gallery next Thursday,” she said. “We need to enliven this place with some art,” she said, looking at the empty spaces on the wall. Sage nodded her head nonchalantly. “It’s a showing from an artist named West.” Sage stared blankly. “Cristian West,” Anna said. The name “Cristian” spurring her full attention, Sage grabbed the newspaper from the table. There was no photograph of the artist with the same name as her beloved in the article. It only spoke of his line of paintings called West Collections and that he would be unveiling his latest masterpiece at the showing. “Looks like we’re going to be attending this gala next week then,” Sage said, feeling her stomach flutter. “I figured you’d be interested in going,” Anna grinned knowingly.

Meanwhile, surprising everyone with his early arrival at the gallery, Cristian stared at his masterpiece of this woman he couldn’t escape from in his mind. She was constantly in his thoughts. It was as if he knew her. He felt an intense urgency to paint her portrait, because he couldn’t forget her face. He didn’t want to forget her face. “Who are you?” he wondered aloud.

“Do you even exist?”

Chapter Three

After weeks of frenzied painting, making sure that it captured the vision that he had seen in his mind, the time had finally arrived for the presentation of his masterpiece, and Cristian felt like a jumble of nerves. It was the night before the most important exhibit of his life, as he stared at the finished portrait of this beautiful woman, completely mesmerized by her face. He covered the painting quickly when his manager entered into the room. “Everything’s all set,” he said. Cristian silently nodded his head. “Don’t tell me you’re getting nervous,” Robert said. “You should be used to the attention by now,” he said. “But this is different,” Cristian replied. “How so?” Robert asked. “You’ve done presentations before—what makes this any different?” “This just feels different,” Cristian said. “I don’t know. I can’t explain it,” he said. He felt an excitement in his belly as if he was on the cusp of something big, something life-changing.

While the others went out into the night for fun and excitement, Sage took out her laptop and searched the Internet for information about Cristian West. Still unable to find any photographs of him, she learned from his biography that he is the son of Christopher and Jillian Westmore who live on Long Island. Cristian dropped the “more” from his last name when he legally changed his name to

West, and it's rumored he has a loft in Greenwich Village. Even the cunning Anna was unable to get a glimpse of the artist when she visited the art gallery a few days ago. Sage was frustrated that she was unable to get a clue of what the man that shared the same first name as her beloved looked like. It just made her miss him even more, given their brief time together.

Curious about the fate of Thomas Furniture, she walked briskly over to the location as she remembered it, only to find that it was gone. The brownstone building had been demolished. She was stunned, for she was certain that the building would remain. Now, even that was gone and all she had left was her memories. Tears of blood formed in her eyes. It felt as if she was losing Cristian all over again. Feeling melancholy from a still-unhealed wound, she went back to her loft, shutting the bedroom door. Silently, she walked over to the dresser, opened it, and took out the old yellow, torn, laminated newspaper clipping of Thomas Furniture that had the hand-drawn picture of Cristian on it. Holding the clipping clasped in her hand, she held it to her breast, quietly weeping.

Media and paparazzi swarmed the entrance of the art gallery for the night of the presentation trying to get interviews and photos of the celebrities who attended. A limo drove up as Cristian, wearing sunglasses and his trademark black, made his entrance. "Cristian West!" the reporters yelled, barraging him with questions as he made his way toward the entrance. "Mr. West, can you tell us what the painting is?" a reporter asked. Cristian grinned. "And ruin my surprise?" he quipped. "I'll give you a clue," he said. "It's about a woman." "Like a Mona Lisa?" one of the reporters asked while the cameras from the paparazzi flashed around him. "You can say that," Cristian said. "Is it someone you know?" "Do you know her name?" the reporters asked. "No, and I really have to get going," Cristian said. "I'll see you inside," he said, waving as the reporters

were yelling more questions at him. “You handled that well,” his manager said, chuckling. “It’s a spectacle out there,” Cristian said. “I didn’t expect this kind of attention.” “This is the biggest presentation yet,” Robert said, seeing dollar signs in his eyes. “This is going to be the best night of your life,” he said. Cristian smiled and nodded his head in agreement.

They walked inside just as the limo carrying the coven pulled up at the curb. Everyone looked at the press swarming the place with dismay. “We’ll have to hurry inside so they don’t get any pictures of us,” Anna said. “Or else Pearson will be on the first flight to find us.” “We’ll be fine,” Sage said. As they got out the limo, she used her powers of illusion so that the media and photographers couldn’t see them. Anna grinned. “Sometimes, I forget just how powerful you are,” she said. The others were very impressed as well as they walked past the media, who didn’t notice them. Billy toyed with one of the photographers by adjusting the hat on his head before they walked inside.

The gallery was jam-packed with people, from celebrities to other artists. Sage, wearing a black evening gown and an upswept hairstyle intertwined with gold beads, walked toward the back of the gallery looking at the paintings while the coven were eyeing some of the guests as potential meals. She looked at one of the landscape portraits that had Cristian’s signature and was impressed with his eye for detail. She declined the waiter’s offer for wine. “May I have your attention?” Robert said into the microphone. “First, I want to thank you all for coming tonight,” he said. “I feel safe in saying that I can vouch for all the hard work Cristian has put into this masterpiece, and like you, I’m looking forward to seeing it.” “So, without further adieu, here is the man of the hour.” Cristian stepped to the podium amidst applause. “Thank you,” he said, smiling at the crowd. Sage felt the hairs on her neck rise upon the

sound of his voice.

Trancelike, she walked into the showroom, trying to catch a glimpse of him, but his manager, who stood in the way, blocked her view. “Sometimes you see an image in your mind that’s so profound that you have to capture it,” he said nervously into the microphone. “For me, it’s an image of a beautiful woman.” Sage felt a tingling sensation go through her body. “I see her so clearly in my mind, but I have no idea if she is real or just a figment of my imagination. But I had to paint her portrait, because her face is unforgettable.” He drew a breath. “Ladies and gentlemen, I present Beauty Mysterium”—he took the cloth off the painting, revealing a portrait of Sage dressed in black and gold royal attire with an emerald and gold headdress.

Everyone gasped and applauded. The coven looked at each other in amazement as Sage moved among the crowd trying to get a better view. Upon seeing the portrait, she was stunned at seeing the likeness of herself. Her eyes then shifted to Cristian who turned back around smiling. Her jaw dropped as her eyes widened. “It can’t be,” she said astonished. She stood frozen like a statue as she looked at Cristian who bore a striking resemblance to her lost love. Cristian turned his head, looking into the crowd, when his eyes fell upon Sage who was staring at him. His body began to tremble as his throat went dry and his mouth dropped open. “Oh, my God,” he said as he stared at the incarnation of the woman who haunted his mind. She was real. It seemed as though time had stopped while Cristian and Sage stood still with their eyes locked into each other. Anna grabbed her arm. “We need to get out of here,” she said, pulling her toward the door as the coven, fearing exposure, began to make a quick exit. Realizing that he wasn’t hallucinating, Cristian yelled, “Wait!” as Anna continued to yank Sage, who couldn’t take her eyes off Cristian, away from the scene. “Wait!” Cristian yelled,

running down from the podium. “Please!” he yelled as he pushed his way through the crowd while they whispered and strained their necks to see whose attention he was trying to obtain. Anna turned and glared at him as they went out the exit. “Wait!” Cristian yelled. He ran out the door, but they were gone. The media murmured about what happened inside. It began to drizzle as Cristian wrung his hands through his hair in frustration. He wanted and needed to know who this mystery woman was, now that he knew she existed.

The coven, mystified by what took place, sat in silence in the limo while Sage, shaken to her core, relayed in her mind what had just happened. It was as if she was staring at the ghost from her past; only this person was the spitting image of her lost love. “How is it possible?” she wondered. She knew that everyone had a twin, but his nearly identical resemblance to her beloved was more than just a coincidence. “Can time correct the mistakes of the past?” she asked herself as she took in the magnitude of what this could mean.

Chapter Four

After an awkwardly silent limo ride home, Sage walked into the grand living room of the loft, the coven trailing behind her wanting to know what took place at the art gallery. “How did that artist know you?” Lisa asked. “We are always careful not to be photographed,” Samuel chimed in. “How did he know what you look like?” Daniel asked. “I don’t know,” Sage replied. “I don’t know how he knew what I look like.” “This isn’t good,” Cody said. “Maybe we should kill him,” Pedro suggested. “No!” Sage said, the forcefulness of her voice startling everyone. “So what do we do then?” Billy exclaimed. “Once Pearson sees that painting, he’ll be on the first plane in a New York minute.”

Sage glanced over at Anna as she thought of what move to make. “We find out what it is that he wants,” she said. “And why the bloke felt the need to paint a sketch of you,” Anna said, looking at her pointedly. “Let’s just hope that Pearson doesn’t watch any television or read the newspapers for the next few days while we figure out what we’re going to do about this situation,” Samuel said. Pedro became irritated as his patience wore thin. “Well, in that case, we might as well all paint bull’s-eyes on our chests,” he said, storming out the room. “Dude needs to seriously take a chill pill,”

Billy said. "He's just hungry, among other things," Anna said. "What do you mean by 'other things'?" Cody asked. "Nothing," Anna said, glancing at Sage wryly. "I'll go check on him," Lisa said leaving the room. "I don't know about you, but I'm starving," Billy said. "I'm coming with you," Daniel said. Samuel and Cody also excused themselves, leaving after Daniel. Sage shook her head perplexed. The only thing she was certain of was that she needed to see the man that had the same name and face as her beloved again.

"What happened tonight?" Robert asked, ushering a drenched Cristian to the back room of the gallery as he paced back and forth. "What was that all that commotion about?" he asked. Cristian shrugged his shoulders while he tried to make sense of what happened. "I don't know," he replied. How could he explain that the woman he thought was a figment of his imagination existed when he didn't understand it himself? The only thing he knew was that he needed to see her again and speak to her in person. "I have an idea," he said, his mind racing.

"Will I like it?" his manager asked, worried. "Sure you will," Cristian chuckled. "Don't you trust me?"

Sage sat up in her bed, having trouble resting. Pushing aside the satin sheets, she got out of bed and walked over to the window, staring out. She replayed in her mind the moment she saw Cristian standing at the podium at the art gallery and his eerie likeness to her lost love. Closing her eyes, she remembered the first time she saw Cristian so many ages ago in the furniture store. How incredibly handsome he was and his deep voice that sent chills down her spine. "This can't be a coincidence," she thought. "There has to be a reason behind this."

Cristian stepped out of the elevator leading to his loft, closing the cage behind him. He walked absentmindedly into the room, still in a daze of what had happened hours ago at the gallery. Taking

off his jacket, he sat down on the couch, his mind going back to the moment he saw the mysterious woman in the flesh. Taking a deep breath, he threw his head back, closing his eyes. “She looked just the way I saw her in my mind,” he thought. “But even more beautiful than I had imagined.” He got up from the couch and walked into the bathroom to take a shower, glancing briefly in the mirror at his reflection. He stopped, backed up, and looked again. “What the hell!” he said, as he noticed that his blonde hair had turned dark brown. “How did that happen!” he wondered wide-eyed. It felt as though from the moment he saw the mysterious woman that he was in some kind of alternate universe. “Nobody would believe me in a thousand years if I told them I don’t know how this happened,” he said staring at his hair in disbelief.

The following morning, Sage sat on her daybed staring at the old newspaper clipping, lost her in thoughts, when Anna appeared. “Looks like we won’t have to make the first move after all,” she said, handing her the morning newspaper. “Look on the back page of the advertisements.” Intrigued, Sage flipped through the newspaper to the back page and saw a full-page advertisement that read: Beauty Mysterium, I’d Like To Meet Face To Face Today At 1:00 p.m., The Art Gallery. West Collections paid for the advertisement. “So what do you want to do?” Anna asked. Sage reread the advertisement. “This is what we’ll do,” she replied.

“Oh my, God,” Robert said staring at the line of people that showed up at the art gallery after the publication of the advertisement. It looked like a Halloween party with people wearing various costumes. Some were dressed as Cleopatra, others as Nefertiti. “This is a freak show!” he exclaimed as the gallery called in police enforcement to stave off the fanatics trying to push their way through the barricade. Cristian came from the back to look at the bizarre scene. His manager did a double take, staring at

his hair. "When did you change your hair color?" he asked. "It's a long story," Cristian said. "Don't ask." "Okay, I won't," Robert said. Anna stood behind a woman dressed as Mona Lisa. "What makes you think you're the woman in the painting?" she asked, snickering. "Because I'm the woman he's searched his whole life for," the woman replied. Anna choked back her laughter. "Maybe you can tell me more," she grinned. "Over supper," she said wickedly. "Let's call it a day," Robert pleaded. "This is getting out of hand." "You're right," Cristian said, feeling dejected. Just as he was about to call the whole thing off, he looked into the mass and saw Anna talking to the costumed woman. "Her!" he said pointing in her direction. "She was here last night. Bring her in."

A security guard walked over to Anna who was still conversing with the woman. "Mr. West would like to speak to you," he said. Anna smiled sweetly at the woman who was fuming. "Nice talking to you." "We'll have to meet up again for that meal," she said with a wicked grin. Robert led Anna, who seemed to glide in the air, to the back of the gallery where Cristian was waiting for her in his studio. He looked at her milky white skin. "People think I look like a vampire," he thought. "Hi," he said nervously. "Hi," Anna replied flipping her hair. He shuffled his feet. "So are you her publicist?" he asked. "No," she replied firmly. "I'm Anna." "I'm her best friend." He nodded his head slowly. "Why didn't she want to come?" he asked. "Didn't you see that circus out there!" she said hotly. "She didn't want any part of that, and do you blame her?" "No," he said, shaking his head. He tucked his hands in his pockets. "Brilliant idea," she said sarcastically. "What's her name?" he asked, ignoring her cynical tone. "Sage," she said. He swallowed hard. Her name sounded so familiar to him. "Why did you paint her portrait?" she asked suspiciously. "I kept seeing her in my mind, and I decided to paint what I saw, because I couldn't forget her face," he said. Anna

thought of the story Sage had told her of losing her love, and his name was Cristian. “Look,” he said sighing. “I need to speak to her.”

He took out a sheet of paper and wrote down his name, address, phone number, and e-mail address. “Could you please give this to her?” he said. She took the paper from his hand. “I’ll give it to her, but I can’t make any promises that she’ll come,” she said. “Thank you,” he said. Having been a vampire for a long time, Anna could tell with her senses when a person wasn’t sincere. She could hear it in their rapid breathing and pounding heartbeat, she could smell it with the fear oozing through their pores and see it in their eyes. Looking into his eyes, she wanted to believe he was being sincere, but she was aware that it could all be just an act. Cristian watched as she left the gallery, hopeful that he will finally meet face-to-face with Sage. Arriving at the loft, Anna handed Sage the piece of paper containing Cristian’s personal information. Nervously, she took the paper, her hands shaking. Anna stared at her, concerned. “You don’t have to do this,” she said. “I know,” Sage replied. “But I have to see him face-to-face to have some questions answered, and maybe find closure to the past.” Anna caressed her shoulder. “I understand,” she said, “If it’s any comfort, he does have long fingers.” Sage laughed at her best friend.

Still in Scotland, Rafael sharpened the silver stake in their suite, while John surfed the Internet, coming across an article about the presentation at the gallery. “Boss, you need to see this,” he said. “What is it?” Rafael asked. “Just come here for a second,” John said. He turned the laptop around so Rafael could see the article. It contained a photograph of the painting. “Well, what do we have here?” he said grinning. “It looks like we’re taking a trip to New York City to finish this thing once and for all.”

Cristian paced anxiously back and forth at his loft, when he

heard the sound of the elevator approaching. From the moment that his intercom rang, Cristian's heart began to thump loudly in his ears like a drum, as he waited impatiently at the door for it to open. The elevator stopped, and for what seemed like an eternity, the door finally opened as he opened the cage staring face-to-face with Sage. He stared at her, speechless. She smiled at him. "I can't come in unless I'm invited," she grinned.

Chapter Five

Cristian stood paralyzed as he stared into the eyes of the woman whose image haunted his mind day and night in the flesh. Sage couldn't believe that she was staring at the likeness of her beloved face-to-face. She cleared her throat, breaking the uncomfortable silence while their eyes lingered on each other. "I can't come in unless I'm invited," she repeated. "Oh," Cristian said, snapping out of his trance. "Where's my manners." "Of course, you can come in," he said, stepping aside as she walked over the threshold into his loft. She looked around at the furnishings that consisted of a couch, a chair, a table, a desk, and a fireplace in the wall, noting that the loft lacked a woman's touch. She stopped at a framed picture of Cristian with a tall man with blonde hair and a woman with short brown hair. "So this is your bachelor's pad?" she asked. "You can say that," he said with a slight chuckle. "Have a seat," he said pointing over to the couch in the center of the living room. Sage walked over and took a seat. "Can I offer you a drink?" he asked. She smiled. "No, but thank you," she replied. He sat down in the adjoining chair and began to tap his knees nervously. Sage bit her lip trying not to laugh. "Maybe you can use a drink," she joked. He noticed his nervous tapping and stopped. "Sorry, I'm just a little

nervous,” he said taking a breath. “So how is it that you painted my portrait?” she asked. “Well,” he sighed. “It’s hard to explain. I kept seeing your face in my mind, and I decided to paint what I saw,” he said. “Well, I’m flattered that you painted me and thank you,” she said smiling. “You’re welcome,” he said, feeling his heart flutter faster than the wings of a hummingbird.

They stared at each other awkwardly. “There’s something I want to show you,” he said, getting up from the chair. She got up as he led her to a room that was next to his bedroom. He opened the door revealing drawing upon drawing of Sage that covered the room wall to wall. It almost looked to be a shrine. “I don’t know why I couldn’t stop sketching your picture,” he said, looking at a stunned Sage. “I just couldn’t forget your face.” “You know, this would be my cue to run screaming for the door,” she joked. Cristian started to laugh. “Yes, a bit obsessed,” he said as they both laughed, breaking the tension between them. She looked at him and noticed that his hair was darker, much like that of her beloved. “Your hair is darker,” she said. “I don’t know how it happened, but it changed,” he said. “When I saw you,” he whispered nearly inaudibly. She looked at him in wonderment. “How can it be?” she thought. “That I’m standing here looking into the face of the man I loved.” Cristian looked at her puzzled as if he read her thoughts. Noticing the puzzled expression on his face, Sage wondered if he heard what she was thinking. “I think I should go,” she said feeling overwhelmed. “Can you stay just a little longer?” he asked. “We don’t have to stay here. We can go somewhere else. Please.” he pleaded. She smiled slightly. “Ok,” she said. He smiled. “I’ll just go grab my jacket,” he said.

She went back over to the couch to sit down while he went into his room to grab his jacket. Stopping at the mirror on the wall to check his appearance, he noticed that when he looked toward

the couch, he couldn't see Sage's reflection in the mirror. Startled, he turned around to see if she'd left because he scared her off, only to see her sitting on the couch. Confused, he looked into the mirror again and didn't see her reflection. Rubbing his eyes, thinking he's seeing things, Cristian looked toward the couch again, and saw her sitting there. "Strange," he thought as he grabbed his jacket. "Sage, I was wondering," he stopped when he noticed she wasn't sitting on the couch. "Sage?" he said, turning around to find her standing behind him, startling him. "I didn't mean to startle you," she said smiling. "It's okay, I'm just a little jumpy," he said. He didn't know what it was, but whenever he was around Sage, he felt a strange sensation that he knew her. "So have you eaten? Are you hungry?" he asked as they went down the elevator to the lobby. "I've eaten," she said with a grin. "So what do you want to do?" he asked putting on his sunglasses. "Let's just walk," she said putting on her sunglasses.

They walked out onto the streets as Sage used her powers of illusion to keep people from staring at them. Cristian was surprised that people seemed to walk right by them without noticing them. He felt an urge to hold her hand but resisted, because he didn't want to appear to come on strong.

"So, Mr. West," she said. "Please call me, Cristian," he said.

"Okay. 'Cristian,' she said, pausing on his name. "Do you bring a lot of women to your bachelor's pad?" she asked.

He regarded her question carefully. "You are the only woman I've ever brought into my home," he said. "No one has ever been there except for my parents." She was touched by his honesty. "Actually, no one knows my address, because it's under an assumed name," he said.

"It's for my privacy." "I love my fans—don't get me wrong—but sometimes they can be a bit aggressive," he said. "I understand,"

she said, knowing all too well how much she loves her privacy.

They walked seemingly in minutes to Central Park over to Bow Bridge overlooking the lake to take in the sunset, taking off their sunglasses. “Sometimes I come here for serenity,” he said softly. He looked at her as she stared in silence at the sunset, completely overwhelmed by what was happening and the feelings reawakening inside of her. “This is beautiful,” she said, breathlessly, looking at the burnt orange and red sky. “You are beautiful,” he said, staring at her bathed in the orange glow of the sun’s rays. Sage felt as though her knees were going to buckle when he uttered those words in almost the same way and tone as she’d heard them spoken to her centuries ago. She stared at him, unable to express what she was feeling. It was as though she traveled back in time, found Cristian again, and they were making up for the time that was lost.

She looked into his eyes. “I don’t know why,” he said, gazing into her eyes, “but I feel like I know you.” He stared at her lips. Caught up in the moment, he leaned in to kiss her. “Cristian, please,” she said, putting her fingers to his lips. “We just met and we barely know each other.” He nodded his head, disappointed. “You’re right,” he said. “We did just meet and are getting to know each other.” He gently lifted up her chin. “But I feel like I already know you,” he said.

Sage swallowed hard, wanting to kick herself for ruining a romantic moment, but she didn’t want to throw caution to the wind and act impulsively just because he bore a resemblance to her lost love. Having heard people talk about past lives, she never believed in it or thought it was possible. She knew that this was more than just happenstance, and there had to be an explanation for this. Walking through the park, they got on a horse-drawn carriage taking them on a tour. Sage felt a strong sense of *déjà vu*. She felt a deluge

of emotions run through her body as she remembered riding in a carriage with Cristian in the past going to the river where they had their first and only kiss. “Did you want to ride on a ferry after this?” he asked. She didn’t respond as her mind envisioned, as if it was happening in the present, the image of her parent’s horrifying deaths. “Sage, are you alright?” he asked when he noticed her horrified expression as she was reliving the last moments of her parents’ lives. She jumped when he touched her shoulder. “What are you doing!” she snapped, her booming voice reverberating across the park. “I’m sorry,” he said, taken aback by the change in her personality. She softened her expression. “I didn’t mean to yell at you,” she said apologetically. “It’s just my parents died on a boat and your mentioning riding on a ferry brought back those memories.” “I’m sorry,” he said, feeling remorseful. “You wouldn’t have known,” she said. “Can we start over?” he said. “I feel like I’m making so many mistakes. You’re not doing anything wrong,” she said reassuringly. “We’re just getting to know each other.” She smiled. They got off the carriage when they arrived in the city and continued their stroll. “So where are you from?” he asked her. “I was born in Barbados, but I’ve lived in Egypt,” she said. “Your accent sounds American,” he said. “English is the language I speak the most, although I tend to pick up the lingo from wherever I live,” she said. “Do you have any siblings?” he asked. “No, I’m the only child,” she replied. “And you?” “Do you have any siblings?” she asked. “I’m the only child as well,” he said. “Where are you staying?” he asked. “In Tribeca,” she replied.

A silence fell between them as the streetlights lit up in the darkening night sky.

“Well, I guess I should let you go,” he said with reluctance, not wanting the evening to end. He noticed, as he was staring at her

in the light, that she didn't cast a shadow when he could clearly see his own. "What is it?" she asked. "I'm seeing things," he said, blinking his eyes. "It's nothing. So can I take you home at least?" he asked. "Sure," she said. He hailed a taxi as they both jumped inside grinning at each other. When the taxi arrived at the entrance to her building, she opened the door to jump out when he said, "Wait!" "I'd like to see you again," he said. "I'd like that too," she replied. He grinned. "So I'll see you tomorrow?" he asked. "I'll call you," she said coyly. "Goodnight," she said. "Goodnight," he said as she shut the cab door and watched as it drove away.

Sage chuckled, watching Cristian nearly twist his neck trying to wave good-bye to her. She walked inside the building smiling warmly when Pedro appeared from the shadows. "So what does he want?" he asked, barely concealing his jealousy. "He doesn't want anything, Pedro," she said slightly annoyed. "There's something about that hombre that isn't right," he said, his eyes blazing. "Don't let him deceive you," he said vanishing into the darkness. "Pedro, may have a point," said Anna standing in the doorway. "What do we know about him?" For all we know, he could be helping Pearson set you up for the kill." Sage didn't want to believe that the man that made her feel alive again would have a sinister ulterior motive. "I don't believe that," she said. "Sage, you've survived for all these centuries on your instinct," Anna said. "You've got to trust your head, not your heart."

Rafael, with John lagging behind, hurried through the airport to board their flight. Having not been to an airport in awhile, he muttered under his breath when he saw the scanners, realizing that he had to have his bag checked. "I need to scan your bag," the airport scanner said. Rafael grudgingly placed his bag down as it ran through the scanner. The airport scanners looked at each other.

KATHRYN NICHOLE

“We’re going to have to detain you,” she said as they looked at the crossbow and gun that showed up on the screen. Rafael threw his hands up in the air frustrated while John, who was able to get through the scanners, watched unsure of what to do.

Chapter Six

Two airport security guards led Rafael to an office in the back of the terminal while John, who helplessly watched his boss being led away, took a seat in the lobby and waited. One of the security guards told him to take a seat in the cramped office that had two desks, two computers, and three file cabinets while the other stood at the door watching him. “So can you tell me why you have a crossbow in your belongings?” the security guard asked him. “I’m an archer and I was taking part in an archery championship contest,” Rafael replied, thinking quickly. “I see,” the security guard said as he typed the information into the computer. “And why are you carrying a water gun?” Rafael smiled slightly. “It’s a gift for my nephew,” he lied. “I was going to have it gift wrapped, but I knew that it would need to be scanned, so I thought against it.”

The security guard typed in more information, glancing over at the other guard standing at the door. Feeling his jacket pocket, Rafael realized that his silver stake was missing. “You know how kids are with water guns,” Rafael said, trying to stay calm. The security guard smiled at him. “Yes, I do. My son has a water gun.” He nodded his head taking a breath. “Okay, so you’re free to go,” the security guard said. Rafael breathed a sigh of relief. “So I can take my crossbow and water

gun with me?” he asked. “The water gun was confiscated because it looked like an authentic gun.” “Just make sure the crossbow is more secure when you’re packing,” the security guard said. “Otherwise, you’re free to go.” Rafael got up from the chair.

“Wait a second,” the security guard yelled as he started for the door. “Did you win the contest?” he asked. Rafael grinned. “I came close, but next time I will win the prize,” he said, furtively enjoying his private joke. He met John who jumped up from the chair in the lobby. “That was a close call,” he said as they went to board their flight. He looked at his assistant. “Do you know where my stake is?” he whispered. John smiled. “It’s in a safe place,” he said. “I’ll tell you later.”

After a sleepless night of debating the pros and cons of Cristian’s intentions toward her, Sage decided to give him the benefit of the doubt. Preparing for her official date with him, she opted for casual attire, wearing black formfitting jeans and a black blouse. Feeling butterflies in her stomach, she gulped down three glasses of animal blood while Anna gave her a pep talk not to put herself in a compromising situation, and if she needed an escape plan, to let her know. The others were surprised that a normally reclusive Sage was going out on a date, while Pedro sulked.

When the doorbell rang, the coven elatedly told her to have a great time. Pedro, full of envy, stared out the window watching Sage get into the cab as she and Cristian left together. Irritated, he kicked a gaping hole into the wall.

While riding in the cab, Cristian inched his hand closer to hers while she watched him from the corner of her eye. He took her hand as she glanced at him with a smile. “I thought maybe we can go see a movie,” he said shyly. “That’s fine with me,” she said. Getting out of the cab, they walked inside the movie theater as some of the moviegoers stared at them. Sage realized that she had

forgotten to use her powers of illusion. She stared at the patrons while they whispered as Cristian went to get the tickets.

“Humph!” “Who does she think she is!” one of the women whispered, rolling her eyes. “She’s just the flavor of the month,” another said, curling her lips in disgust. “It’s a curiosity thing,” the sneering woman said. “You know what they say about them. The stereotype.” Sage felt her temper about to explode as Cristian came over with the tickets. “Did you want some popcorn?” he asked. “No, I’m not hungry,” she said annoyed. They went to take their seats, and Cristian pretended to stretch as he placed his arm around her. Sage grinned at his slyness and began to get comfortable as the previews began.

Suddenly, something hit her head. She heard snickering as she turned around to see what it was. “Chocolate and vanilla,” someone whispered, laughing. “She likes crème in her coffee,” another said. “Maybe they have the fever,” another said loudly. Sage fumed in her seat. “Ignore them, Sage,” Cristian said looking at her. “Some people are ignorant and narrow-minded.” Someone threw popcorn at them. “Hey!” Cristian yelled, turning around. Sage looked around in the darkened theater, and with her night vision, she could see the women who talked about her in the lobby get up from their seats and walk out the door. “Cristian, I’ll be right back,” she said getting up from her seat. “Save my seat for me.”

Taking advantage of the darkness, she changed her form to mist and followed the women into the restroom where they were laughing at their pettiness as they began to reapply their makeup in the mirror unaware that Sage was standing behind them. They turned around startled to see Sage menacing with red eyes and bared fangs. She hissed at them as the horrified women screamed and slammed into the door, nearly breaking it down trying to run out the restroom and running to the counter screaming incoherently,

pointing toward the restroom. The manager, thinking they were just playing a prank, went to check out the situation in the restroom and didn't see anything. Sage, grinning smugly, rejoined Cristian in the movie theater, stating that the troublemakers wouldn't bother them anymore.

Rafael sat at the window of the airplane while John slept, imagining finally finding Sage and killing her. Once he achieved his goal, he was going to celebrate in fashion with a bottle of chilled champagne that he promised himself he would drink once he vanquished the vampire queen. "I'm going to finally do what no one else has been able to do," he thought with a gleeful smile. "I'm going to send that bloodsucker to hell where she belongs."

After watching the movie without any further interruptions, Cristian asked Sage if she was hungry. "I'm fine," she said. "Maybe next time we can take in a play," he said. "I'd like that," she said. He took her hand as they began to walk together, when he stopped abruptly to look at her. "I couldn't sleep at all last night," he said. "I thought of you." He took his hand and gently caressed her face. "I like you. A lot," he confessed. What Cristian really wanted to say was that he was falling in love with her. He knew it from the moment he saw her in the art galley the night of the presentation, and even before that. "I like you a lot too," she said, even though she knew that what she was feeling was more than just an infatuation.

They stared into each other's eyes under the moonlight as everything slowed down around them. Caressing her face with his hand, he brushed his fingers against her lips, feeling a pull to her that he couldn't control. Unable to resist his touch, she closed her eyes and parted her lips slightly in anticipation as he moved in closer until their lips touched. Enjoying the softness of each other's lips, they wrapped their arms around each other in a passionate embrace; she could hear the rapid beating of his heart as their kiss deepened.

Chapter Seven

As Sage and Cristian continued their lip lock, her vampire urges were aroused as she could feel his body temperature rise. Instinctively, she began to kiss his neck, feeling lost in his embrace, as the urge to sink her fangs into his protruding vein and taste his blood grew stronger. Fighting against her urges, she mustered all her strength to pull herself away from him, turning so that he wouldn't see her glowing eyes. "What is it, Sage?" he asked between breaths. She put her hand to her mouth to conceal her fangs. "I think we need to slow down a bit," she said, trying to get a handle on her urges. Cristian took a deep breath to calm his nerves from that explosive kiss that kindled a fire within him that was a prelude of what could happen once it consumed him.

He walked over to her as she kept her back turned away from him and caressed her shoulder. "I don't want to do anything that makes you uncomfortable, Sage," he said. She turned around to face him. Her eyes back to normal and her fangs receded. "I'm not sorry for the kiss," she said breathlessly. "I just want to take things a little slower." He took her into his arms as they held each other. "I don't know what it is, but I can't help myself around you," he said "I love being with you." Sage closed her eyes as she inhaled his

musk-scented cologne. “I love being with you too,” she whispered intoxicated by his scent. “The night is young,” he said, stroking her hair. “Let’s take a tour,” he said taking her hand.

They went to the Empire State Building Observatory to take in a splendid view of the Big Apple. “This is breathtaking,” Sage said in awe as she looked at the skyline that sparkled like stars against the night sky. “You feel like you can conquer the world from this height,” Cristian said as they took in the view. Sage nodded her head in agreement. “This is spectacular,” she said as they snuggled together.

Next, they got on a double-decker sightseeing tour bus to take a tour of the bright lights of Times Square and get a view of the illuminated backdrop of the Manhattan skyline. Sage felt bubbly being with Cristian. She had resigned herself to a life of solitude, but he made her feel alive again. She didn’t think it was possible after she’d lost Cristian that she would ever love again, but now here she is with this walking, talking, embodiment of her lost love and falling in love all over again.

After a whirlwind evening of movies, tours, and romance, Cristian got out the waiting cab, walking Sage to her door. “I had a great time tonight,” she said gingerly. “Me too,” he said. He took her hand, kissed it, then leaned in and delicately kissed her lips.

They stopped at the sound of Anna clearing her throat standing at the doorway and laughed.

“So I’ll see you tomorrow?” he asked. Sage nodded her head, “Yes.” He began backing up toward the cab door. “Goodnight,” he said grinning. “Goodnight,” she said.

She watched the cab drive off while Anna, with her arms folded, stared at her. “What!” Sage exclaimed. Anna gave her a knowing look. “You two keep this up and you’ll be shagging soon,” she said.

Sage shook her head in denial. “I hadn’t really given it thought,” she said innocently.

“Sure, you haven’t,” Anna said teasingly. She followed Sage into her bedroom. “So this means you’re not going to tell him you’re a vampire?” she asked. Sage liked the idea of having a normal relationship and didn’t want to complicate it with her vampire secret. “I think it’s best that he doesn’t know,” she said.

“There you are!” Robert exclaimed, finding Cristian in the gallery looking at his masterpiece painting of Sage. “There have been a lot of inquiries about that painting,” he said. He looked at Cristian. “And requests for interviews about the inspiration behind it,” he said. “So did you find your muse?” he asked inquisitively. Cristian smiled at the portrait dreamily. “Well, that answers my question,” Robert said with a laugh. “So this means you won’t be living like a vampire anymore,” he said, giving him a playful pat on the back. Cristian chuckled as he headed to the back of the gallery toward his studio. “What’s with the vampire fixation?” he wondered. “Wait a second,” he thought, having a light bulb moment. He recalled the day Anna came to the art gallery and how she seemed to walk without moving her legs—as if she was floating. His mind flashed to when Sage came to his loft and she told him she couldn’t come inside unless she was invited and her odd behavior after their kiss earlier in the evening.

Intrigued, he sat down at his desk, opened his laptop, and began a search on vampirism.

“Vampires have extremely pale skin, because they are corpses,” he said reading the information aloud thinking of how ghostly white Anna’s skin appeared. “They cannot enter a house unless they are invited.” “They don’t cast any reflection or shadow and are sensitive to sunlight.” He thought of when Sage was sitting on the couch in his loft she didn’t reflect in his mirror or cast a shadow

in the light when he could see his own. “But she was able to go out in sunlight,” he said confused. “I thought vampires imploded in sunlight.” He continued to read. “Vampires have supernatural ability, senses, and need to consume blood in order to survive.” He then thought of how each time he’d offer Sage something to drink or eat, she would decline it. His eyes darted back and forth rapidly as his mind processed the information. “It can’t be,” he said, shaking his head in disbelief. “Sage is a vampire?”

It was about one in the morning when the airplane landed at JFK airport, and Rafael and a drowsy John walked through the empty terminal. They hailed a taxi and got a room at a rundown motel. A yawning John fell on the bed, falling fast asleep while Rafael rummaged through the drawers taking out a phonebook to look up the addresses of all the art galleries in town and of toy stores to restock the confiscated water gun. “Find the artist that painted the vampire’s portrait and find the vampire,” he thought.

Chapter Eight

“Cristian, wake up,” Robert said, shaking him at his desk. He began to stir as he slowly opened and focused his eyes realizing that he’d spent the night at the gallery. “Cristian!” his manager repeated. He sat up from his chair, looking around, disoriented. “You obviously spent the whole night here,” Robert said.

Cristian remembered that he was looking up information about vampires and looked at his laptop, relieved that it was in sleep mode. “What time is it?” he mumbled rubbing his eyes. “It’s about seven in the morning,” Robert said. Cristian got up from the desk to stretch his stiff muscles. “Is everything alright?” he asked, worried. “Yeah, everything’s fine,” Cristian said as he went to the restroom to splash water on his face, his mind still occupied with the information he uncovered about vampires. He went back to his office to check the desk drawer, remembering he had set aside toothpaste and toothbrush in case he spent an all-nighter at the gallery.

Feeling refreshed after sprucing up, he went over the things in his mind that didn’t add up about Sage or Anna and reasoned with himself that he’s reading more into it than it really is. “It could be

nothing at all,” he thought, shrugging his shoulders.

“Maybe it’s nothing but a coincidence. I’m not a vampire and she probably isn’t either,” he reasoned. “Maybe she’s just into the Goth look. That still doesn’t explain why Sage didn’t cast a shadow or reflect in the mirror.” He said, talking to himself. “I’m just going to have to ask her.” He imagined the conversation in his mind. “Sage, I like you and all, but are you a vampire?” He began to laugh aloud at the thought of it. “Talk about a conversation killer,” he said to himself. “Get a grip.”

His manager knocked at the door. “I’m going to go get some breakfast. Did you want anything?” he asked. “Bring me a bagel with some orange juice,” Cristian said as he began to set up for his next painting. “Ok,” Robert said, closing the door.

“How did this happen?” Sage asked, looking at the massive hole in the wall. “I have an idea what may have happened,” Anna said. “Pedro,” she said, looking at Sage. “I’ve been meaning to tell you this, but I think he’s in love with you.” “I’ve seen the way he looks at you.” “Pedro has been very loyal to me,” Sage said. “But my heart could never let go of Cristian.” “I could never stop loving him.” “And Pedro has misgivings about Cristian,” Anna said. “I know,” Sage replied. “But I don’t think that Cristian means me any harm.” “I truly don’t.”

After checking off the list of all the art galleries he’d visited, Rafael strolled inside the art gallery late in the afternoon looking for the painting of the vampire queen. In his casual attire of jeans, shirt, and jacket, he seemed a bit out of place with the more elegantly dressed attendees.

Suddenly, from the corner of his eye, he caught a glimpse of the painting showcased in the middle of the floor. Cautiously approaching the masterpiece, he was stunned at how the artist captured the likeness of the vampire queen.

“It’s a beautiful piece isn’t it?” Robert said approaching him. Rafael nodded his head. “It’s exquisite,” he said. He looked at the man talking to him. “Did you paint this portrait?” he asked. “No,” Robert replied. “My client did. I’m his manager.”

Rafael raised his eyebrow. “Is it possible that I can speak to him?” he asked. “I’ll be right back,” Robert said, disappearing in the back. Rafael stared at the portrait. “You are beautiful,” he said. “I’d do you.” He smirked. “Then kill you afterwards.”

Rafael saw a young man, tall and lean, approach. He shook his hand. “I understand you wanted to speak to me?” Cristian asked. “Yes. I’m Rafael Pearson.” “Cristian West,” he said. Rafael pointed at the painting. “I’m really impressed with this portrait,” he said. “You’ve really captured the queen’s likeness.” Cristian furrowed his brow, taken aback. “Queen?” he asked.

“Yes,” Rafael replied. “She’s a queen.” Cristian was stunned. “She became a successor to the throne when her parents died,” Rafael said nonchalantly. “How did you get the reclusive queen to come in for a sitting?” he asked probingly. “I didn’t,” Cristian said with an ominous feeling in the pit of his stomach that something was off about this man standing before him. “I don’t know her,” he said, suspicious of this stranger’s motive. “It was just an image that I saw in my mind, and I painted it.” “Do you know her?” he asked the stranger. “No,” Rafael answered quickly.

“I’m an admirer of hers, and I’ve always wanted to meet her.” He gave Cristian a shifty grin. “Then how did you know what she looks like?” Cristian asked. “I saw an article about the queen in a magazine a long time ago,” Rafael replied. “Maybe I’ll stop by again to tell you about it,” he said. Something in his menacing tone alarmed Cristian with a sense that there was more to the story, and he needed answers. He motioned to his manager. “There’s something I need to do,” he whispered, leaving abruptly out the

back exit door of the gallery.

“Are you going out again tonight, Queen V?” Billy asked. “I kind of miss having you around here,” he said. Sage smiled at Billy. “I got used to you being around here too,” Cody said, playing with his cowboy hat. “You have nothing to fear,” Sage said. “Nothing is going to tear up our family.” The doorbell rang.

“Who can that be?” Samuel said, alarmed as the doorbell rang incessantly. Daniel, Lisa, Cody, and Samuel all stared at each other anxiously.

“I’ll get it,” Anna said appearing at the door. Cristian stood at the door as it creaked open.

He peered inside. “Sage,” he said. Anna appeared out of the darkness. “What are you doing here?” she asked. “Look, I need to speak to Sage—it’s important,” Cristian said. She stepped aside opening the door wider. “Come in,” she said. He walked inside the door as the door shut hard behind him and walked down the dark hallway that seemed to close in on him. He felt a sensation of eyes watching him as strange sounds filled the air.

“Sage,” he called out as he began to perspire feeling claustrophobic. “What is it Cristian?” she said, coming up behind him holding a lantern as he jumped, startled.

“I need to speak to you,” he said, relieved. She brought him into the grand living room filled with antique handcrafted mahogany furniture and sculptures, the walls decorated with Egyptian paintings. A smell of incense lingered in the air.

Looking around, Cristian realized she wasn’t alone as he looked at Anna, Lisa, Cody, Samuel, Daniel, and Billy who were huddled together staring at him. He noticed on the table that there was a wine glass filled with a red substance. However, it did not appear to be red wine.

“This is my family,” Sage said as she introduced him to each

member of the coven, except for Pedro who wasn't around. When she introduced Cristian to Billy, he noticed his eighties pirate attire. "Whoa, time warp," he thought. Sage snickered having heard his thoughts.

"So what did you want to tell Queen V?" Daniel asked, sizing Cristian up. "Daniel," Anna said, shooting him an annoyed stare. "Queen V," a confused Cristian thought, thinking back to what Rafael said in the gallery about Sage.

"Cristian," Sage asked, snapping him out of his thoughts, staring at him with curiosity. "Someone showed up at the gallery today," he said swallowing. The coven looked at each other with dread as if they knew what he was going to say.

"Someone named Rafael Pearson." "I knew it!" Pedro exclaimed, standing at the entrance to the living room. He approached Cristian, hostile and intimidating.

"You brought him to town with that painting. Didn't you!" he yelled. "Pedro!" Sage yelled. "I told you that you shouldn't trust this hombre," he said, towering over Cristian, raising his hand as if he was going to strike him. A furious Sage flicked her arm sending Pedro hurling into the air across the room until he landed upside down on the ceiling, staring at her with red eyes. Staring at Sage with her glowing eyes and bared fangs, Cristian, his eyes wide as saucers, realized that what he suspected about her is true. Sage is a vampire.

Chapter Nine

Cristian stood speechless as he realized that he wasn't daydreaming and that Sage and the others were all vampires. She shook with fury. "Eres celoso," she said angrily. Pedro shook his head "no." "That's not true," he said. He looked at Cristian who was too stunned to speak.

"Este hombre no es digno de confianza. Él va a traicionar a usted," he reasoned. "Stop it, Pedro," Lisa yelled.

Sage saw the horrified look on Cristian's face and realized that he now knew her secret, much to her chagrin. "Can you leave us alone!" she commanded, as the coven slowly filed out the room one by one.

Anna gave Sage a look, asking if she was sure. She nodded her head. Pedro crawled down from the ceiling and looked over at Sage to say something, but she turned her head away completely appalled by his actions. He silently left the room, leaving Cristian and Sage alone as she wrestled with how to explain to him what he had just witnessed.

"I didn't want you to find out like this," she said trying to read his eyes. "I didn't want you to find out at all."

"I knew somehow in the back of my mind that you were a

vampire,” he said. “I just didn’t want to admit it to myself.” Sage stared at him with surprise. “How did you know?” she asked. Cristian sighed. “When you came to the loft and you asked to be invited inside,” he said.

“The biggest clue was when you didn’t cast a reflection in the mirror or a shadow in the light. But it was what I saw here tonight that confirmed it,” he said. He stared at her, puzzled. “I have a question,” he said. “How are you able to move around in sunlight? I thought vampires imploded in sunlight.” “I use a lot of sunscreen,” she said sarcastically.

“Actually, we can move around in daylight despite popular belief of the opposite. But our powers are diminished, so we have to be careful.” “Rafael Pearson said you’re a queen,” he said. “Are you?”

Sage walked over to the window, staring out, gathering her thoughts. “Yes,” she replied.

“I am a queen.” She looked at him, forlorn. “My parents were vampire royals, and when they died, I became the heir to the throne.”

“How did they die?” he asked. Sage drew a heavy breath. “They were staked in the heart when we were trying to flee from the hunters.”

“So this guy Rafael Pearson is a vampire hunter?” he asked. She nodded her head “yes.” “He is a hunter coming from descendants of hunters,” she said dryly. “In fact, it was Pearsons who killed my parents,” she said, flinching from the memory.

“Look, Cristian,” she said, “I didn’t want to be a vampire. I wanted to have a normal life, and I was forced to become a vampire to continue the lineage.”

“This is a lot to process,” Cristian said, taking a seat in the antique chair.

She approached him cautiously. “I’m sorry you had to find out

this way,” she said.

He looked at her, still trying to comprehend what was happening. “So you’re a vampire,” he repeated in disbelief of what he was uttering. “That means that you can change into a bat, grow fangs, drink blood, and never grow old,”

Sage chuckled. “I think you’ve watched too much television,” she said. “I don’t watch TV,” he said. “So do crucifixes or holy water repel you?” he asked.

“It depends,” she replied, remembering a long-ago, faded memory of when she was a spiritual person and how the thought of being a vampire repulsed her. “How so?” he asked confused.

“A crucifix or holy water can only repel me if there is faith behind it,” she mused. “Ok, you just lost me,” he said.

“What I mean is that if the person holding the crucifix or holy water has no faith, they have no power.” “Are you a religious person?” she inquired. “I was raised Catholic,” he replied. “But I’ve dabbled in Buddhism.” She nodded her head, intrigued. “So tell me what it’s like to be a vampire?” he asked, captivated by the thought of eternal life and youth.

“Well, it’s hard to explain,” she said. “Each vampire isn’t the same.”

“What do you mean?” he asked, completely fascinated. “Some vampires have powers, others don’t.”

“With your being a vampire queen, you must be very powerful,” he said, remembering how with just a flick of her hand, she sent Pedro hurling through the air. “I have power,” she said hesitantly, sensing his interest in her supernatural power. “But I don’t like to put it all on display.”

Cristian found himself more and more intrigued by Sage and the power she possessed.

“Can you show me some of your power?” he asked. She

sighed, closing her eyes, sensing that once he got a foretaste of her power, he'd want to be a vampire. "Please?" he asked, sensing her apprehension.

She reluctantly took his hand and they glided together to the window. She pushed the window open as they looked out toward the city. "Are you sure about this?" she asked.

"Yes," Cristian replied, not understanding her hesitation. In less than a blink of an eye, they were standing on the window ledge. "You're not afraid of heights, are you?" she asked.

Cristian nodded his head "no." "Keep your eyes focused on me," she said. She took his hand, and they began to soar through the air, whirling around holding each other as they gazed into the other's eyes as if they were slow-dancing, landing on the Brooklyn Bridge, looking down at the traffic speeding by below.

"This is magnificent," Cristian said, taking in the scene and the night air, his skin tingling with the feeling of pins and needles. "This is amazing," he said.

"The power can be addicting," Sage said. "But there is a dark side. There is the endless darkness, the constant hunger, the running from vampire killers," she shuddered.

"But you get to live forever," Cristian said excitedly. "You never die or grow old. As long as you avoid being staked in the heart," she cautioned.

"I still can't believe that vampires don't implode in sunlight," he said.

Sage chuckled. "That is a myth that began in the 1920s," she said.

Cristian looked at her in wonder as they watched the traffic, realizing that she's lived for centuries. "You've lived for a long time," he said, staring into her glowing eyes looking out toward

the skyline. She nodded her head. “You’ve seen so many things. So what decade did you prefer?” he asked, his mind racing with questions about her life.

She looked at him, puzzled. “I mean we know that Billy loves the eighties—don’t even get me started on the pirate shirt,” he said. They both started to laugh. “I knew from his whole glam look that he loved the eighties.” “So what was your favorite?” he asked like an eager student about to get a history lesson from his teacher.

“I don’t have a particular preference,” Sage said wearily. “Some decades were better than others.” She wrinkled her brow. “However, there always seems to come a time every so often that there’s an uprising.” “A revolution,” she said. “I saw it happen in the sixties and again in the eighties.” She sighed. “It’s also happening now. It only takes one person to light the flame. Not all change is a bad thing,” she mused.

Cristian nodded his head silently in contemplation. “My long life also reminds me of the passage of time,” she said sadly, thinking of her many years that she’s been a vampire and the death and destruction she had seen.

“It reminds me that even after this generation passes, I’ll still be here.” She looked at Cristian with sadness in her eyes. “The reason why I feel so drawn to you is because you remind me of someone that I loved and lost so long ago.”

“You have such an uncanny resemblance to him,” she said. “Maybe we were meant to find each other again,” he said. “To get it right this time.”

He took her hand. “And spend eternity together.”

“Cristian please,” Sage said. “You don’t know what you’re saying.” “You’re looking at the romanticism of being a vampire,” she said. “But it’s a cursed life. A life I didn’t want,” she said, shaking her head. “You will never again walk in the light, and I’m not talking

about sunlight. You would live in eternal darkness.”

“Hear me out, Sage,” he started.

“The last thing I ever want to do is to curse you with this life too,” she said interrupting him. “I won’t do it.” “I’d die first.”

Rafael arrived back at the motel room to find John eating potato chips and looking for a place to plug in his laptop.

“Today was a productive day,” he said grinning. “Did you find the vampire queen?” John asked. “I found the person that’s going to lead me to her,” Rafael said. “Well, in that case you’re going to need this,” John said, taking off his tennis shoes and opening a drilled hole in it and taking out the silver stake. “So that’s where it was,” Rafael said impressed.

“Clever,” John grinned. “I could tell that that artist knew the vampire,” Rafael said.

“And he’s going to lead me straight to her, and when he does,” he sliced the stake through the air in a stabbing motion, “she’s dead.”

Chapter Ten

Cristian tenderly stroked Sage's cheek gazing intently into her eyes. He had always sensed sadness behind them and for the first time he could see the pain reflected in them.

"What happened that day?" he asked, searching her eyes. "How did you become a vampire?"

While staring into her eyes, he felt weightless as if he was moving in the air feeling a gust of wind waft through his clothes. As he turned his head to look around, he found that they were inside his loft. "How did you...", he was astounded at how they seemed to just appear in his loft out of thin air. Being in her presence, he always felt as if he was in an alternate universe. He realized that he was, because he was in the presence of a vampire that defied logic or gravity.

"Talking on the bridge wasn't the ideal spot for this kind of conversation," she said, taking a seat on the couch as he came and joined her. "The day I became a vampire was the day I lost everything," she said staring afar. "My parents, the man I loved," she looked at him plaintively, "and my life as I knew it," she said. "Tell me," Cristian pleaded.

"I want to help if I can," he said with tenderness.

“Why?” She asked.

“Do I have to state the obvious?” he said. He gently clasped her hands in his. “Sage, I love you.” She stared at him wide-eyed. “I’ve known it since I painted your portrait before I even knew you existed.”

“Cristian,” she said fighting the tears forming in her eyes. “I’ll only destroy your life.”

“But it’s my decision to make,” he said. “It’s my choice. I know you love me,” he said, caressing her face. “You remind me of the love I lost,” she said gruffly. He sighed in frustration that was building inside of him. “You keep saying that,” he retorted. “Because it’s true,” she said. She looked at him, knowing that he was confused, because she felt the same confusion. “How can I tell you something I don’t understand myself?” she thought. He stared at her. “Yes, how can you?” he said staring at her inquisitively.

She looked at him stunned. “You can read my thoughts?” she asked. He nodded his head.

She suddenly got up from the couch, unnerved. “Now that Pearson knows I’m in New York, I’ll need to leave right away,” she said, abruptly changing the subject. “You and your coven?” he asked. “They’re my family,” she said. “Pedro?” he asked, feeling a tinge of jealousy.

“Pedro is very protective of me,” she said. “He doesn’t like me,” Cristian said. “He doesn’t like the fact that your portrait of me alerted Pearson of my whereabouts,” she said. “I didn’t know you were real when I painted it,” he said, raising his voice slightly.

“I know, I’m not accusing you,” she said. She began to walk toward the elevator feeling frustrated that the communication was going nowhere. “Sage, wait,” he said with desperation ringing in his voice.

He took her in his arms, kissing her ardently, feeling the

unquenchable fire growing stronger inside of him. They stumbled back, falling on the couch as the kisses became more passionate, and her vampire bloodlust aroused as she could feel the fangs in her mouth growing.

“No!” she yelled breaking the kiss. “I can’t do this.” “Why not!” he yelled aroused, panting heavily. “Because I’m only intimate with vampires, if you must know,” she said, exasperated.

Her admission stunned Cristian who winced at her words. “With a vampire, I don’t have to fight my urges,” she said, taking deep breaths.

Cristian felt a combination of confusion and hurt emotions stabbing through his body like knives. “Vampires are very sensual creatures, Cristian,” she said. “Once we’re aroused, the urges are strong and hard to resist.” “We have a need to bite, a need to scratch.” “I could kill you, Cristian,” she said, feeling the hurt and anger emoting from his body.

She stood up quaking from her own desire for him and the difficult decision she knew she had to make. “I’m sorry, Cristian,” she said. He threw his head back, sighing heavily, and closing his eyes.

“Sage, I just want to ...,” he turned around to find that she had vanished. “Sage,” he said, looking around, his eyes smarting. The intercom buzzed.

“Son, are you home?” his father asked. He solemnly walked over to the intercom. “I’m home, Dad,” he said softly.

Sage walked into the grand living room of the loft with her hand clutching her chest, feeling the burden that weighed her down of her decision. She didn’t notice the coven’s presence in the room or the intense way they watched her.

“What happened with Cristian?” Anna asked, sensing Sage’s pain. “What are we going to do?” Lisa asked. Sage composed herself,

facing them. “I’ve decided that we are going to leave New York. The sooner, the better,” she said with sorrow, knowing that she would have to leave Cristian behind, because it was the best choice for both of them.

Pedro, silently listening from the door, smiled wryly.

Chapter Eleven

Cristian sat on the couch despondent as the elevator opened and his parents came inside the loft. “What’s wrong, Son?” his father asked with concern. “You’ve been acting odd since the night of the presentation. What’s going on?” Cristian took a deep breath.

“Mom, Dad, do you believe in fate?” he asked, looking at their baffled faces. “Well, I believe that sometimes things happen that we have no power over,” his mother replied. “I believe in fate, Son,” his father said.

“Sometimes things in life are predestined, and it will happen no matter what.” He stared at Cristian with a questioning look in his eyes. “Does this have to do with the woman in your painting?” he asked, stroking his chin. Cristian’s mind flashed to the pain he could see in Sage’s eyes and the need to know the reason behind it.

“I have to cut this visit short, Dad,” Cristian said apologetically, jumping up from the couch. “There’s something I need to do,” he said as he gave his mom a quick kiss and his dad a hug, and got on the elevator, leaving his parents standing in the living room flabbergasted.

“I need to know what happened in Sage’s past that she doesn’t

want to tell me,” he thought.

Sage stood in the window in the moonlight staring at the newspaper clipping while Pedro stood in the shadow of the doorway wordlessly watching her in her satin gown with longing. He marveled at how, in the translucent light, her skin shone like a star and her hair shimmered like strands of silk, her gown clinging to every inch of her body as if it had been painted.

“Te quiero, mi reina,” he said as he made his presence known to her. Sage stood silent still looking out the window. He took his hand and swept it softly against her hair inhaling her jasmine scent.

“Pedro, por favor,” she said, turning and staring into his eyes, seeing the desire that burned in them.

“Mi corazón, pertenece a Cristian y que ya no será ningún cambio.” She could see the pain in his eyes at her words. “Lo siento, Pedro. Pero te quiero sólo como un hermano.” He grimaced as if he had been stabbed in the heart. Silently, he turned and disappeared from the room. Sage, her lips quivering, held the newspaper clipping in her hands and silently wept.

Cristian ran into the art gallery nearly knocking down his manager. “Whoa,” he said, stumbling back. “What’s the rush?” he asked. “There’s something I need to do,” Cristian said.

His manager grabbed his arm. “Wait,” he said. “That guy that came in the other day that spoke to you...” his eyes flickered nervously, “he’s back.”

Cristian nodded his head. “Thanks for the heads up,” he said, walking toward the painting and finding Rafael staring at the portrait nearly trancelike. “May I help you?” Cristian asked while Rafael whipped around, giving him a once-over. “I was just wondering if by chance you got to meet the inspiration behind your portrait?” he asked grinning like a Cheshire cat. “No,” Cristian said with a slight grin.

“I can use this to my advantage to find out about Sage’s past,” he thought slyly. “You seem to know a lot about the queen,” he said. “What can you tell me about her?” Rafael smirked.

“She is a special woman,” he grinned. “Special how?” Cristian asked, knowing that Rafael was toying with him. “She comes from a royal family—that’s all I meant,” Rafael said, trying to stifle the laughter in his belly. “She is a very reclusive woman,” he said. “The only thing I know about her was that she was in love with a carpenter, and it ended badly. His father had a business called Thomas Furniture.”

“Thomas Furniture,” Cristian mouthed, intrigued. “I have to say that you really made this portrait look so realistically like her,” Rafael said.

He handed Cristian a business card that contained only his name and phone number. “If you need to talk, you know where to reach me,” he said with a flash in his eyes that suggested that he knew more than what he was implying and walked with a swagger from the gallery.

While Cristian looked at the card curiously, Pedro watched him from the entrance with hatred in his eyes.

“Thomas Furniture,” Cristian said, walking into his office and turning on his laptop. He found out the business closed some ten years prior and was demolished. He also found out that after the tragic death of the owners’ son, a distraught Jonathan Thomas turned the business over to his brother who ran it until his death, and it passed on to the next generations until the death of Gerald Thomas, the last owner of the business.

“Jonathan Thomas,” Cristian said as he typed the words into his laptop. “Jonathan Thomas had a wife named Carolyn and a son named Cristian.”

Cristian was shocked that they both had the same name. “No

wonder Sage looked at me like I was a ghost,” he said feeling a tremor in his spine. He looked at the business card that Rafael gave him, took out his cell phone, and began to dial a number. Rafael stared at his ringing phone and grinned with amusement. “Like clockwork,” he said.

“Where’s Queen V?” Pedro asked, looking around frantically.

“She’s in her room, I suppose,” Lisa said.

Billy came out into the living room with his new wave music blaring noisily through the hallway. “What’s going on, dude?” he asked.

“It’s that artist,” Pedro said, his eyes a flaming red. “He’s been talking to that vampire killer. He’s going to betray Queen V.”

“Only a daft person would betray, Sage,” Anna said angrily.

The coven enraged, spoke of concocting a plan to go after Cristian. Sage appeared in the room, her eyes a glowing yellow. “We’re leaving tonight before there is any betrayal,” she said firmly.

Rafael shook John, who was asleep on the bed, awake.

He jumped awake, brandishing his stake in his hand. Rafael flashed a wide grin.

“We got a big break,” he said. John began to put on his shoes. “I know where that vampire is, and tonight we’re making our move,” he said, packing up his silver stake, crossbow, and hunting knife. “How’d you find out?” John asked.

“A little bird told me,” Rafael grinned.

Chapter Twelve

The coven hastily packed while Sage and Anna covered the furniture with cloth. “Who knows when or if we’ll ever return,” Sage said, giving the room one last glance.

“What are you going to do about Cristian?” Anna asked. “Pedro said that he was talking to Pearson.” Sage took a breath. “But Cristian told us himself that Pearson spoke to him,” she said still wanting to give him the benefit of doubt. “What happened tonight?” Anna asked.

“He wants me to turn him,” Sage replied shaking her head. “And you don’t want to,” Anna said.

“Cristian knows all the pop culture of a vampire, but he doesn’t truly understand what being a vampire entails,” Sage said. “He doesn’t get it.” Anna nudged her shoulder. “Then you made the right decision,” she said with a tiny smile.

Rafael added the last of the holy water into the water gun, placing it into the duffle bag. He looked at John who seemed a bit nervous. “Once you’ve killed a vampire, you get used to it,” he said tapping his shoulder. “Anyway, they’re not human, so it’s not a person you’re killing—it’s a creature,” he said. He drew him close. “Just a word of warning,” he said in a hushed tone.

“The vampire queen is very beautiful, and she uses it as a weapon to ensnare those who succumb to it.” John swallowed hard. “Stay focused on the task at hand and don’t be swayed by her beauty.” He threw back his duffle bag. “Let’s go kill these bloodsuckers.”

The taxis arrived to pick up the coven. As they began to put their luggage into the trunk, another taxi carrying Cristian pulled up to the curb. “What’s going on?” he asked, getting out as the coven ignored him and continued loading up the trunk. He saw Anna come out of the door.

“Anna, what’s going on?” he asked. She looked at him with scarlet eyes and fangs snarled.

“What are you doing here?” she asked angrily.

“I’m here to speak to Sage,” he said.

Anna glided over to him. “Rubbish.” She doesn’t want to speak to you,” she said with pursed lips.

“But it’s important,” Cristian stammered. “I found out something that she needs to...”

“Where are you, vampire?” Rafael said, coming up from the shadows with his crossbow in hand, surprising them. Anna looked at Cristian with anger in her eyes. “Bollocks!” “You set her up,” she said. “You bloody led that hunter to her.” She lifted up her hand to strike him, but Rafael shot holy water at her from his water gun, causing her to recoil in pain, screaming.

“You need to get out of the way,” he said, pushing Cristian aside, flashing a smile. He looked at John who was shaking like a leaf on a tree.

Frightened, the taxi cab drivers fled from the cars as the street became a battleground between the vampires and the vampire hunter. Rafael shot a stake at Billy but missed. He looked at John who was frozen in place. “Don’t just stand there!” he yelled. “Help me out.”

John ran up to Daniel and tried to stake him, but he grabbed the wooden stake from him and crushed it to pieces. John, the seat of his pants damp from urinating in them, backed away slowly from Daniel.

Lisa ran up on Rafael, but he squirted holy water in her face and she went down screaming. He lifted up the stake to drive it into her heart, but Cody shoved him with force, causing him to fall against the taxi onto the street. Undeterred, he stood up.

“Where’s the vampire queen?” he yelled, blood dripping from his mouth. “I’m right here,” she said, scaling down the brick wall, her voice bellowing in the air.

Cristian went to run to her, but Anna stopped him, jerking him back.

“Don’t distract her,” she snarled. John squirted her with holy water as she glided onto the street, but it had no effect. Cristian remembered what Sage had mentioned about if there was no faith, there was no power.

Sage smirked staring at John who took off running.

Cristian watched as Sage and Rafael stood facing each other as if they were in a duel. Her eyes like a flame of fire, fangs bared and menacing. “I’ve been waiting a long time for this day,” Rafael said cracking his knuckles. “You can’t escape your doom, just like your parents couldn’t.”

Cristian saw Sage flinch slightly at his words as if it cut her.

“Nothing personal,” Rafael said grinning. “But you need to die.”

“Wanker,” Anna snarled.

Cristian noticed how the coven looked at Sage with trepidation in their eyes. Rafael whipped out the crossbow that was hanging from his side and aimed it. Sage changed her form into fog as he shot the silver stake and missed. Cristian’s mouth dropped in astonishment.

Rafael laughed. “I knew you were powerful, but I had never seen it firsthand.”

The fog then shifted into the form of a wolf, and Sage lunged for Rafael, biting his arm. He screamed in agony as she bit down harder, drawing blood as he managed to reach for the holy water in his pocket and throw it in her face.

She yelped in pain, shifted her form into a wasp, and flew toward Cristian who couldn't believe all he was seeing. She then flew toward Cody, went behind him taking her normal form, and gave out a shout causing the heavens to burst forth rain like a fountain.

Undaunted, Rafael aimed his crossbow again, but Cristian ran in front of him blocking his aim. “Get out of my way!” Rafael yelled.

“Why do you want to kill her?” Cristian asked.

Rafael stared at him blankly. “She’s a vampire, haven’t you noticed” he snapped.

Cristian took a step back, holding his nose. “Dude, two words: toothbrush and toothpaste.”

Rafael shoved Cristian who shoved him back, and they began to fight.

Sage came from behind Cody, surprised at the scene as the others looked on.

Pedro appeared from nowhere and grabbed Cristian, causing him to let go of his grip on Rafael. Anna ran over to Sage to help her into the taxi.

“Let me go,” Cristian yelled. While he and Pedro were scuffling, Rafael grabbed the silver stake, placing it on the crossbow, and aimed it at Sage who was about to enter into the cab, and fired it. She felt a searing pain in her flesh as the stake drove deep inside her chest barely inches from her heart.

“Sage!” Anna screamed. “I missed her heart,” Rafael said fuming.

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He ran toward her, taking out a silver hunting knife, sidestepping through Samuel, Cody, and Daniel who tried to stop him from finishing the job.

Before he could reach her, she flung him with her arm, using what was left of her strength, with such force that he slammed against the pavement and lay unconscious.

She fell down writhing on the pavement screaming. “No!” Lisa screamed. “Queen V!” Pedro yelled.

Cristian’s face turned white as a sheet as he stared at Sage lying on the pavement in the rain screaming a piercing cry of an agonizing impending death.

Chapter Thirteen

Daniel, Samuel, and Cody scrambled to help Anna get Sage, who was beginning to lose consciousness from the excruciating pain, into the taxi.

“Let me go,” Cristian yelled, jerking away from Pedro who stood horrified. Cristian ran over to the taxi, but Anna shoved him back.

“Stay away from her,” she said angrily. “It’s your fault she was hurt because you brought Pearson here.”

Cristian shook his head profusely. “No, I didn’t,” he said vehemently. “I didn’t have anything to do with him coming here I swear,” he said, pleading.

Anna wanted to believe him as she stared into his eyes and saw the fear and the pain. “We need to get her out of here quick,” she said. Cristian took her arm. “You can bring her to my loft—no one knows where it is,” he said.

“Alright,” Anna said begrudgingly. She looked over at the coven, as they stood stricken. “Queen V would want you all to go underground and lie low for awhile. I’ll let you know something as soon as I can,” she said as she got into the taxi, while Cristian took the driver’s seat and sped off.

“She can’t die,” Lisa said.

They looked over at Rafael who lay unconscious on the pavement. “Let’s finish him off,” Billy said. “I think Queen V did just that when she flung him like a rag doll,” Pedro said still looking in the direction that the taxi drove off.

They heard sirens approaching. “Let’s get out of here,” Daniel said as they got into the taxis and took off before the police arrived.

“If you can muster up some of your power to help us get inside unnoticed, please do it,” Anna pleaded, cradling Sage in her arms. She opened her eyes weakly as Cristian helped to get her out of the taxi and carried her in his arms. She used her power of illusion to help them get into the elevator.

Once inside his loft, she cried out as her strength waned, nearly collapsing as he laid her on the floor. Anna braced herself for the difficult task of removing the embedded stake from Sage’s chest.

Fighting back the tears, she pulled out the stake, and blood oozed from the wound that was festering with pus. Her skin was clammy and her face pale. “She’s dying, Cristian,” she said as tears of blood trickled down her eyes. “No,” Cristian said, stricken. “I won’t let her die.”

He looked at Sage who seemed to age into a silver-haired, wrinkled, old frail woman right before his eyes. “She needs blood,” Anna said. “I need to go back and get the supply from the loft.”

“What about human blood?” he asked. Anna shook her head. “She won’t drink human blood, Cristian. She detests it.” She looked at Sage who was fading away.

“I need to go and try to get the blood for her.” She bent down and looked into Sage’s eyes as she was wheezing.

“Please hang on until I get back,” she said. She looked at Cristian. “Don’t let her die,” she said, her lips trembling.

Cristian watched as she got on the elevator and left.

“Let me die, Cristian,” Sage said hoarsely. “I never wanted to be a vampire.” Tears flowed down Cristian’s cheek. “No,” he said defiantly. “I won’t let you die.” “I love you.”

Sage focused her eyes in the room and could see her parents’ apparitions standing behind Cristian. They were silent. She could also see other members of her family that were fallen from vampire hunters, standing next to them.

Between them was a deep abyss of blackness. They were standing on the edge, all dressed in royal garments of gold and black. It was as though they were waiting for her to join them. Her parents wore a gold crown adorned with sapphire stones.

Sage felt cold as she could feel the life ebb from her body. “Sage,” Cristian said, wondering what she was staring at so intently behind him.

He placed his hand on her chest and felt something crinkly underneath her blouse. He took it out and it was the old, yellow, laminated newspaper clipping.

Curious, he opened it and saw the article about Thomas Furniture. He looked down further and saw the drawing of Cristian Thomas. “Oh, my God” he said, astonished. He couldn’t believe the striking resemblance he shared with the person in the drawing.

He looked at Sage who was staring at him.

Her eyes dilated.

Suddenly, he saw a fleeting image of her in his mind. It was like a flicker of a moment in time, but it wasn’t the present. It was a different time. She was wearing a day gown that was full of ruffles. It was sunrise, he was staring into her eyes, and they kissed.

He then saw a memory flash of her in a different setting. She was distressed as she looked at him lying on the floor. He felt a pain in his chest as the life was leaving his body. The last thing he saw

was her eyes. Dazed, he realized now why he couldn't forget her face, because it was the last thing he saw in another lifetime.

The past and the present had collided, bringing him and Sage back into each other's spheres to right the wrong of the past. However, in a cruel twist of fate, she is now the one lying dying on the floor—something he would not allow to happen.

"Sage," he whispered. "I won't let you die. Not after we found each other again."

He got up and went to the kitchen opening the drawer, taking out a kitchen knife. He kneeled down beside her and took the knife to his wrist.

"You need blood to survive," he said with determination. "You need my blood." Sage shook her head frantically "No, Cristian," she said weakly. "Don't do this," she said.

He took the knife and slit his wrist, grimacing as the blood began to flow from the wound steadily like a stream. He held his wrist to her mouth as she tried to turn her head away, refusing to drink. "Drink," he said as the droplets of blood fell on her lips. "Drink." "I could take too much," she pleaded. "It's a risk I'm willing to take so you can live," he said.

He held his wrist over her mouth as she continued to thrash her head in protest. The droplets of blood seeping into her mouth, she began to feel her thirst awaken, grabbing hold of his wrist and bringing it to her mouth. "Drink," he said. She took his wrist to her lips and began to drink hungrily as she felt her body begin to revive.

Cristian flinched in pain as she sucked harder like a baby suckling from its mother's breast. He felt himself weakening as she continued to drink in gulps, entranced by the sweet hotness of his blood. Mustering his strength, he jerked his arm away, forcefully falling to the floor.

Sage, now restored to her youthfulness, sat up like a Phoenix rising from the ashes. “Did I hurt you?” she asked anxiously. “I told you I may take too much.”

Cristian sat up somewhat lightheaded. “I’m alright,” he said. He looked at Sage and saw that she was now back to her youthful appearance and even more beautiful than she was before. The wound in her chest healed with no scarring.

The EMTs wheeled Rafael into the emergency room as the nurses and doctors frantically worked on him. John, who followed behind, claiming to be his brother, waited worriedly in the waiting room. He listened as the nurses murmured about what could’ve caused his injuries.

Trying to avert suspicion, he told them that the injuries occurred when Rafael tried to fight off a mugger. He heard a call come into the police walkie-talkies that the taxis turned up empty with no fingerprints to garner any suspects. He thought back to the fight with the vampires.

How futile his efforts were against Sage or the coven. Truth is, the only reason he worked for Rafael was because he had nowhere else to go after he ran away from home, and the thought that there were real vampires fascinated him. However, vampire slaying wasn’t his strong suit.

Being a computer geek was more his thing. The doctor approached him, taking him out of his thoughts.

“Your brother was very fortunate,” he said. “He sustained a broken arm, a concussion, and a cut that required stitches, but it could’ve been worse.”

“How long will you keep him in the hospital?” John asked. “We’ll keep him overnight for observation and then release him in the morning,” said the doctor. John jumped up from his seat. “May I see him?” he asked anxiously.

“Sure,” the doctor said. John approached the emergency room and peeked in. Rafael had his eyes closed and his arm bandaged. “Rafael,” John said in a whisper. “Are you asleep?”

Rafael opened his eyes and stared askance at John. “You disappointed me, John,” he said, barely raising his voice. “You let fear stop you from...,” he looked around, “from killing that vampire,” he said.

“I practically did everything. In fact, I did do everything,” he said. John opened his mouth to speak, but Rafael silenced him with his hand, grimacing. “Our association is over,” he said. “Consider yourself fired.”

John’s eyes welled up. “But I don’t have anywhere to go,” he said, his voice catching. “That’s not my problem,” Rafael said coldly. “Tomorrow, when I’m released, I don’t want to see you anywhere near the motel room.”

John silently nodded his head and began to walk out the room with his shoulders slumped in despair. “John!” Rafael yelled.

Sage sat beside Cristian after bandaging his wrist. “Are you sure you’re alright?” she asked worriedly. He smiled at her slightly. “I’m fine, Sage,” he said. He handed her the newspaper clipping. She looked at it and then at him. “You see now why I said you remind me of someone I loved and lost,” she said. Cristian nodded his head. “His name was Cristian,” he said. She gasped. “How did you know that?” she asked. “That’s what I was going to tell you tonight before Rafael showed up,” he said. “I even tried to call you earlier on your phone to tell you.”

He took a deep breath. “His name was Cristian Thomas.” “I know that,” Sage said, her body beginning to tremble. “Sage,” he paused, “my name is Cristian Thomas Westmore.” She froze by his declaration, unable to utter a sound. “That’s not all,” he said taking her hand. “I saw you in a different time,” he said. “You were wearing

a ruffled day gown and we shared a kiss.” Her eyes welled up.

“I also saw you leaning over me, anguished. I was in pain from what felt like a gunshot wound, and I was fading away.” He stared at her pensively. “Your face was the last thing I saw.”

“It can’t be,” she said, astonished and covering her mouth. “You’ve come back to me,” she said. “I can’t explain it, Sage,” he said. “All I know is that I’ve felt like I’ve known you from the moment I kept seeing your face in my mind.” He took his hand to her cheek. “I love you, Sage.”

They embraced holding each other tightly as tears flowed down both their eyes. “I felt like you were calling me back to New York,” Sage said tearfully. “I felt this urgency to come back now.”

“Just like I felt the urgency to paint your portrait,” Cristian said.

They stared into each other’s eyes and kissed as though they were rediscovering each other. Refraining from the embrace, Sage gasped for air, as he possessed her lips again in a clash of teeth and tongues.

Feeling her fangs growing in her mouth, she pulled away from him.

“Sage, please” Cristian said. “We need each other.” “Cristian,” she started, but he placed his fingers to her lips. “I almost lost you tonight, Sage,” Cristian said. “Let’s not let fear stop us from being together,” he said.

“I have a legitimate fear, Cristian,” she reasoned. “I could kill you.”

“Sage, you’ve already tasted my blood,” he said, amused. “I don’t believe you’ll kill me.”

He kissed her again. “I’ve already hurt you enough by nearly draining you of your blood,” she said, staring down in dismay. He lifted up her chin. “You didn’t hurt me,” he whispered.

She sighed. “My love could destroy you,” she said.

“I’m a big boy, Sage,” he said. “It’s my decision.”

He began to kiss the nape of her neck. She shuddered as the desire inside of her grew like a flower bud blossoming in the spring. She closed her eyes as he continued to kiss her neck, tugging on his shirt ripping it with her razor-sharp claws.

He picked her up and carried her into his bedroom, laying her gently on the bed as her chest heaved. She drew in a harsh deep breath as he continued to kiss her neck, working down to her chest taking off her blouse

“You’re so beautiful,” he said, staring at her breasts and kissing them gently. He could hear her panting softly, her eyes still closed. He took off his shirt and threw it to the floor. “Let me see your eyes,” he whispered, kissing her ears. He knew that she was not only aroused, but also her vampire instincts were heightened.

She opened her eyes, and they were a smoldering orange-yellow. He smiled as he continued to kiss her, taking off her pants. She could still taste the sweetness of his blood on her lips. She leaned in and kissed his neck, licking it when she felt the urge to bite him. She felt him tense up as she dug her claws into his back.

She looked at him, worried. “Don’t stop,” he said, taking deep breaths. Their passion enveloping them like an inferno, he ran his fingers through the silky strands of her hair that smelled of jasmine.

They leaned back on the bed as he positioned himself on top of her. He could feel her breath, hot like flames on his neck. She impatiently tugged on his pants as they ripped from her claws. “Too many clothing,” she complained much to Cristian’s delight. He looked at her as she lay back on the bed biting her lower lip in anticipation of what was to come.

“Please, Cristian,” she pleaded, lurching herself forward.

“Please.” Understanding the need for union, he granted her request joining their bodies as he shook from the pleasure of it. Being an experienced lover, he had been with other women before, but it was never like this.

This was uncharted territory for him. They moved together, their panting mingled as Sage dug her claws into the sheets to keep from shredding his back raw.

She could hear his heart beating fast in her ears like a cymbal as he moaned and groaned, calling her name. She leaned in as the desire to bite him intensified, opening her mouth to sink her fangs into his neck, but resisted with all her strength, afraid of what would happen if she gave in to her vampire desires.

Sensing her struggle to keep from biting him, Cristian lifted himself up to look at her as they moved rhythmically together. “I love you so much,” he thought. “I love you, Cristian,” she said between breaths.

He smiled as the passion overtook him and he picked up the pace; she matching his movements. The only sounds between them were a symphony of moans, groans, and sighs with only the walls of his bedroom as an audience to their love song. Reaching the crescendo of their passion, they exploded together like a volcanic eruption in a wave of pleasure that swept over them both. Their bodies glistening like dew on the morning grass, he held her close as they both experienced the aftershocks of their rapturous ecstasy.

Chapter Fourteen

Cristian tenderly stroked Sage's moist hair as she lay on his chest, kissing it softly and raising herself up to kiss his lips. He cuddled her, kissing her forehead. "That was amazing," he said, grinning. She lifted herself up on her elbow. "You're the first human I've ever been with," she grinned coyly. "You're the first vampire I've ever been with," he said with a chuckle. "Once you've had a vampire, you can't go back," she laughed. They both started to giggle like love-struck teenagers. "And I don't want to," he joked. "So what do we do now?" she asked, taking his hand and kissing each finger scrumptiously. "I want to be with you, Sage," he said, serious.

"You want me to turn you?" she asked. "I want to be with you, and that's the only way we'll be together for all time," he said. "You saw what can happen to a vampire tonight," she said, sitting up. "We can be killed. And on top of that, there's the constant hunger for blood. It's insatiable," she said, the taste of his blood still lingering on her lips. She stared into his eyes. "Being a vampire means that you have to die physically," she said, remembering her own death. "It's not an enjoyable experience." He started to answer when the intercom buzzed. "That's Anna," he said, jumping out of bed. "She

was going to get blood for you.” Sage got out of bed looking for her clothes as Cristian put on his pants and a new shirt. He went to answer the intercom, picking up the silver stake from the floor. “Who is it?” he asked. “Anna,” she said simply.

Sage, now dressed, came out of the bedroom and sat on the couch while Cristian sat the stake down on the table and waited for the elevator. Once the cage opened, Anna stepped out, looked at Cristian and then at Sage, noting their “rested” appearance. A tiny smile appeared on her face. “It took you long enough,” she said staring at them; they both unable to conceal the beaming grin from their faces. “You give new meaning to the term “cougar,” she joked as she gave Sage a hug. “I don’t ever want to see you like that again,” she said holding her. “You scared us.” “How are the others?” Sage asked. “They’re waiting for word about you,” Anna said. She stared at Cristian. “I flew back, in case you were wondering,” she said. “Now I can tell them that you’re alright,” she said, turning her head toward Sage.

She handed her one of the bottles of animal blood. “I guess you don’t need this now,” she said smiling. “You had to drink human blood to be revived.” Sage stared at Cristian with a warm smile. “He refused to let me die,” she said. Anna gazed into her eyes. “Now that you’ve tasted human blood, you’ll crave it,” she said telepathically. Sage heaved a deep sigh, knowing that Anna was right, because she still could not get the taste of Cristian’s blood out of her mind.

“Now we need to find out who revealed your whereabouts to Pearson for him to show up at the loft,” Anna said. “It wasn’t me,” Cristian said. “I know that now,” Anna said. “I saw the fear in your eyes when Sage was hurt. I realized it couldn’t be you.” “Someone told Rafael, and we need to find out who it was,” Sage said. “We

know he has an assistant, but he reeked of fear,” she said. “He looked out of his element,” Anna said. “Like he really didn’t want to be there,” Cristian added.

He looked at Sage. “I know you don’t want to hear this, but what if Pedro was behind it? You don’t have to be a rocket scientist to know that he wants you for himself, and maybe he was trying to move me out the way to have you.” “I know that Pedro cares deeply for me,” Sage replied. “But turning to a vampire hunter that he knows wants me dead doesn’t seem like something he’d do.” “The coven has always been loyal to Sage,” Anna said. “Well, if it wasn’t him, somebody helped him,” Cristian said.

The coven sat huddled together in an underground vampire nightclub in New Jersey, checking their cell phones every few minutes for word from Anna. Pedro, growing more restless, got up. “Where are you going, dude?” Billy asked. “Anna said she’d tell us what happened with Queen V,” Lisa said. “She’s with him,” Pedro spat, rolling his eyes. “It was because of him she got hurt.”

“We need to wait and see what Anna tells us,” Samuel said.

“I need some air,” Pedro said, looking like he smelled something foul as he walked toward the door. Daniel and Cody watched him go out the door. “What’s up with him?” Daniel asked shaking his head.

Lisa got up. “I’ll go check on him,” she said. She walked out the door only to find that Pedro wasn’t there. He had disappeared. “Pedro,” Lisa said, going up the steps. She could make out his silhouette walking down the street. “Pedro!” she yelled. She decided to try to follow him, but he disappeared. “Pedro!” She stomped her foot irritated.

The rain having cleared up, she flew back into the city looking to see if he went back to the loft and didn’t find him there. She knew that Pedro was antsy because of Sage being hurt, but she also

knew there was another reason. She remembered the look on his face when she brought him to meet Sage for the first time—how he couldn't keep his eyes off her. She could tell that he was completely smitten with the vampire queen.

Snapping back into the present, Lisa wandered until she found herself walking through Times Square. She tried to blend in with the crowd so as not to stand out.

“Still no Pedro,” she thought, looking through the faces in the crowd. As she crossed the street, she saw someone sitting with a duffle bag on the sidewalk with a hood over his head.

She recognized the jacket. It belonged to the geeky-looking vampire hunter who tried to kill them earlier in the evening. She crept over to him quietly like a cat creeping up on a mouse.

“Hey!” she said, startling him. John looked at her peering at him. “Please don't hurt me,” he said throwing up his hands. “You tried to kill our queen,” she said, yanking him up from the ground.

“Please,” he pleaded. “I didn't want to do it. I'm serious.” She stared into his eyes. “Where's Pearson?” she demanded. “He's incapacitated,” he said. “You may be more useful to me alive than dead,” Lisa said, grabbing his arm tightly.

“So what do we do now about Pearson?” Anna asked Sage.

“I'm not sure yet,” she replied. “I've been running from vampire hunters all of my eternity.” “But this particular hunter is doggedly pursuing me.”

“He's determined to kill you,” Anna said.

“There has to be a way to figure out what his game plan is and beat him at his own game,” Sage said. Anna's cell phone began to ring. “It's Lisa,” she said. She answered the phone. “Lisa, I told you I would let you know about... What!” she exclaimed.

“Where are you at now?” she asked. “Okay,” she said, hanging up the phone.

“Lisa found one of the hunters tonight,” she said, answering Sage’s inquisitive stare. “He was alone.” “Where are they?” Sage asked. “At the loft,” Anna replied. “Let’s go,” Sage said. “You’re not going without me,” Cristian said. “I’m a part of this now too.”

Anna took Sage aside as Cristian went to grab his jacket. “Lisa also had something else she wanted to tell you, but she didn’t want to say it over the phone.” “It’s about Pedro.” Sage sighed heavily, hoping that Cristian’s suspicions about him weren’t true.

Chapter Fifteen

The door to the entrance of the loft creaked open slowly as Sage, Cristian, and Anna peered inside. “Lisa,” Anna called out. “They heard sounds of whispers as they walked down the hallway in the darkness. Cristian noticed how both Sage’s and Anna’s eyes glowed like felines’ in the darkness. “Lisa!” Sage cried out. “In here,” she replied. They walked into the living room and saw John, his face covered by his hooded jacket, sitting on the covered antique chair with Lisa standing over him.

“What do we have here?” Anna said. “Don’t kill me, please,” John pleaded. “Why should we spare you when you tried to kill Queen V?” she replied. “I didn’t want to do it. Rafael told me to do it.” “Where’s Pearson?” Sage asked. “He was in the hospital,” John answered trembling. “He had a broken arm and a concussion.” He looked up and was stunned to see Sage well. “He staked you,” he said, incredulous. “I saw the silver stake go inside your chest.”

Sage took out the silver stake from under her arm. “You mean this silver stake?” she asked. “That was the stake that Rafael said was used to kill your parents,” John said. Sage winced, dropping the stake from her hand. Cristian looked at it, stunned.

“Rafael wanted to use the same stake to kill you,” John said.

Sage blinked away the tears, sniffing softly. “He didn’t succeed,” she said angrily. “How did he know to find me?” she asked. “He got a phone call—that’s all I know?” John replied.

“You’ve never killed a vampire before...?” Anna said. John shook his head “no.” “I could tell.” “Rafael hired me to help him with the computer stuff because he’s computer illiterate,” John said. “Then he was teaching me how to track and kill a vampire. I never thought that vampires existed until I saw it for myself,” he said.

He stared at Sage. “He always talked about the vampire queen that no one could kill, and he wanted to be the first to accomplish it.”

“After the death of the vampire king and queen,” Sage fumed, “he wanted to kill the surviving heir.” “You,” he said, staring at her. “He lives and breaths it...”

“And will never rest until he achieves his goal,” Sage said, cutting him off.

Cristian shook his head, frowning. “It’s important for Rafael to live up to his family’s expectations,” John said. “Killing the vampire queen would be a big feat for him.” “And why aren’t you with him now?” she asked.

“Because he fired me for being incompetent,” John replied. “I’m not a vampire killer,” he said. “I found him sitting on the sidewalk in Times Square,” Lisa said.

“I have nowhere else to go.” John said with puppy-dog eyes.

Daniel, Billy, Cody, and Samuel appeared into the living room, shooting Lisa an irritated glance. “Sorry,” she said sheepishly. “You leave us just sitting there, and we didn’t know what happened,” Billy said, agitated.

They looked at Sage and went over to hug her. “I’m so glad you’re alright, Queen V,” Cody said. Daniel looked at John, remembering that he tried unsuccessfully to stake him. “What’s he doing here?”

he demanded. “He was telling us how obsessed Pearson is with killing Queen V,” Lisa said.

“You know vampires get a bad rep,” Billy shouted, waving his arms in the air. “Vampires are thought of as foul-smelling, fang-toothed, bloodsuckers that prey on humans for food.” Everyone stared at Billy while he ranted.

“Well, isn’t it true?” John asked. “No!” the coven all replied in unison. “What are we going to do about him?” Anna whispered into Sage’s ear, looking at John. “We’ll find out how loyal he is to Pearson,” she replied. “We’ll see by his actions.”

Sage asked Samuel to take John to be bathed and clothed while the others waited in the living room, taking a seat staring at her and Cristian.

“So what happened—as if we don’t already know,” Billy said. “Cristian saved my life,” Sage said. “And I don’t believe he led Pearson to me.”

“I would never betray you, Sage,” Cristian said. He stared at each member of the coven. “I want you all to know that, because I can see what she means to all of you.”

“Queen V is special to us all,” Anna said. “She took us in when we had nowhere else to go.” She stared at Sage who smiled graciously. “She is special,” she said smiling warmly.

“How did you all come to be the coven seven?” he asked, curious.

“We never really talked about that,” Lisa said. “Because it’s a life we all left behind, and it’s of the past.” “But what do you all know about each other?” Cristian asked.

“I can see that you’ve all lived and traveled together. But what was it that brought you all into each other’s paths?” They all looked at each other, dumbfounded.

“I never really thought of that,” Sage said.

“Sage and I have known each other the longest,” Anna said. “We met right when she fled to Egypt after her parents died and she was still newly a vampire, and hadn’t learned of all her power yet.” She sighed. “I was part of another coven in England, and I saw them all slaughtered by vampire killers. I was the only one who escaped.”

Everyone gasped. “I never spoke of it to anyone until now,” she said with a grimace. “But Sage accepted me and welcomed me without any pretext or judgment,” she said. She and Sage clasped each other’s hands.

“I met Anna during the eighties, as you can all tell from my appearance,” Billy said to chuckles around the room. “I moved from place to place around L.A., and I wasn’t sure what I wanted to do with my life, so she offered me this world of eternity. Ergo, I took her up on it and became a vampire, and she introduced me to Queen V.”

“How did you get the nickname Queen V?” Cristian asked. “Queen Vampire,” Anna said. “One day Cody called her Queen V, and it stuck.”

“I ran away from home,” Lisa said, staring out toward the window. “My father used to beat me and my mother,” she said quietly. “I couldn’t take it anymore and ran away, and that’s when I met Samuel.” “He turned me and brought me to meet Queen V, and that’s where I’ve stayed ever since.”

“Did you ever find out what happened to your mother?” Cristian asked.

“I went back a year after I left and I found out that she’d died,” she said tearing up. “I’ve always regretted leaving my mother behind,” she said. Overwhelmed, she got up and ran out the room.

Anna went after her.

“I had never thought to ask what your lives were like before you

were vampires, because I thought that that was your life before,” Sage said, feeling guilty. “Maybe I was being selfish.”

“No,” Cristian said. “How were you to know what their life was like before?”

Samuel came into the room. “Where’s the little stinker?” Daniel said. “He’s changing clothes,” Samuel replied. “He’s not wearing the pinstripes anymore,” he chuckled.

“I’ll go watch him,” Billy said with a grin. “I need some fun after tonight.”

“What happened with Lisa?” Samuel asked.

“We’re talking about what our lives were like before we became vampires and met Queen V,” Daniel said. “Interesting,” Samuel replied.

“So what was your life like before becoming undead?” Cristian asked.

“I escaped from the slave traders in Barbados,” Daniel volunteered. “They were about to ship me as cargo when I escaped from the boat before it set sail.” I saw others captured, chained like some kind of animal, and shipped away,” he said, his eyes tearing in anger.

“And I refused to share that same fate, so I escaped and lay low in Alexandria. “I met Anna, and she brought me to Cairo where I met Sage, and I decided to become a vampire, and have been loyal to her ever since.”

An uncomfortable, heavy silence fell across the room as everyone stared at Daniel. Sage could remember her father often speaking of escaping from slave traders that came to Barbados.

“I came from a noble family,” said Samuel, breaking the silence. “They were keen on tradition. I felt trapped—like I couldn’t have my own life—that I was always in my parents’ shadows, having to live up to their high expectations of me. One day I left and never

looked back. I met Anna and, well, you know the rest.” He sighed.

Cody fumbled with his cowboy hat nervously. “I lived on the farm with my father in Kansas, and I was about to get married to my girl,” he grinned shyly. “But she became ill. The doctor said she had scarlet fever and her body just gave out. My sorrow overwhelmed me, and I was no good to my father. He told me to get my act together or leave. So I left with just the clothes on my back. I met Lisa, and she offered me a new life. I decided to become a vampire, and I met Queen V; and slowly but surely, I’ve been able to come to terms with losing the love of my life.”

Sage and Cristian stared at each other, pained.

Anna and Lisa reentered the room. “Are you alright?” Sage asked. “I’m fine,” she said.

“This room is so rich with history,” Cristian said in awe.

“Yes,” Anna said. “We’ve all come from different walks of life.”

“And different centuries,” Cristian said.

“Billy is the youngest vampire among us,” Sage said.

“The only story we haven’t heard is Pedro’s,” Daniel said. “You’ve known Pedro the longest,” he said, staring at Lisa. “What do you know of his life before he joined the coven?”

“Not much,” she said, staring down at the floor and chewing her lower lip nervously. Sage could see that Lisa was hiding something.

“So what have you decided to do about John?” Lisa asked, attempting to change the subject.

“He’s going to show me if he’s still helping Pearson,” Sage said.

“How so?” Lisa asked.

“I’ll go into more detail later,” Sage said. She got up and walked over to Lisa. “What was it about Pedro that you couldn’t tell Anna

over the phone?” she asked.

“He was really upset about your being hurt,” Lisa said. She glanced over at Cristian. “And that you were with Cristian. Pedro loves you Queen V,” she said. “I’ve known it for a long time, and I’m afraid of what could happen if...”

“Mi reina. Soy feliz de verle bien y justo tan hermoso como jamás,” Pedro said as he walked over and gave Sage a hug, glaring at Cristian as if he was marking his territory.

Rafael left the hospital before he was to be officially released, complaining that he didn’t want to stay overnight. He felt his cell phone vibrating against him as he was wheeled out to the taxi but was unable to reach it with his arm in a sling.

The phone continued to vibrate once he arrived at the motel and he fumbled with the keycard to enter the room. John was gone and had taken his laptop with him.

His cell phone vibrated again. “Okay!” he yelled. He took the sling off and reached into his pocket to take it out.

“It worked,” the text message read. “I’ve been able to successfully infiltrate the enemy.” “Good,” Rafael grinned. “The vampire queen didn’t suspect a thing,” the message continued. “She’s practically putty in my hands.”

“I’m surprised that the vampire fell for the ruse,” Rafael said, thinking back to the moment he concocted the plan while in his hospital bed, giving John a chance to redeem himself.

“The end justifies the means, so it works for me in the long run.”

Chapter Sixteen

Pedro stared into Sage's eyes, still holding her in his arms. "I'm glad you are alright," he said. "I'm fine," she said softly as the room fell dead silent with all eyes on Cristian, Sage, and Pedro.

"Everyone did a good job with getting the police off our scent," Cody said awkwardly as Pedro walked over to Lisa while still glancing at Cristian and his bandaged wrist.

"They have nothing to go on," Daniel said. "The only matter now is Pearson." "Yes Pearson," Sage replied.

"That reminds me—I have something I need to do," Cristian said as Sage excused herself and went with him to escort him to the door, feeling Pedro's eyes following them intensely like a laser. "I'm going to go inform my parents of what's happening," he said, giving her a smile. "This may take some time. What are you going to do about Pedro?" he asked.

"I'm going to wait first," she said. They leaned in and kissed.

"So much happened tonight," he said as they nuzzled together.

"Things that can't be undone," she said.

"Are you sorry for what happened between us?" he asked.

"No. I'm not sorry," she said. "You saved my life—in more ways than one."

They kissed again. "I'll be back as soon as I can," he said. She watched him leave and disappear around the corner. Cristian hailed a taxi and took out his cell phone. "Mom, Dad, there's something I need to talk to you about," he said into the voicemail. "I'm on my way there. This can't wait." He hung up the cell phone. "I hope this works," he thought.

Rafael dialed a number from his cell phone. "You said you would help me when I asked for it," he said. "Well, I need your help now. I need supplies. I need a new crossbow, arrows, stakes, and more holy water. You gave me your word," he said. "Remember what's at stake here, and besides, this will bring you more money and recognition than you ever dreamed of. Isn't this why you do what you do for a living?" he asked. "We'll both be legends when this is all over. I thought you'd see it my way," he laughed.

John, after being scared by Billy who wanted to give him styling tips, walked into a room adjacent to the living room dressed in a black shirt and black jeans. Without his glasses, he didn't appear to be so geeky. He was actually quite handsome.

"Are you hungry?" Lisa asked, startling him.

"Yes, I am," he replied meekly. She smiled at him. Stepping aside, she revealed a tray on the table spread with cloth. The tray had an array of fruits from bananas to apples, to pears, to peaches and salads and sandwiches. He sat down on the black velvet loveseat and began to eat as Lisa sat beside him, watching him. He lifted up a peach to his lips and bit down as some of the juice spilled down his chin; he licked his lips slowly as he ate.

Lisa found herself aroused watching him take his fingers and lick them. She licked her lips tantalizingly. He looked over at her, swallowing hard. "I'd join you," she said grinning. "But I'm on a protein diet." He looked into her eyes and felt his heart begin to beat rapidly. He felt his face flush as she continued to stare at him

as if she was undressing him.

“Why would vampires have food if you don’t eat?” he asked, perplexed.

“We have it in case we dine...with humans,” she grinned. He nodded his head nervously.

Sage, having changed into a crimson gown, entered the room. “Thank you for your hospitality,” John said.

“And here you thought vampires are malevolent creatures,” she said with a tinge of sarcasm.

“Rafael said that all vampires are evil,” he said, feeling his skin prickle with goose bumps at the resonance of her voice. He picked up a pear with shaky hands and began to bite down into it.

“What else did Rafael tell you?” she asked.

Lisa stood up. “I’ll excuse myself,” she said looking at John.

“Talk to you later,” he said, watching her walk out the door.

Sage smiled slightly at the obvious attraction she could sense brewing between them.

“What did Rafael tell me?” he said getting back to the topic. “He told me it was important for him to maintain the family dignity of the Pearson name—” he said. “that the name was nearly tainted due to some scandal that happened before he was even born. It was referred to as the fate of Amerie and Lance,” he said, taking another bite from the pear.

Sage’s ears perked up, having heard those names before when her father mentioned it. It was whispered amongst the family, but no one spoke openly of what happened. “What do you know of the story?” she asked intrigued.

“This is all hearsay,” John said. “But Rafael told me that in his family, there was a hunter named Lance Pearson, and he was obsessed with killing the vampire queen Amerie.” “She had supposedly turned the crown over to her son when he became a

father and sent him and his family into hiding when hunters felled her husband, the king. That wasn't good enough for Lance. He was determined to kill the vampire queen as well."

"Sounds familiar," Sage thought, arching her eyebrows.

"So he waited and waited until he tracked down the queen." "Finally, he found her, and when he tried to kill her, he couldn't." He stared at Sage. "Rumor is that Amerie was very beautiful, and those who gazed upon her would fall under her spell.

Lance couldn't bring himself to kill her. Instead, they fell in love and decided to run away together." Sage was amazed at the similarities between Amerie and Lance and herself and Cristian.

"But Amerie was a vampire and Lance was human. It was doomed to fail," John said. "Lance's brother Lawrence found them in Vienna and forced Lance to watch as he drove the stake into Amerie's heart and cut off her head, destroying her. He was driven from the family in disgrace and was never heard from again, with speculation that he ended his life."

"That was the fate of Amerie and Lance."

Sage was horrified at the tale, having never understood why her family members spoke in hushed tones about Amerie. Now she understood why her father tried to keep her away from Cristian, because he was scared that she would share the same fate as her great-grandmother, and she nearly did.

"Rafael warned me about you," John said as she stared at him. "He said that you are also very stunningly beautiful and would draw people into a trancelike state." He stared at her. "And you are beautiful," he said. "He wants to kill you because you are the last of the royal line. And you are the most powerful." Sage understood that Rafael would not wait until the next successor came along to end her reign. He would continue with his quest

until he succeeded.

Cristian sat in the taxi parked on the ferry crossing over to Long Island thinking of how he was going to explain to his parents all that had happened since the night of the presentation. As the taxi drove up the long driveway to his parents' waterfront property, he could see the white stately house that had gray blinders and two pillars with stairs leading to the massive chestnut door with brass door handles. The door opened as Cristian stepped out the taxi. "What's going on, Son?" his father asked, looking as if he hadn't slept for days. "We went to the gallery and you weren't there, and Robert had no idea where you were. Why are you acting so strangely?"

Cristian walked up the stairs and inside the house, taking a breath. "Not only that," his mother added, "we saw all of those drawings in your room of the woman in your portrait." She stared at his bandaged wrist. "What happened to your wrist? What's going on, Cristian?" she asked. "I'll explain everything the best way I can," Cristian replied. "You'd better have a seat," he said. "Where do I begin..." he started.

Chapter Seventeen

Sitting on the ferry headed back to town, Cristian went over what he just told his parents of the abridged version of the truth. He told them that Sage is a royal, and a crazed person is looking for her because of the portrait, which is why he couldn't reveal her secret identity, leaving out the fact that she is a vampire, because he knew that his parents would think he'd gone completely over the edge. He explained his injured wrist by saying that he cut it on a nail when he was retrieving an easel at the gallery. He suggested, despite their protests, that they take a vacation until things calmed down.

As he stared out the window of the taxi, he thought of what had happened hours ago. He'd nearly lost Sage forever, only to revive her with his blood, then they'd finally consummated the love they felt for each other. Closing his eyes, he could still smell the jasmine in her hair, taste the sweetness of her lips like honey, and feel the softness of her smooth skin against his. He felt an ache when he wasn't with her, and he hoped that she would reconsider her uneasiness about turning him. The very thought of being separated from her for all eternity was too much to bear. He understood her reluctance to turn him, because being a vampire isn't just a fad. It is a life-altering decision and a decision not made lightly or without

giving careful thought to the consequences.

When the taxi arrived at the port, he asked the driver to take him to the gallery. It seemed like ages ago since he was last there as he walked inside and noticed the crowd gathered around his masterpiece portrait of Sage. “That’s my Sage,” he thought affectionately as he looked at the crowd musing over the painting.

“It’s always like this,” his manager said approaching him. “People stare at the portrait as if they’re in a trance. I’d say that the portrait possessed some type of magical power.”

Cristian smiled. “It’s the allure of the painting,” he said.

“I think it’s more than that,” Robert replied. “That portrait draws you in. This portrait is akin to Mona Lisa and Girl with a Pearl Earring,” he said.

“People are constantly asking me what the back-story to this portrait is. How is it that you saw this image of an extraordinarily beautiful woman and painted her face? This is a guaranteed moneymaker. Just think of it. This portrait represents an immortal love that crossed centuries and death.”

Cristian looked at his manager suspiciously. “This painting is your greatest masterpiece,” Robert said with a twinkle in his eyes. “What do you mean by ‘an immortal love that crossed centuries and death?’” Cristian asked, narrowing his eyes. His manager smirked. “I knew vampires existed,” he whispered. Cristian grabbed his arm. “We need to talk,” he said as they went back toward his office.

Shutting the door, he turned and faced his manager. “What do you mean by ‘vampires existing?’” he asked.

“That guy who inquired about the portrait,” he shifted his eyes toward the ceiling feigning forgetfulness. “His name was Pearson.” “Oh, that’s right. Rafael Pearson.” Cristian folded his arms. “He told me this fascinating story.” He grinned. “You want to hear it? But I believe you already know the story.”

Cristian sighed heavily.

“He told me this story of a vampire queen who had lost her love, and centuries later she found him again when he painted her portrait.”

“What do you want?” Cristian asked steely eyed. “First, I want the rights to the story,” Robert said smugly. “This will make us both millions,” he said. “Second, I want to see her,” he said. “I want to meet her.”

“No,” Cristian said forcefully. “I won’t let you expose her so that you can make money off of her.”

“But isn’t that what you did when you painted her portrait?” Robert asked, bemused.

“I didn’t know she existed when I painted her portrait,” Cristian retorted. “It was just a face I saw in my mind and I painted it.”

“Because she is in your blood,” Robert said. “If I was a woman, I’d swoon over this kind of romantic stuff.” “Two souls so intertwined that not even death or time could come between them,” he waxed poetic.

“Vampires don’t have souls,” Cristian interjected. Robert shrugged his shoulders apathetically. “What else did Rafael tell you?” Cristian asked.

“He said that he would give me half of the proceeds once he met the queen.” “You mean once he destroyed her,” Cristian thought, frowning. “Look Cristian, this is a once in a lifetime opportunity. It’s not every day that you meet an actual vampire, and especially one who is a vampire royal.” He leaned toward him. “I hear that she is even more beautiful up close.”

Cristian stared at his manager in disgust. “I knew that you were power hungry and money hungry. But I never thought that you’d sell your soul to the highest bidder.”

“Money talks,” Robert said coldly. Cristian shook his head,

opened the door swiftly, and stormed out. Robert dialed a number on his phone. “We need to talk,” he said.

Lisa watched Pedro as he paced back and forth in his bedroom that displayed an array of handcrafted Mexican art such as clay pottery, embroidered colorful shawls, colorful baskets, and rugs spread across the floor. “I need to prove to Sage that Cristian can’t be trusted,” he said aloud.

“Cristian saved her life,” Lisa said.

“That’s what he wants us to think,” Pedro said. “He could’ve set the whole thing up and then came in as the hero to save the damsel in distress so that she’d be forever indebted to him. I need to somehow show her that she gave her heart to the wrong man—that she should’ve chosen....” he stopped abruptly. He looked at Lisa who stared at him with concern. “I can’t do anything cooped up in here,” he said. He grabbed his leather jacket and put it on.

“Pedro, where are you going?” she asked.

He walked out without saying a word. Lisa decided to see where he was going and keep a distance so that he wouldn’t suspect she was following him by picking up her scent. She saw him walk around the corner. Hurriedly, she ran around the corner and saw him hail a taxi. Watching the taxi drive off, she hailed a taxi and asked the driver to tail the other taxi ahead of it.

They followed the taxi to a rundown motel. She watched as Pedro got out the car and walked inside. Paying the taxi driver, she quickly got out the taxi and walked inside the motel. Looking around at the sparse furnishings, she could see, in spite of the dull lighting, Pedro step onto the elevator headed toward the fourth floor. Lisa decided to take the steps and literally flew to the fourth floor.

Opening the door slightly, she heard the “ding” of the elevator as the door opened and Pedro stepped out.

She heard voices' whispering as Pedro was speaking to someone whose face she couldn't see clearly, because their back was turned. They walked over to a door and knocked. The door squeaked opened and to Lisa's surprise, it was none other than Rafael.

"What is Pedro doing talking to that hunter?" she thought. She leaned her ear closer to the door to hear the exchange between the men. "You said that you'd make it look like he set her up,"

Pedro fumed. "Instead, you tried to kill her." "I'm a vampire hunter," Rafael said sharply.

"It's my duty to kill the vampire queen." Pedro turned to face the other man who was Cristian's manager. "And you," he glared. "You were supposed to keep him distracted so that the plan would be flawless."

"And it almost was," Robert said. "But Cristian has always been unpredictable." "This was a setback," Rafael said. "The next time, I will succeed."

"But not with my help this time" Pedro snarled. "I don't need your help anymore," Rafael snapped. "You'll be sorry," Pedro said, baring his fangs. "Don't you threaten me, vampire," Rafael snarled.

Lisa couldn't believe her ears. She hoped that maybe her mind was deceiving her and she didn't overhear that Pedro plotted against Cristian and Sage.

"I need to warn them of Pedro's deception," she thought as she quietly shut the door and hurried out the motel before her presence was detected.

Flying inside the entrance, Lisa yelled, "Queen V!"

Anna came out to the hallway. "What is it Lisa?" she asked.

"We were deceived!" Lisa said.

"Deceived, how?" Anna asked.

"It was never Cristian who betrayed Queen V." "It was... it

was... it was Pedro,” she said finally.

“Pedro!” Anna said, astonished.

“Pedro...” Sage said standing at the doorway, troubled.

“Yes, Pedro,” Lisa said on the brink of tears.

“Tell me,” Sage said. Lisa walked into the living room and saw John sitting on the chair. “Samuel, can you take him somewhere out of earshot” Sage said telepathically. “Sure,” Samuel said as he and John got up and left the room; he looked back at Lisa.

Lisa sat down, and Anna and Sage joined her to tell them what she had seen and overheard. Sage looked down in dismay when Lisa was finished. “Pedro,” she said with sadness and disappointment.

“Pedro loves you, Sage,” Anna said. “And he’s resentful of your love for Cristian. He kept telling me repeatedly that Cristian would betray me when it was he all along,” Sage replied agitated. “Daniel asked me earlier if I knew what Pedro’s life was like before he became a vampire,” Lisa said. “I knew, but didn’t want to say.”

“I know,” Sage said. “I could sense your apprehension.”

“When I met Pedro in Chihuahua, it was during the Mexican Revolution in 1910.” She took a heavy breath. “Pedro had escaped from prison for killing his girlfriend and her lover.”

Sage and Anna were stunned. “Pedro told me that he found them in bed, and he completely lost it in a jealous rage and killed them with his bare hands in the heat of passion.

He was a fugitive, and I thought he had gotten a bad break. So I offered him a vampire life and to come away with me to meet the vampire queen, because I knew you’d take him in.”

Sage was silent. “I turned him and brought him to Egypt where he met you, and I could tell from the moment he saw you, that he was smitten. I saw how he pined for you,” she said. “I saw his frustration when you met Cristian. I was afraid that his jealousy would once again get the best of him and something bad would happen.”

“It did,” Sage said. “He set me up for the kill whether intentional or not. Cristian needs to be warned,” she said, fearful. “I can’t let him be taken from me a second time.”

John sat in the bedroom Sage had set up for him when his cell phone buzzed. “A change in plans,” it read.

Cristian was en route to Tribeca when his cell phone began to ring. “Cristian, we need to talk—can you come back to the gallery—there’s something I need to tell you.” He stared at the text message wearily. He asked the driver to turn the taxi around to go back to the gallery. “Okay, so I did what you asked,” Robert said, terrified. “Good,” Pedro snarled, towering over him menacingly.

Chapter Eighteen

Cristian arrived at the now-closed art gallery and came to the door. The security guard let him in. “Working late tonight?” he asked him. “I just came to check on something,” he said.

He looked around and noticed the masterpiece in the middle of the floor. It seemed to radiate in the single light shining upon it. He stared at it for a minute, entranced. Remembering that his manager had called him, he went back toward his office. “Robert!” he called. There was no sound. “Robert!” he called again. He walked inside the office, and there was no sign of his manager anywhere. He noticed on the floor a few red spots. Kneeling down for a closer look, he saw what appeared to be blood. “Robert!” he called again, alarmed.

He heard a hissing sound. Turning around, he didn’t see anything. Walking back toward the entrance, he asked the security guard if he’d seen his manager. The security guard told him that he saw him leave earlier in the evening.

“This isn’t funny, Robert,” Cristian said, incensed. “I need to call Sage,” he thought taking out his cell phone. “No signal,” he said frustrated. He noticed as he looked down at his hand that the blood from the wound on his wrist was seeping through the bandage.

“That could’ve been the red spots I saw on the floor,” he said. He decided to go back to his loft to clean and apply a new bandage to the wound.

As he walked out the gallery, a dark figure stood in the light staring at the portrait.

John continued to stare at the text message pensively, when Sage appeared in the doorway. “What did he want?” she asked pointedly. He jumped. “He...he...he wants for me to get you to come to the Lake Cemetery tomorrow night alone.” “It’s in Staten Island,” he said.

“I’m not surprised that he would choose a cemetery to meet,” she said. “Thank you for informing me of his plan.” John stared down at the floor feeling guilty. “I didn’t do anything,” he said. He looked up and she was gone.

Sage went and grabbed a black hooded cloak, putting it on. “I need to find Cristian,” she said. “I can’t reach him by phone.”

“Maybe it’s taking longer for him to explain things to his parents,” Anna said. “It’s a lot to digest.” “Maybe you’re right,” Sage said removing the cloak.

“And we need to deal with Pedro’s betrayal,” Anna said. “The penalty when a vampire betrays another vampire is banishment or death.”

Sage nodded her head sadly.

The elevator cage opened as Cristian walked inside his loft. Taking off the bandage, he walked into the bathroom to take out a first-aid kit. As he ran water into the wound, the cage opened and closed by itself.

Cristian looked up, suddenly shutting off the water, sensing eyes on him.

Looking toward the open bathroom door, he didn’t see anything, so he resumed cleaning the wound.

The door adjacent to his bedroom opened as the ominous figure stared at the drawings of Sage. After Cristian finished rewrapping the wound with gauze, he walked out the bathroom, startled to see the adjacent door opened. "I know I left that door shut," he thought. Then he remembered his mother mentioning seeing the drawings in the room. "Maybe she left it opened," he mused. He shut the door and walked into the living room. The next sight he saw left him speechless in his tracks. The portrait was now sitting on the couch in an upright position. "How in the world..." he said.

He heard a growling sound as Pedro appeared and grabbed him, tossing him across the living room. He went to grab his cell phone, but Pedro grabbed it and crushed it with his hands. "No one can help you now," he said. His eyes were black as midnight. "You had to ruin everything," he said with snarled fangs. "I waited patiently for her. I was about to finally win her heart when you came along. After I lost Emilia, I didn't think I'd love again. All that changed the day I saw Sage's beautiful face. I knew that she belonged with me." He glared at Cristian, "And not you. She doesn't love you," he said. "She loves a memory."

"That's not true," Cristian said. "She loves me."

"Why? Because you have the same name and face as the man she loved centuries ago...I know the story," Pedro said, bored.

"That's not why she loves me," Cristian said firmly. "I am that man she loved centuries ago."

Pedro gasped taken aback. "You're lying!" he yelled. "There's no way that you're the same man from her past. He died." He lifted Cristian up by the neck, his hand pressed firmly on his jugular and threw him across the table smashing it into pieces. He picked up the portrait as Cristian got up slowly. "You painted this portrait to steal her away from me," Pedro said, crazed with jealousy.

He threw the portrait down to the floor and tried to trample it, but Cristian shoved him back, crashing into the wall and leaving an imprint. Cristian cried out as the wound began to bleed again profusely.

“Once you’re gone, she will come to love me,” Pedro said gruffly. “She will see that it was I who loved her.” He eased out of the wall and began to stalk toward Cristian, crouching like a wild beast about to pounce on him. Cristian lunged for a jagged piece of wood on the floor from the broken table and held it up as Pedro jumped on him, landing on the tip. He gave a strangled cry as Cristian realized that the wood had lodged in his heart.

Lisa doubled over clenching her chest screaming in agony.

Cristian sat up stunned while an astonished Pedro looked at him as he began to disintegrate. Sage saw an image of Pedro in agony as she and the others could feel the impact of his slow death. “Mi reina!” Pedro screamed as he disintegrated into dust. “Pedro, está muerto!” Lisa screamed as she cried uncontrollably.

“The coven seven is broken,” Anna said shocked.

“Pedro...,” Sage wept.

Cristian sat shell-shocked as the reality set in of what had just happened. “Sage,” he said as he buried his face in his hands and wept.

Cody took Lisa in his arms and held her as she cried. Samuel placed a comforting hand on a distraught Sage. Daniel sat down, stunned. John accompanied by a stricken Billy came out to see what had happened as he looked at the vampires in mourning. Billy, unable to contain his emotions, collapsed to the floor, weeping.

Cristian tore down the drawings from the wall with his bloodied hands. Working feverishly, he piled all the drawings into the fireplace, struck a match, and watched them go up in flames. “Forgive me, Sage,” he said remorsefully, watching the drawings burn to ashes.

Chapter Nineteen

John looked on silently as a grieving Samuel knelt down beside Billy and they cuddled together. He watched as Anna held Sage and at Lisa and Cody clinging to each other while Daniel sat in silence. He felt his eyes begin to well up watching the vampires comfort each other. Slowly, Sage got up and, without a sound, exited the room as the others continued to grieve.

“Pedro...,” Lisa cried.

Anna stared at John watching them. “What!” she said, irritated. “You’ve never seen vampires grieve before. We do have feelings too, you know,” she said.

“I never thought that vampires had feelings,” John said softly. “I was always told that vampires aren’t human.”

Anna walked out the room in a huff as John followed her. “Wait!” he yelled.

“What is the significance of the number seven?” he asked. She stared at him blankly. “What is the meaning of the coven seven?” he asked.

She took a breath. “Naturally, the coven seven means the seven members, who are,” she sighed, realizing her faux pas, “who were members of our coven. The number seven represents perfection

or completion. It can also mean control, and it was the ancient Egyptian symbol of eternal life.”

“So now that the number has been broken, what then?” he asked.

“I can’t answer that,” Anna said disappearing into the darkness of the hallway.

Cristian stepped into the taxi weakly holding the covered portrait against his arm. “Are you alright?” the taxi driver asked him. “Fine,” Cristian said. He instructed the taxi driver to take him to Tribeca as he figured out how to explain to Sage what had happened. He replayed the scene in his mind repeatedly of the image of Pedro disintegrating right before his eyes. He heard Sage’s voice in his head telling him vampires could be killed and shivered at the thought.

The others dissipated into their own quarters, not wanting to leave the loft after a night of nearly losing Sage and then losing a member of the coven. The door to Pedro’s bedroom was sealed shut with a black shroud made of silk draped over it.

John, not knowing what to do, sat in silence in his bedroom when Lisa came to the door. They stared at each other without uttering a word. She sat down beside him.

He looked at her, trying to figure out what to say. “I’m sorry about your...about...,” his voice trailed off. She looked at him and silently nodded her head, acknowledging his awkward attempts at trying to comfort her. He nervously took his hand and placed it on her shoulder. She glanced at him, giving him a tiny smile.

“How did you end up working for Pearson?” she asked. He stared at her, blinking incessantly as she waited for a response.

“He found me,” he said. “I was living on the streets after I ran away from home.”

“He offered me a job, because I told him I’m good with computers, and he took me off the streets.”

“Why did you run away from home?” she asked. He stared down at the floor. “My father didn’t like me,” he said. “My older brother was the favorite son. He had everything—looks, friends, girls, a promising career. My father would compare us, and I never lived up to his expectations. He hated the way I dressed, the way I ate my food. No matter what I did, it wasn’t good enough for him. However, he didn’t know that his favorite son had a drug addiction that he kept hidden. I found his stash one morning by accident. He had a bag of cocaine hidden under socks in his drawer.”

“What happened when you found it?” Lisa asked. “I tried to tell my father, and he didn’t believe me. He accused me of planting the cocaine because I envied my brother. He told me that I wasn’t his son—that he only had one son.” He trembled, fighting back the tears at the memory. “So I packed my bags and I left.”

Lisa clasped his hand. “I’m sorry you had to go through that,” she whispered. John was touched by her compassion. A vampire, thought to be an evil, godless, demonic creature, showed him more compassion than he’d ever received from a human. He realized that maybe he had pegged the vampires wrong, based on the perceptions of others.

Cristian got out of the taxi and rang the doorbell. “Sage!” he called out.

The door opened slowly. “She’s waiting for you,” Anna said solemnly.

“So you know?” he asked.

“We know Pedro is gone,” she said with a sober look. She led him through the hallway, taking him through another long hallway and up a flight of stairs. He could hear strains of an eighties song about love and loss playing loudly from Billy’s room. The haunting lyrics seemed to verbalize Cristian’s love for Sage. Finally stopping at a doorway, she motioned her hand for him to go through the

door. He walked inside and saw Sage standing at the window in her crimson gown, her back turned toward him. He placed the covered portrait down, leaning it against the wall, noticing that on the wall hung a painting of Queen Nefertiti.

“Sage, I’m sorry,” he said mournfully. “It was an accident.” She turned around to face him. “How did it happen?” she asked. “He somehow followed me to my loft and he was crazed with jealousy. He said I stole you away from him and he tried to attack me. We struggled, and he was staked in the heart with a broken piece of wood.” “It wasn’t intentional, Sage, believe me,” he said. “I was defending myself.” “What did you do with the broken piece of wood?” she asked. “I took all the broken fragments and discarded them...,” he looked down, “including the dust when Pedro...” Sage nodded her head.

“Pedro in his jealous fixation betrayed us all,” Sage said.

“He was the one who told Rafael of my whereabouts.”

“I didn’t want to be right about him,” Cristian said.

Sage noticed how pale Cristian appeared. “Cristian what’s wrong?” she asked, alarmed.

“The cut on my wrist,” he said. “I think I cut it too deeply.”

“And I took too much blood,” she said. His legs began to buckle as he collapsed to the floor. “Cristian!” she yelled.

She ran to him and rested his head in her lap. The bandage on his wrist was saturated with blood. “You’re bleeding to death,” she said horrified.

Cristian stared at her as he felt himself getting weaker.

Sage felt as if she was reliving Cristian’s death in a cruel joke. “I can’t lose you again,” she said as tears flowed down her eyes.

“You only have two options, Sage,” Anna said, standing in the doorway. “Either turn him or let him die.”

“I can’t let him die,” she said.

“Then you will have to do the unthinkable, Sage,” Anna said. “There’s no other way.”

She looked at Cristian as he stared into her eyes. This was the last thing she had ever wanted to do. She fought against it, and now she didn’t have a choice. She either had to embrace her vampirism and turn him or reject it and watch him fade away. She looked at his bandaged wrist dripping with blood, feeling the hunger in her arising.

“Do what you feel is best,” Cristian said to her telepathically. “My love for you will never die.” She leaned down and kissed him. His lips felt cool, like a winter’s chill on a rosebud. She tilted his head back until she could see his jugular, focusing her eyes on it and listening to his weakening heartbeat. She felt her fangs growing, continuing to concentrate on the vein pulsating from his neck. She lowered her head and kissed his neck softly before sinking her fangs into his vein. He whimpered as she bit down harder, drinking his blood and feeling him writhing against her.

Pulling herself away, she stared at him. He was nearly pasty white, his breathing labored. She took her claw and cut her wrist placing it over his mouth as if her love was literally bleeding from her veins. “Drink,” she said huskily. He leaned up, took her wrist to his mouth, closed his eyes, and began to drink her essence.

Her body felt like a bundle of nerves as he drank from her wrist like a sensual kiss, taking as much as he could before collapsing from exhaustion. Knowing what she had to do next, she leaned down cradling his limp body in her arms, the droplets of her tears falling on his face and bit down again, drinking until his flesh was colorless. Falling back to the floor and catching her breath, she could still feel her body tingle from the erotic embrace.

Suddenly, he began to convulse violently as his body began to undergo the throes of a physical death. Sage sat up and watched

with anguish as his body continued to spasm, his eyes rolling to the back of his head. Then as soon as it began, it was over. He lay still. His eyes semi-opened. “Cristian,” she said frightened. He lay still and unresponsive.

Chapter Twenty

After hours of nothingness and darkness, Cristian began to awaken, hearing sounds of whispers around him. “He was only staked in the heart,” Anna whispered. “He wasn’t beheaded or burned.” “This could mean.” “I know,” Sage replied. “Do you think it’s possible?” Anna asked. “Have you known of it happening before?” Sage asked. “How long do you suppose it would take?” “It depends on how much blood is consumed,” Anna said.

Cristian slowly opened his eyes. He felt strange. Like a fire was in his blood accompanied with a gnawing hunger that he’d never felt before. “He’s waking up,” Anna said. Cristian sat up, realizing that he was lying in Sage’s bed. “Cristian,” Sage said, clasping his hand. He turned his head and stared into her eyes. “I’m sorry,” she said to him telepathically. “But I didn’t have a choice. You would’ve died if I hadn’t turned you.” He squeezed her hand. “Don’t apologize, Sage,” he said to her. “This was what I wanted.”

He could hear the sounds of feet shuffling stridently like hoofs in the hallway as the others excitedly came into the bedroom. “The coven has a new member!” Anna exclaimed. “You’re one of us!” Billy squealed. “Welcome to the family,” Daniel said. “He’s not just one of us,” Samuel said. “He’s now our king.”

Cristian looked at Sage, bewildered, holding her hand. “It’s true,” Anna said. “Sage performed the vampire wedding sacrament on you.” “You are now a vampire king.” “Meaning that you have the same powers as Queen V,” Cody said. “Of course, you have to be coronated,” Samuel said. “There’s a coronation?” Cristian asked, stunned. Sage nodded her head. “So does this mean I’ll be nicknamed ‘King V?’” he asked to laughs around the room. “I’m glad that Queen V saved you,” Lisa said coming into the room. “We lost a member and gained a member,” Daniel said.

“Where’s John?” Anna asked. “Right here,” he said, standing at the doorway, glancing at Sage as if he wanted to say something to her. “Well, let’s leave them alone,” Billy said, clearing his throat. The others got up, chuckling at his not so subtle hint, and left the lovers alone, shutting the door behind them.

Cristian stared at Sage in admiration, knowing that this was a hard decision for her to make. As he tried to find the words to express to her what he was feeling, he could hear the vampires reveling in celebration of the union of the queen and king. Looking down at his wrist, he removed the bandage and the cut was healed. “Thank you, Sage,” he said softly as their eyes lingered on each other. “I nearly lost you and you nearly lost me.” “We saved each other’s life.” “I lost you once before—I couldn’t lose you again,” she said, blinking back the tears. Cristian stared at the tears forming in her eyes, unsure if they were of joy or sorrow. He cupped her face with his hands, pulling her into a passionate kiss until they couldn’t breathe. Reluctantly breaking away from the embrace to catch their breath, he stared at her face as his newfound vampire bloodlust became aroused, his eyes a glowing yellow. He could see her eyes staring back at him mirroring his own desire. They kissed again with renewed passion as he felt the claws in his fingers growing. He looked at her panting heavily, her eyes drunk with love.

With one flick of his hand, her gown fell to the floor as she climbed onto the bed and helped him out of his clothes. They leaned back on the bed, discovering anew, with their vampire senses, the erogenous zones of their bodies with each touch sending pleasurable shockwaves from their head to their feet. On instinct, innate desire, and desperation, they joined, moving together tremulously not knowing where each body began or ended. For Cristian, the experience was even better than earlier in the evening when they had made love at his loft. He gazed upon her as she grabbed hold of his back with her claws digging them into his skin.

The sensation caused him to nearly catapult out the bed as the passion consumed them in a blinding fury. Unable to control his bloodlust, he bit down into her neck as she let out a sharp cry that was a combination of pain and pleasure. His hunger now abated, his lips found her mouth again, tracing it with his tongue. She nuzzled against his neck giving him love bites. Their passion reaching a fever pitch, they clung to each other until they had a mutual earth-shaking climax. Snuggling together, their breathing returning to normal, Cristian noticed that Sage had a stillness in her eyes as the soft rays of the sunrise flickered into the room, giving them a glow. He sensed unspoken regret reflected in them. “It seems fate wasn’t going to let us be parted from each other again,” he said reassuringly. “You and I were meant to be. We will be together forever and for always,” he said. “Our blood is mingled,” Sage said. “We are a part of each other.”

Rafael dialed a number on his cell phone. “Robert, I just wanted to say thank you for giving me the funds for my new arsenal,” he said, looking at his new crossbow, arrows, stakes, and holy water. Where are you anyway—you’re supposed to come with me tonight to the cemetery when I vanquish the vampire for good. Don’t

worry about Pedro. I'm going back to the lair to kill the rest of the vampires after I finish off the queen. If the artist gets in my way again, I'm not responsible for what happens to him. Give me a call when you get this message, alright?" He hung up the phone. "Tonight this long, drawn-out story comes to an end," he said, smiling.

Cristian awakened to find the bed empty. "Sage!" he called out. Next to the bed on a tray, he noticed a bottle. Staring closer, he noticed it was a bottle of animal blood. He remembered that Anna brought a bottle to his loft for Sage the night before. There was also a note attached. "I didn't want to wake you, you looked so peaceful," Sage wrote. He studied the bottle, then opened it and poured the contents into a waiting wine glass. Surprisingly, the animal blood didn't have a bitter taste to it as he had imagined. It had a bit of a savor like cranberry juice. However, he preferred the taste of Sage's blood: that was so sweet to his taste buds.

Getting out of bed, he noticed a black dress shirt and dress pants laid out for him. He walked out into the hallway trying to remember how to get to the main room. After descending the stairs, he turned to go down another long hallway, passing by the door to Pedro's bedroom and noticing the black shroud covering it. His mind flashed again to the struggle between them and the broken piece of wood impaling him. "I hope you're at peace wherever you are," he said somberly as he continued down the hallway.

"You can get lost in those mazes of hallways," he said walking into the grand living room and finding Sage talking with John in hushed tones. "What's going on?" he asked. "Rafael wants me to meet him tonight at the Lake Cemetery." "I know where it is," Cristian said. "It's in Staten Island. It's an abandoned cemetery." "Which is why he chose it," Sage said, "so that there won't be

witnesses.” “I have a bad feeling about this,” he said. “Rafael’s downfall will be his arrogance,” Sage replied. “This is what he wants. He wants me to come alone because he thinks I’m naive.” “Sage is right,” Anna said coming into the living room. “He thinks that because he nearly killed Sage that he knows her weakness.” “And this time it won’t work,” Sage said staring at John. “John told me this was Rafael’s plan.” Cristian looked hesitantly at John who quickly looked away. He took Sage aside. “Are you sure about this?” he asked. “You know this is a trap.” “Rafael will learn a lesson to be careful of what he wishes for because he may get more than he anticipated,” she said. “Perhaps sooner rather than later if my suspicions are correct,” she thought. Cristian stared at her, puzzled by her cryptic statement.

It was after sunset when Rafael arrived at the cemetery. He noticed that overgrown grass covered some of the headstones, while other headstones either were toppled or were desecrated with graffiti. “This is a great place to wait for the vampire to show up,” he thought, taking out his crossbow and stakes and sitting down on the parched grass to wait. “It’s time,” Sage said, putting on her black hooded cloak. She, Anna, and Cristian discussed the plan, telling the others to be prepared. She looked at John. “Is there anything else I need to know?” she said. “Speak now.” He looked at her, then at Lisa, and at Cristian. “No,” he swallowed. “I told you everything,” he said. “Okay,” Sage said.

Rafael sat in the darkness waiting for the arrival of Robert or Sage. He felt a chill as the temperature began to drop suddenly. Taking out the water gun filled with holy water, he placed it at his side. A mist began to fill the cemetery as he looked on with growing unease. Darting his eyes back and forth, he stirred at the sound of twigs breaking as if someone was approaching.

“Robert?” he said. The sound stopped. His body began to tremble as he tried to reassure himself that it was just the chill in the air making him shiver. In the mist, he saw a tall figure draped in a black shrouded cape appear. It was floating in the air with no hands or feet visible. “Vampire!” Rafael called out. The draped figure stopped abruptly and turned its head toward him. Standing up, Rafael was unable to make out a face as he felt a chill go down his spine. The shrouded figure started to move toward him slowly. “Vampire!” Rafael called out as the figure continued advancing toward him. Frightened, Rafael began to run, tripping over the headstones and looking back while the dark figure quickened its pace behind him. He jumped up running and fell into a giant hole in the ground. He realized he fell into an open grave and landed on a coffin.

Suddenly, he felt a blast of bone-chilling air, the hairs from his pores standing on end as he realized that the shrouded, faceless figure now hovered over the grave. Quaking with fear, Rafael squeezed his eyes shut and began praying fervently. He continued praying, not opening his eyes, until he heard the figure float away at the sound of shuffling grass and pebbles.

Breathing a sigh of relief, he looked at the coffin he was sitting on. It was an unfinished chestnut coffin with the hinges broken from his fall. As he got up, he heard the sound of a cell phone ringing. Taking his own out of his pocket, he realized the ringing cell phone was coming from inside the coffin.

Curious, he opened it, falling back from shock. The body inside was none other than Robert.

He had been dead for hours, his body completely drained of its blood.

Hours later, after arduously climbing out of the grave using his stake and hunting knife as a prong, Rafael, ignoring the pain of his broken arm, gathered up his supplies and duffle bag and hurried

out of the cemetery, afraid that the shrouded figure would reappear. “You will pay for this, vampire,” he fumed while getting into the rented car and driving speedily to catch the ferry headed back to town. Once he got off the ferry in Manhattan, he dropped off the rental car, and hailed a taxi ordering the driver to take him to Tribeca. Enraged, he yelled at the driver to pick up speed through the slow moving traffic. The taxi came to a screeching halt at the curbside of Sage’s loft.

Throwing the money at the driver, Rafael jumped out of the taxi, and ran to the door. “Open the door, vampire!” he yelled, pounding on the door. Turning the knob the door creaked opened. Pulling out his crossbow and stake, he entered the door, gripping the holy water in his hand. He walked down the pitch-black hallway. “Vampire!” he yelled. He reached his hand in front of him to try to feel for a wall or a door. He heard sounds in the air of wailing. Taking a breath, he pressed forward until he felt a doorway. “John!” he yelled. “Where are you?” he asked.

There was no answer as he walked down another hallway. “Is this a maze?” he said, frustrated. He walked further down until he could see what appeared to be an open door. “I wish I had a flashlight,” he said as he inched slowly toward the door. He reached for the door and felt a silky material in his hand. Peering inside, he tried to focus his eyes. He saw what appeared to be someone or something in the darkness. “Who’s there?” Rafael said. “John,” he said, “say something.”

Sage awakened suddenly in bed to find Cristian staring out the window. Billy cranked up the CD player as the music began to boom throughout the cottage. Cristian turned and smiled at Sage as she got out of bed, putting on a sheer eggshell-colored gown. “They love it here,” she said, wrapping her arms around him with

a squeeze and suppressing the thoughts that began to plague her mind of enjoying the taste of human blood. “They all love it here,” he mused. “It’s only been a week,” she said. “How long do you think we’ll stay here?” he asked. “I don’t know yet,” she said. “A part of me wants to go back to Egypt. We’ll see. You will have to be crowned.” He sighed contentedly.

“Prague is beautiful,” he said. “Yes. One of the most beautiful cities in the world,” she said, kissing his shoulder and neck. Cristian felt her become tense as she focused on his neck. “So what’s on the agenda today?” he asked stroking her face. She lifted her gaze to his eyes. “Well, I know that Billy, Cody, Samuel, and Daniel are going to see the Astronomical Clock and take a tour of Prague Castle. Anna, Lisa, and John are going to see the catacombs and Charles Bridge.” “John?” Cristian said, incredulous. “I thought for sure he couldn’t be trusted, but he surprised me.” “He surprised me as well,” Sage said. “I think somehow Lisa played a role in that,” she grinned. “Now, as for us...,” she said. “I’d love to visit Prague Castle. I’ve always loved medieval things—especially a castle that is older than all of us,” she grinned. They turned and looked at the portrait of Sage hanging on the wall. “When I painted that portrait, I had no idea how much it would change my life,” Cristian said. “It brought us together again.” “It did,” Sage said as they shared a tender kiss. She stared into his eyes as the sun began to rise on the horizon. “Just one question,” she said. “What are you going to tell your parents?”

He looked at her, furrowing his brow.

Part Two

The Forsaken

Chapter Twenty-one

Cristian awakened from his slumber, reaching over for Sage to find the bed once again empty, the satin sheets tossed back. He noticed with increasing alarm since they had left New York that Sage seemed troubled, even though she tried to hide it from him. In the three weeks since they and the coven had arrived in Prague, she seemed to be preoccupied. “Sage!” he called out, getting out the bed. He walked down the spiral staircase into the dining room. Focusing his eyes in the darkness, he found her standing with a bottle of animal blood in her hands. She was staring at the bottle, deep in thought. “Sage, what’s wrong?” he asked, startling her. “I was contemplating,” she said with a solemn voice. “Contemplating what?” he asked, approaching her. “I can tell when something’s troubling you,” he whispered. “What is it?” “There’s something you need to know,” she said with hesitation. “It’s about Pedro.” “Pedro can’t harm us anymore,” he said. “He’s gone.” “Actually, he isn’t gone,” she said. “What do you mean?” he asked. “When you told me that Pedro disintegrated after he was staked in the heart, I knew.”

“Knew what!” he exclaimed, wanting her to stop speaking in riddles. “That Pedro wasn’t truly gone,” she said haughtily. “But

I thought that when a vampire was staked in the heart, they were destroyed,” he said. “That’s partially true,” Sage replied. “But to truly kill a vampire, they not only have to be staked in the heart, but in addition, they have to be decapitated or burned, and their ashes scattered.”

Cristian dropped his jaw, astonished. “If that doesn’t happen and the vampire doesn’t lose any body parts, they can regenerate, but it’s a painful process,” she continued. Cristian remembered when Sage spoke cryptically about Rafael getting more than he asked for the night they left New York. “That’s why you said that Rafael may get more than he anticipated when he wanted you to come to Lake Cemetery.” “I felt it in my gut that Pedro would begin to regenerate,” she said. “I’ve never seen it happen before in all my years of being a vampire.

But I know that it can happen. How do you think I was able to revive after I drank your blood?” she said. He remembered overhearing part of the hushed conversation that Sage and Anna were having when he awakened after being turned. “Does Anna know?” he asked. Sage nodded her head. “The rest of the coven?” She nodded her head again. “Anna told them shortly after our arrival here,” she said. “Why didn’t you tell me this before?” he asked, agitated. “I don’t know why, Cristian,” she said. “I didn’t want to think of what could happen once Pedro is back in his physical form. Right now, he’s literally a shadow of his former self, and who knows how long it will take for him to completely regenerate. It all depends on how much blood he consumes. He’ll want revenge for us abandoning him,” she said, feeling guilty. “And I’ll be ready for him,” Cristian said firmly. He grabbed her hand. “Come join me for a bath?”

Rafael began to awaken. Opening his eyes, he found himself blinded by a bright light. “Where am I?” he asked, his eyes squinted.

“You’re in the hospital,” the woman said in a soothing voice. “I’m glad to see you’re awake.” “How did I get here?” he asked. He remembered leaving Lake Cemetery and going to the vampires’ lair and walking through the mazes of hallways. The last thing he saw was something or someone in the darkness of the room. “You were found in an alley, unconscious,” the woman said.

Instinctively, he reached for his neck for signs of bite marks. “What are you doing?” she asked, closing the blinders. “Nothing,” he said sheepishly. He looked at the woman. She was dressed in hospital scrubs with long brunette hair tied back in a ponytail with big expressive eyes and minimum makeup. “Are you a doctor?” he asked. “I’m a nurse,” she said. “What’s your name?” he asked. “My name is Randi.” “Randi,” he said smiling. “Yes, Randi,” she repeated. “I’m Rafael,” he said. “Nice to meet you Rafael,” she said. “Likewise,” he replied. “So is John your brother?” she asked. He stared at her, puzzled. “You kept talking about someone named John while you were unconscious,” she said. He remembered how he kept calling for John at the lair, realizing that his assistant had betrayed him. “No, he’s not my brother,” he said, curling his lip. “He’s an idiot that was hoodwinked by vampires,” he thought angrily. “I didn’t mean to pry,” she said. “The doctor will be speaking with you shortly,” she said. “Will you be coming back?” he asked anxiously. “Of course,” she said.

After dressing, Cristian tried to call his manager using Sage’s cell phone. The voicemail was full. “That’s unlike Robert,” he thought troubled. “Something happened to him.” He thought back to the droplets of blood he saw on the floor in his office at the gallery. “Maybe that blood didn’t come from me after all. It could’ve come from Robert.” Sage came up behind him tapping him lightly on the shoulder. “I’m sorry I didn’t tell you sooner about, Pedro,” she said.

“I’m not angry with you, Sage,” he said tenderly. “Just don’t shut me out. You and I are together now, and I don’t want there to be any secrets between us. Okay?” “Okay,” she said.

They walked arm in arm into the dining room greeted by the coven, and John. The room became silent with heaviness in air. “What’s going on?” Sage asked, noticing their anxious expressions. “Sage, remember when we talked about what our lives were like before we became vampires?” Anna said. Sage nodded her head slowly. “I realized I hadn’t seen my home for many years.” And so I decided to return to my hometown to reminisce.” “I decided to go visit my ancestral home as well,” Samuel said. “I’m going with you,” Billy said. Daniel stood next to Anna. “I told Anna I would accompany her,” he said. “I don’t mind you coming along,” she said. “I want to go to Indiana to see what happened to my brother and father,” John said shyly. “I told John that I would go with him, since I’m from the same state,” Lisa said as though she was seeking approval. “I’m tagging along with y’all because I’m curious to see what became of my father’s farm,” Cody said. “Then we’ll meet up in Kansas afterwards,” Lisa offered.

Sage forced a smile on her face to cover her sadness. “Just as I needed to revisit my past,” she said, staring at Cristian, “I understand your need to revisit your own.” “I have always said that you have free will,” she said. “That means that you have the freedom to leave anytime you want. I’ve never wanted any of you to think that you’re forced to stay with me.” “And I haven’t,” Anna said. “I’ve stayed with you because you said I had the choice, and I appreciate that.” “I can’t speak for the rest,” Samuel said softly, “but I intend on returning.” He and Sage held each other’s gaze. “And so am I,” Cody said. “Me too,” Lisa said. “Me as well,” Daniel said. “You know I’ll be back, Queen V,” Billy said. Cristian snorted. Anna gave Sage a reassuring hug. “This is the first time we’ve parted company

since we met,” she said telepathically.

“I’m not going anywhere, I will be returning as well.” “Thank you,” Sage said, her eyes brimming slightly.

Cristian picked up the newspaper that was on the table, noticing the words “Beauty Mysterium” in the article. “Sage, are you familiar with the Czech language?” he asked, showing her the article. “It says that the portrait is missing and that your manager hasn’t been seen since the night of the painting’s disappearance,” she said. “I have to go back to New York to take care of this,” Cristian said. “The painting isn’t missing. It’s with me, and something has obviously happened to Robert.” “I’m going with you,” Sage said. “What about Rafael?” Cristian said. “What about Pedro?” “Pearson will be a threat no matter where I go,” Sage said. “I will face whatever comes.” “I can postpone my trip,” Anna offered. “No,” Sage replied. “I want you to go ahead with the trips that you’ve planned. Everything will work out,” she said. What she didn’t want to say openly was that she sensed that more troubles, like a looming shadow, were on the way.

Chapter Twenty-two

Everyone arrived at the airport and walked quietly to their destinations when Sage turned around somberly to look at Anna, Daniel, Samuel, Billy, Lisa, Cody, and John who were all about to leave in opposite directions to whatever awaited them on their journeys. “Be safe and I’ll see you in New York,” Sage said, blinking back the tears threatening to spill from her eyes. She felt like a mother who was bidding farewell to her children who were leaving the nest. “We’ll be back before you know it,” Anna said, trying to sound upbeat. “Right,” Billy said, stifling a snuffle. One by one, Sage gave them all a hug and watched as they disappeared into the crowd to their respective terminals. “You’ll see them again,” Cristian whispered softly in her ear as she quickly wiped a single tear that fell from her eyes.

Rafael stirred awake abruptly. He was dreaming of walking through the darkened hallway approaching an opened door. Peering in, he saw what appeared to be eyes staring back at him. They were glowing. “Rafael,” Randi said, startling him. “I was just coming to check your temperature,” she said apologetically. “Help me get out of here?” he asked. “I feel like a trapped animal.” “The doctor told you that you will probably be released in another day.” He stared

at her while she took his temperature, pleading with his eyes. She sighed. “Look Rafael, you are recovering from an assault and your cast had to be reset,” Randi said. “You should probably stay as the doctor ordered.” “I can’t stay here for another night,” Rafael

demanded. “There are things I need to do—things I need to take care of.” “Such as what?” Randi asked. “Killing the vampire queen that you kept speaking about in your delirium?” Rafael’s eyes widened. “I said that?” he asked. She nodded her head. “Please,” he asked, softening his voice. “Please help me get out of here, and I can explain what you overheard.” She looked at him, folding her arms.

Sage stared out the window of her private plane looking at the ocean while Cristian watched her in silence. For the first time, she would be traveling without the coven. It reminded her of the loneliness she felt while trying to avoid the passengers in the boat after fleeing from New York. “You’re not alone, Sage” he said taking her hand. “They have been my family for such a long time,” she said, tearing up. He brushed his hand across a tear rolling down her cheek.

“You and I are family,” he said. “And one day we will have our own family.” She looked at him, distressed. “You said that you were turned to carry on the lineage, and together we can have a family. A boy or a girl—it doesn’t matter,” he said with a smile. Sage shook her head violently. “No, Cristian,” she said, her voice breaking. “That won’t happen. You see my father turned me before I married and before I could have children.” “What do you mean?” Cristian asked, swallowing hard, the growing lump in his throat. “The tradition in my family was that once the new heirs had a family, then they were turned afterwards. My father in desperation turned me before I was able to bear children.” She paused, closing her eyes against the inundation of tears she knew would roll down her face. “Cristian, I

can't have children." "But you're a living, breathing woman," he said. "I'm not alive, Cristian," she said in anguish as if the very words ripped out her heart. "My body died when I became a vampire, just as yours did when I turned you." She turned her head away from him and stared out the window. He looked down, stunned by her admission, realizing what it truly meant to be a vampire.

"I'm sorry, Cristian," she said softly. He lifted his head up and saw her staring at him. "My father denied me the chance of having a family." She felt the resentment that she harbored against her father buried within her beginning to arise again. Not only did he turn her against her will, he now denied her the one thing she had always wanted. A family. Because of the vampire curse, she could never give Cristian the family that he desired. She felt her body tremble from her anger. "Sage, I don't fault you for something you were forced to partake in." Cristian took her gently into his arms. "I now understand the sadness that lies behind your eyes. Don't fault yourself for turning me," he said, "I chose this life of my free will. You and I will always be a family, no matter what." He kissed her passionately holding her tight against him.

Randi came back into the room after Rafael dressed. "Are you sure about this?" she asked. "Yes," he said. "Okay," she said. She opened the door, glancing down both sides of the corridor and motioned for him that the coast was clear. They walked briskly out the room and into an elevator. She handed him his cell phone. "Where did you find that?" he asked. "It was in your pocket and I kept it until you awakened," she replied. "At first I thought, you were some kind of spy with gadgets," she said. He stared at her blankly. "Well, uh, thank you," he said, putting it in his back pocket. After arriving at the garage, the elevator door opened and they stepped off. "So where are you staying?" she asked. "I can drop you off."

Realizing that he had probably lost his room due to his week-to-week agreement, he replied, "I don't have anywhere to go." "Then I guess you'll be staying with me," she said matter-of-factly. "Here's my car," she said as she clicked her key to unlock the door. It was a silver Pontiac. "I live in Brooklyn," she said as they drove out the hospital garage. "So do you mind telling me what's going on?" she asked. "Which version do you want?" he replied, "The long or short version?" "It doesn't matter," she said. "I need to know first if you believe that vampires exist," he said. "Let's just say I believe in the supernatural," she said. "So who is this vampire queen you kept yammering about?"

Sage saw herself walking through the dark hallways of her loft. She could sense a strong presence in front of her. From the faint scent, she could tell that a vampire was before her. "Pedro!" she called out. There was no answer. "I can tell from your scent that it is you, Pedro," she said. "Speak." She stretched her hand out and felt the silky shroud. She heard a nearly inaudible whisper. "Mi..." "Sage," Cristian said, breaking her trancelike state. "The pilot just announced that we should be arriving in New York within the hour. We're almost home." "Home," Sage said with a shudder, knowing without a doubt that others were also awaiting her homecoming.

Chapter Twenty~three

Anna and Daniel arrived at the airport in Staffordshire and boarded a taxi. “Where are we going?” he asked. “To a town named Leek,” Anna replied, smiling warmly. “That is where I grew up.” As the taxi drove through the market town and past the mills, Anna’s eyes welled up as she fondly recalled her childhood. She could see herself in her little dress excitedly running to The River Churnet to play, spending most of her time in her imaginary world of fairies and unicorns. The taxi dropped them off at a cottage as the sun was setting. “If we had come before the summer solstice, we would’ve seen what is called a ‘double sunset,’ Anna said, looking toward the orange horizon. “It is astonishing to behold.” Daniel regarded Anna as she beamed with excitement. They checked into their room. “Maybe we can stay here for a couple of days before going back to the States?” Anna remarked. “Sure,” Daniel replied. “I can see that this town means a lot to you.” “It does,” she sighed. “I had happy memories here, and I’m glad that you’re here to share them with me,” she said.

Samuel and Billy arrived in Scotland. “It’s not too late in the day,” Samuel said, checking his watch while grabbing his luggage. “Maybe we’ll be able to stop by my home after we’ve checked in at

the bed and breakfast. "I'm a bit anxious to see how my parent's estate has fared in all these years. It was quite lovely when I last saw it." They boarded a waiting taxi, arriving at a picturesque bed and breakfast at dusk. "I hope Queen V is okay," Billy said as he sat his luggage down in their suite. "She seemed sad to see us leave." "I noticed it too," Samuel mused. "This is the first time that we've all separated after all our years together. It would be a bit jarring," he said. "How long did you want to stay?" Billy asked. "Maybe a day or two," Samuel said. "I'll see once I've seen my home." "So where is your home?" Billy asked.

"Along the border of England," Samuel replied. "It was built during medieval times." "Cool!" Billy said. "Maybe we can eat first before we go," Billy said taking out a couple of thermoses containing animal blood. "I'm starved. Brilliant idea, mate," Samuel said.

After leaving Cody who took a layover flight to Kansas, Lisa and John arrived at the Indiana airport. "It's been so long since I came back here," Lisa said, remembering how she hurriedly packed and climbed out the window of her house to escape early in the morning. "The last time I returned, I found out that my mother was dead." "I'm sorry," John said softly.

He took a breath. "I have no idea what I'm coming back to," he could still hear his father's harsh words toward him echoing in his mind. "Did you want to get a room together?" Lisa asked. "We might as well." "Okay," John said awkwardly. "We can get a room with two beds if that makes you feel better," Lisa said smiling. "It's no problem," he said, his voice cracking.

They went to a hotel near the airport and paid for a single room with two beds. "Does this satisfy you?" Lisa asked as they walked toward their room. He nodded his head, smiling slightly, the tips of his ears red, opening the door with his keycard. "I'm hungry," she

said, taking out a flask filled with animal blood from her duffle bag and gulping it down. John felt queasy watching her. “How can you drink that?” he asked, wrinkling his nose. “John, I’m a vampire—what did you expect.” “Well, I’m going to go look for a vending machine to get some snacks,” he said. “Whatever you say,” Lisa said, plopping on the bed and turning on the radio. “I wonder if Queen V and Cristian have arrived back in New York yet,” she thought.

Randi pulled her car up on the curb at her apartment. “This is my home,” she said, turning off the engine. Rafael got out the car and stretched his legs. “C’mon,” Randi said as she opened the front door, stopping at the mailbox to check for mail. She opened the door to her apartment. It was spacious with wooden floors, a sofa and chairs arranged near the huge windows, and an entertainment system and table centered in the living room. A landscape scenery portrait depicting a sunrise hung on the wall. Curious, Rafael leered at the portrait to see the signature of the artist. The signature was from West Collections. “Humph,” Rafael snorted. “So you’re telling me that Cristian West painted a portrait of a vampire?” Randi asked. “Yep,” Rafael replied. “The painting is missing now,” she said. “It’s been in the news and in the newspapers.” “If that’s the case, then the vampire could make a return from wherever she went.” Rafael thought. “All I have to do is bide my time.”

Chapter Twenty-four

Sage and Cristian arrived at JFK airport and prepared to get their luggage. They decided when the plane landed that they would stay at his loft in Greenwich Village while he took the portrait back to the gallery. Using his newly acquired powers of illusion, they were able to walk through the terminal unnoticed, and hailed a taxi. Sage noticed that Cristian enjoyed flaunting his power with chagrin. “I know you wanted to go to Egypt,” Cristian said in reference to his coronation. “Once this is taken care of, we can go and do what we planned.” “I know, Cristian,” Sage said. “I’m not upset that we had to put those plans on hold.” She felt a chill within her of a lingering sense of dread since their return that she would not only have to face Rafael wherever he was but also Pedro whose presence was strong in her mind.

They stepped out of the taxi and walked inside the building. Cristian was amused when the guard didn’t notice their presence as they walked past him and into the elevator. “You’re enjoying this a bit too much,” Sage said halfheartedly. When the elevator cage opened, he stepped inside his loft, surprised to find his parents waiting for him. “Mom, Dad,” he said astonished. “Thank God,” his father said. “We were worried about you, Son,” his mother said.

“How did that dent get in the wall?” she asked. “An accident,” he said softly. “Haven’t you seen the news?” she asked. “I have,” Cristian said while taking Sage’s hand as she stepped out of the elevator. Upon seeing her, his parents were stunned, their mouths dropped in awe. “This is she,” his father said after a long silence. “Your painting in the flesh.” “This is Sage,” Cristian said. “Hello,” she said politely. “You’re the royal Cristian told us about,” his mother said, attempting to curtsy. “Please, there’s no need to curtsy,” she said smiling. She noticed in the fireplace remnants of the burnt sketches.

“We had to come back after we saw the news about the missing painting and Robert,” his father said. “That’s why I came back,” Cristian said. “The portrait isn’t missing. It’s with me.” “But how?” his mother asked. “It’s complicated,” Cristian said. “Well, praise Jesus that you’re alright,” she said, clasping her hands together. Both Cristian and Sage flinched at her invocation. His mother frowned at their reaction looking at the both of them. She noticed as she stared intently at Sage that her eyes seemed to change like a feline. Her expression changed from perplexed to hot rage. “What have you done?” she said, her voice thundering. “Jillian,” his father said to her, puzzled by the change in her temperament. “Mother,” Cristian murmured, squeezing Sage’s hand. “You were raised Catholic and you turned from your Christian upbringing for that new age mess with the chants and breathing,” she spat. “I knew something happened when you changed your hair color.” “Jillian!” his father said, alarmed. She stared steely-eyed at Sage. “You’re evil,” she said, stalking toward her. Sage stood motionless, not uttering a word. “Stop it, Mother” Cristian yelled, reaching for her arm, glimpsing the crucifix hanging on her neck. He stumbled back, repelled by it. His father’s eyes widened.

“What has happened to you, Cristian?” his father said, distressed.

“He’s damned his soul,” his mother said, looking at him with disappointment. “How can you do this to yourself?” she said. “How can you let yourself be entangled,” she pointed at Sage, “with that?” “You sound like a bigot, mother,” Cristian rebuked. “You know I am no racist,” she roared. “Don’t you dare reproach me!” “There’s an evil in her,” she looked at him, “and in you.” Cristian’s shoulders slumped, pained by her stinging words. “I’m going to have to ask you to leave,” he said firmly. She looked at him with tears in her eyes. “May God have mercy on your soul.” She grabbed his stricken father’s arm and they got on the elevator. Cristian kept his back turned toward them as the cage closed with a slam. Sage exhaled short breaths when Cristian turned to face her. His eyes about to spill over like a waterfall with tears. “I knew my mother was pious, but I never thought she’d react like that. She’s wrong about you,” he said. “No, Cristian,” Sage said remorsefully. “She’s right. I am evil.”

Anna and Daniel walked through the town under the cover of darkness until they reached The River Churnet. She sighed. “I loved to play here,” she said. “When my parents died, I came here to live with a distant relative, but I could tell that she was weary of me. Therefore, I would come here and live in my imaginary world.” She looked at him. “There’s a legend in town of the Mermaid Pool. The legend is that the pool is bottomless and a mermaid appears by the lake. Those who see her she draws to their deaths.” “Interesting,” Daniel said, intrigued. “I wanted to try to catch a glimpse of the mermaid but never did,” she said. “Why did you leave this town?” he asked. “His name was Gabriel,” she said, staring into the river. “He was a magician or a conjurer. He arrived in town from seemingly nowhere. It was as if he just appeared. He had black hair down to his waist, ivory skin like the moon, and he always wore a long black robe. I was intrigued by his power. At the things he could do.

You could say I was entranced.” Daniel watched Anna’s eyes dance excitedly as she relived those memories of long ago. “He could vanish. He could transform into a tiger. He could restore a smashed piece of glass back to its original state. He could move objects. I was completely besotted with him and wanted to know what the secret to his power was. He told me that conjurers do not reveal their secrets.”

They sat down in the grass. “Rumors were swirling that he practiced black magic,” she continued. “When the rumors found his ears, he left and I went with him. I was in love and seeking adventure, so I went with him and the gypsies. We went to Manchester where his legend grew. One night after his show, I snuck out and followed him. I watched him at the pub sink his fangs into a fanatic and drink her blood. He saw me and I fled back to my room. I was terrified yet aroused by what I had seen. He found me hidden under the blankets in my room and admitted that he was a vampire and I now knew his secret. I wanted to become a vampire as well. I begged him to turn me. He finally relented and I became his pupil,” she smiled, “then his lover. I found out the gypsies that traveled with him were actually part of his coven and that they all slept in coffins. He told me briefly about the vampire king and queen and the young princess in Egypt, but I thought little of it. We were happy for many years. That all ended the night hunters found us. I can still see the terror in their eyes as the stakes were driven into their hearts and hear the screams as the vampires were being slaughtered,” she said trembling. “Gabriel and I were able to make it out but,” she took a deep breath, “he turned around and went back. The last thing he said to me was that if he did not come back out to go on without him. I waited for several minutes that seemed like an eternity, and he never came out. I fled to Egypt seeking the vampire king and queen that Gabriel told me about, but they were

gone. I didn't dare go back to England after what had happened, and so I waited. Then I saw her." "Queen V," Daniel said solemnly. "She looked so lost," she said staring afar. "Her dress was in tatters and she looked shell-shocked. Hunters had killed her parents and she was now queen. That's how I met Sage," Anna said.

They sat in silence listening to the chirp of crickets in the air. "Why didn't you want to return to Barbados?" she asked suddenly. "Because I have nothing to go back to," Daniel said softly. "My parents were captured by slave traders and I never saw them again. The day I escaped, I was able to free myself from the shackles, and I helped to unbind my cousin—I thought he was still behind me when I got off the ship. "But when I turned around, he wasn't there. Time was against me and I had to flee, so I was unable to go back. I've felt guilty for leaving him behind. That last image of his frightened face haunts my mind." "I've felt guilty for not going back for Gabriel," Anna said. "I suppose it can be called survivor's guilt." Daniel silently nodded his head blinking back the tears. They clasped each other's hands.

Lisa waited until John was fast asleep, turning down the volume of the radio when she quietly left their room. When she was sure that no one could see her, she flew to the cemetery to visit her mother's grave. She knelt down at the headstone that had the simple inscription of the name 'Rose Gregory.' She remembered when she returned to town a year after she ran away that she came home to an empty house. Terrified for her mother, she asked the next-door neighbor what had happened, and they told her that her mother had died a month after she had left, and her father hastily moved out and left town. She thought prematurely that her father was to blame, but she learned that her mother's heart gave out. Her body was discovered in Lisa's room holding one of her baby dresses. A guilt-ridden Lisa felt that her mother had lost hope when she left

and her reason for living. “I’m sorry, Momma,” she cried with a heavy heart looking up toward the stars. “I’m sorry I didn’t take you with me.” She lay down on the grass curled up in the fetal position begging her mother to forgive her for abandoning her.

Christopher and Jillian sat in silence on the ride to their Long Island home. She turned to say something to him, but he turned his head to stare out the window. She sighed, opening her purse to stare at the business card that she found on Cristian’s desk at his loft. “Maybe this Rafael Pearson can help to save my son,” she thought tucking it back inside her purse.

Chapter Twenty~five

Randi handed Rafael a blanket and a couple of pillows as he got comfortable on her sofa. “So when did you become a vampire hunter?” she asked, taking a seat in the chair. “I started training when I was five,” he said. “At first, I thought it was just some kind of child’s play, but I realized when I was older that it was not. By the time I was twelve, I had mastered using a bow and arrow, and how to properly stake a vampire.” “What of your parents?” she asked. “I was raised by my father,” he said softly. “My mother died while in childbirth.” “I’m sorry,” she said. “When my father lay on his deathbed nine years ago, he made me swear that I would fulfill the obligation of killing the vampire queen.” “So this vampire queen,” she said, “why are you so intent on eliminating her?” “Because she continues the vampire bloodline,” Rafael said. “The vampire bloodline began in Egypt, as far as I know, and she is the last royal. “Once she is vanquished, it will be easier to kill the rest. They keep their power as long as she lives.”

“Very interesting,” she said. “I have a friend who works in the morgue, and she told me that there have been bodies of homeless people arriving with their blood drained. Rafael remembered seeing the shriveled up body of Robert in the coffin at the cemetery,

drained of blood. He shuttered as though he felt a cold chill in his bones. "Are you cold?" she asked. "Do you need another blanket?" "No, I'm fine," he said. "From what you've told me, that sounds like the work of a vampire," he said. He looked at her. "This is why I must kill the vampire queen to end this once and for all."

Cristian walked over to Sage, grasping her hand. "Don't say that," he said. "It's true, Cristian," she said. "This is what I tried to warn you about. It's in our nature. Vampires are evil because we live in darkness. Your mother could sense it." "What would you have done?" he asked. "Let me die?" "No," she said firmly. "That is why I turned you, because you would've bled to death." "Then don't regret your decision," he said, sensing her thoughts. He sighed. "There's no way I'm taking the portrait to the gallery tonight," he said, still reeling from his mother's harsh treatment of them. "You can still go, don't worry about me," she said. "I am worried about you, Sage." "There's something troubling you." She didn't want to confirm his suspicions by admitting that he was right. Ever since she tasted his blood, she has acquired an unquenchable thirst for it. So much so that even the animal blood wasn't enough to squelch her hunger for human blood. It was beginning to consume her every thought. She looked away from his penetrating gaze to the burnt edges of the sketches in the fireplace. "I had to burn them, Sage," he said. "It was a bad idea for me to have left them around for so long." She looked at the dent in the wall. "This is where you and Pedro struggled?" she asked. He silently nodded his head, knowing that she was avoiding eye contact. "Sage, look at me." She closed her eyes and slowly turned her head to look at him. "I know with Rafael out there somewhere and Pedro..." his voice trailed off. "I won't let anything happen to you. I promise you that." They embraced.

John tossed and turned, shifting uncomfortably on the bed as he

tried to sleep. Opening his eyes, he was startled to see Lisa standing at the foot of the bed watching him. “Why are you looking at me like you want to eat me?” he asked. She began to laugh. “You really need to lighten up, John,” she said. “I don’t bite.” “Yes you do,” he stammered. “Well I do bite, but that’s beside the point,” she grinned. “You’re too uptight. Loosen up.” “Where did you go last night?” he asked. “To visit my mother’s grave,” she said softly. “I thought you were dead asleep.” “I couldn’t sleep,” he said. “I would’ve gone with you if you’d asked me.” “I know,” she said. “But I needed to do this alone.” They stared at each other. “Anyway rise and shine,” she said. “This is one time I wished vampires slept during the day,” he mumbled getting out of bed and stepping into the bathroom to shower. Lisa smiled, watching him. His nervous shyness amused her. She thought about the rest of the coven, wondering how they were doing on their various journeys. Then she thought of Cody and if he had made it to his father’s farm yet. John came out of the bathroom clothed, his hair still wet. “That was fast,” she quipped. “I’m ready to go see about my father and brother,” he said with apprehension.

While sitting on the bus, John felt as if he was going to hyperventilate while en route toward his house. Lisa, wearing dark sunglasses, sat silently beside him while some passengers would occasionally glance at the both of them in curiosity. “Let’s get off here,” he said, standing up suddenly when the bus came to a stop. “I live down this street,” he said, standing at the corner. “I did live there,” he said under his breath. Lisa lightly stroked his arm. “You’re trembling,” she said. “I’m just nervous,” John replied. “I don’t know what kind of reception I’m going to receive.” “There’s only one way of finding out,” he said taking a breath and walking down the sidewalk. They stopped at a small wooden house with white sidings where the paint was cracking and peeling. Fallen leaves

were scattered throughout the lawn.

Portions of the front steps crumbled as they approached the front door. John drew a heavy breath and rang the doorbell. There was no answer. He rang the doorbell again. “Maybe no one is here,” he said. Lisa with her sensitive ears heard movement. “Someone is here,” she said. The door creaked slightly open. “Who is it?” the rough voice yelled. John opened his mouth to speak but was unable to utter a sound. The door opened wider. A scrawny man with short white hair smoking a cigarette stared at them. His weary blue eyes softened at first glance of John and a tiny smile subtly formed at his mouth.

Then the twinkle in his eyes instantly turned to anger and the smile into a scowl. “You,” he glowered. “Dad,” John replied. “I thought you were my son,” he said icily, taking a puff of his cigarette. John winced. Lisa glared at his father. “Where is Jude?” John asked. “He’s not here,” his father snapped. “He was in the hospital because he’s...he’s sick,” he said. “Because of the drugs?” John asked. “The drugs you gave him,” his father snapped. “He was in the hospital to get better and then left before he was done with the treatment.” “This would’ve never happened if not for you,” he said. “It’s not my fault,” John protested. “It is your fault.” “You planted the drugs in his socks because you were always jealous of Jude. Your mother even left because of you. You were a mistake.”

John stumbled back, his knees buckling at his father’s cruelty. Lisa grabbed him to keep him from falling. “Just go away and don’t come back,” his father said slamming the door in his face. Lisa tugged his arm gently. “Let’s go, John,” she said. “You’re better off without him.” John lowered his head trying to compose himself before starting down the steps. Lisa turned back and saw his father looking at them from behind the curtain. She shook her head in

disgust. “There’s a special place in hell for people like you,” she thought. “There’s no reason to stay here,” John said, fighting unsuccessfully against the tears that were streaming down his cheeks. “The sooner we leave the better.” Lisa went to console him, but he pulled away. “Can we just leave now?” he said. “Okay,” she said, hurt by his rejection.

Billy and Samuel walked across the lush, green lawn toward a stone house shaped like a castle. “This is my home,” Samuel said smiling. “It still looks the same way it did when I left.” “It was built in the style of Renaissance castles.” “It’s gorgeous,” Billy said in awe. “A castle,” he said. “You could say that,” Samuel replied. “But it’s actually called a tower house.” “I feel like I’ve stepped back in time,” Billy said. “Now I’m looking for knights in shining armor.” Samuel chuckled. They walked toward the gate and read the inscription: “James Museum,” Billy mouthed. “My home is a museum,” Samuel said with surprise. He opened the door, and they walked inside, Samuel stopping abruptly while Billy swiftly stepped to the side as they looked at the French furnishings, tapestries, porcelain, silver pottery, and armor enclosed in a glass case. “Looks like a museum,” Billy thought looking around. “Welcome,” a stout man wearing glasses and a suit said, approaching them cheerfully. “This is the home of Lord and Lady James. My name is Lawrence and I’m the keeper and historian. Lord and Lady James lived here until their deaths,” he continued.

“They left the home to their son Samuel when he vanished in hopes that he would return, but when he did not, the home was turned into a museum.” Samuel stared stoically. “Rumor is that Lord James thought his son to be a bit, um,” he cleared his throat, “a bit effeminate.” Samuel smiled wryly. The man stared at him, dropping his mouth slightly. “I do say, you should take a look at the family portrait that hangs in the study,” he said. “You look

remarkably like their son.”

Samuel didn't reply while Billy bit his lower lip to keep from laughing. “How did their son vanish?” Billy asked in jest. Samuel shot him a perturbed stare. “No one really knows,” the historian said. “It's rumored that he climbed out the window and disappeared into the night.” He stared at Samuel inquisitively. Samuel gazed into the historian's eyes. “You will have no memory of seeing me this night,” he said. “You will go and leave us be and speak no more of it.”

The historian blinked and robotically left the room, confused with his actions. Billy laughed. “I was only teasing,” he said innocently while Samuel shook his head. “I want to see this portrait,” he said. “Seems that's something you and Queen V have in common,” he joked. Samuel smirked. They walked up the wide marble stairs into the study that had rows of books along the stone-built wall. Billy gasped, looking at the portrait. Samuel was standing while his stone-faced parents remained seated. He wore a velvet ruby jacket trimmed with silver, trousers, and tunic with a brooch, his long hair tied back into a ponytail, and he had a slight frown on his face.

His father was dressed in the same fashion, while his mother wore a red-velvet gown with a fur petticoat. None of them smiled. “Pardon me for saying this,” Billy said, “but no one looks happy in this painting.” “I wasn't,” Samuel said. “My father wanted me to wear my haired pulled back, because he didn't want people to think he had a daughter instead of a son.” “Is that part of the reason you left?” Billy asked. “Partly,” Samuel replied. “My father arranged for me to marry an upper-class heiress. Social standing was very important to both of my parents,” he said. “My future bride was envious because I was prettier than she,” he scoffed. He looked around in the dimly lit room. “This house was always stuffy to me. I felt like I was suffocating. Just like the rigid furnishings,

this house never had warmth to it.” He stared at Billy. “I never saw my parents show affection towards each other. Never saw a hug or kiss. I didn’t want to be doomed into a loveless marriage.” “Now that you know that your parents left this house to you, do you regret your decision to leave?” “No,” Samuel said. “I made the right decision.” “Before we leave you have to show me your bedroom,” Billy said. They walked down a narrow, darkened hallway. “At one time you needed a torch to walk through here,” Samuel said. They walked into a room with a large bed carved with intricate designs of vines throughout with a feather mattress and silk quilt and canopy, and along the wall a mammoth fireplace with carvings of birds in the stone. “This was my sleeping chamber,” Samuel said. “My parents’ room is made up the same way except they had their own private oratory.”

Leaving the museum, Samuel turned back for one last glance. “This is probably the last time I’ll return here,” he said. “Maybe we could bring Queen V so she can see the portrait,” Billy said. “Maybe,” Samuel grinned. “Maybe we can see your home in California,” he said. Billy’s smile vanished. “No,” he said sadly. “No home for me,” he said as they walked across the lawn. “I grew up in foster homes since I was a baby. I never knew either of my parents. I went from foster home to foster home until I went to L.A. and stayed with friends until I met Anna. I never stayed at one place for long before I met Queen V. I wonder how she is doing,” he said. “I miss her and everyone else.” “I miss them too,” Samuel said. They stopped and sat down in the darkness. “I must confess,” he said. “I was smitten with Queen V when I first met her—she’s so beautiful. Nevertheless, I knew having a relationship with her was impossible, because she always seemed unattainable.” He sighed wistfully. “Does it bother you that she’s with Cristian?” Billy asked. “I’m not the envious type,” Samuel replied. “If he makes

her happy, I'm happy." "At least you weren't obsessed like Pedro," Billy said. "Pedro..." Samuel replied. "You believe he will come back like Anna said?" "If Queen V could come back from nearly being staked to death, then Pedro could as well." "Maybe we should hasten our return then," Samuel said. "Cristian will look out for her," Billy said. "He'll take care of her while we're gone, and Queen V can take care of herself. Remember how she flung that hunter across the pavement?" "Yes," Samuel smiled. "It was definitely a Kodak moment."

"Anyway, I thought that you and Anna would get together," Billy said, changing the subject. "What!" Samuel exclaimed. "But that would probably be weird for you since you both look alike," Billy joked. Samuel shoved him playfully, causing him to soar across the lawn. "Billy," he yelled, standing up looking for him. Billy grabbed him from behind as they wrestled falling to the ground. "Okay," Samuel said while Billy tickled him unmercifully, singing a chorus from a popular eighties song. "I'm sorry," he laughed, gasping for air. They stopped wrestling and stared at each other. Billy flicked a blade of grass from Samuel's hair. "You are beautiful in an effeminate way," he said, staring into his illuminated eyes. "You could use a bit of eyeliner and rouge though." "This, coming from someone who wears makeup?" Samuel teased. "I'm metrosexual and proud of it," Billy joked. He rolled off of Samuel and they sat up. "When I think of the eighties, I think of big hair and shoulder pads," Samuel said. "As if you didn't wear any fashions from the eighties," Billy said.

"The eighties rule. It was the decade of revolution." He began counting down the list: "Sixteen Candles, Pretty in Pink, The Breakfast Club, St. Elmo's Fire, Weird Science." Samuel shrugged his shoulders. "Don't tell me you've never watched any of these classic movies?" Billy stammered. Samuel shook his head "no."

“When we get back to the States, we’re going to sit down and watch all of those movies I just mentioned, and the other classics.” Samuel chuckled. “This also means you probably didn’t wear your hair feathered at least once,” he said staring at Samuel in disbelief. Samuel shook his head furiously. “No,” he said, trying to conceal a smile. “Liar,” Billy laughed. “Now it’s my turn for a confession. I wore the punk look for awhile. Feathered hair and spiked hair,” Samuel said. “Can you imagine the visual?” They looked at each other and started laughing until they cried. Samuel glanced over at Billy whose black eyeliner ran down his eyes. “You look like a raccoon,” he said doubling over laughing, holding his belly.

Anna and Daniel entered their room at the cottage. “What a revealing night,” he said. “We learned a lot about each other.” “Yes,” she said, watching him intently, the heat surging through her veins like molten lava. “The night is still young,” he said. “Are you hungry?” “Yes,” she said licking her lips, her voice deepening as her body grew more aroused. “But not for food,” she said grabbing him and kissing him, moaning. They fell against the wall kissing long, hard, and deep while Anna feverishly worked to take off his shirt. They stopped kissing long enough for him to help her out of her clothes, while she jumped on him, wrapping her legs around his waist and panting heavily while they fell to the floor.

Chapter Twenty-six

Lisa and John sat in the airport terminal, their duffle bags at their feet, in silence while waiting for their flight to Kansas. She could see from the corner of her eye, John staring at her as if he wanted to say something, but he remained silent. She found herself unsure of what to say to him after his father's rejection. When she opened her mouth to speak, she found herself not knowing what to say without sounding patronizing. Lost in her thoughts of helplessness, she took a breath and stared out the window watching the planes with sadness that all his hopes of reconciliation with his father and brother were dashed by cruel words.

Samuel and Billy arrived in their suite at the bed and breakfast in the early hours of the morning after scaring some of the nosy tourists watching them oddly. Billy kicked off his shoes and collapsed on the settee while Samuel started a log fire in the fireplace. "So what made you think I was with Anna?" Samuel asked alluding to their earlier conversation. "I don't know," Billy said, looking at him. "We both know that she likes to take an occasional lover as we all do." "I just thought naturally that you two would have," he smiled, "well...you know." "I don't like to kiss and tell, but in this case no that didn't happen," Samuel replied. He raised his brow.

“What about you and Lisa?” “Nope,” Billy grinned. “It was Anna.” “Anna,” Samuel grinned. Billy nodded his head, grinning cheekily. He sprang up from the settee. “I’m going to shower and crash,” he said. “Okay,” Samuel shrugged.

He turned and stared into the burning embers in the fireplace with a smile forming on his face of a memory that he had kept hidden from everyone. He closed his eyes. “Your majesty,” he said bowing before Sage. “Please, there’s no need to bow,” she’d said smiling. “But you’re a royal,” he stammered. “That’s not of any importance right now,” she said gliding into his room, closing the door behind her with a flick of her hand. “You felt it too when we first met...,” he said.

“Yes,” she said huskily, standing close to him, their lips nearly touching. “You are very beautiful,” he said. “And so are you,” she said, gazing into his violet eyes with their long lashes. “I had never thought of taking a lover until now,” she said staring at his flawless translucent skin, his long lustrous hair, and lips the color of a rose quartz.” He cupped her face in his hands and brought her lips to meet his. Her lips were soft and moist and tasted of honey. She had a sweet fragrance that smelled of cinnamon on her skin.

She took her hand and swept it across his face while the candles flickered out. “This night is for us alone,” she said, “Do I have your discretion?” “You have my word,” he said. “Let us cherish this night and keep it in our memory.” He kissed her again, purring softly as they lay down together onto the bed, resting their heads on the feather pillows. “I offer my apologies in advance if this isn’t to your liking,” he said nervously. “I’m new to all of this.” “I’m new to this as well,” she said, giving him a lingering kiss that set ablaze his loins. She gazed downward, smiling. “I think you’ll do just fine,” she grinned wickedly.

He could still feel her fingers running through his hair and the

softness of her skin as they undressed, the touch of her hands sending tingles through his body as their limbs tangled in-between the satin sheets. “My queen,” he whispered, smiling with the knowledge that he was the only one in the coven to spend a night of passion with Sage. “What are you smiling about?” Billy asked, his head wrapped in a towel. “A pleasant memory,” Samuel replied.

Rafael tossed and turned on the sofa. His mind flashed back to the lair. He was walking in the darkness, stopping at an opened door. Peering inside, he made out glowing yellow eyes staring back at him. Before he could reach for his stake, this unseen entity grabbed him and shoved him against the wall. He jumped up from his sleep, disconcerted by his surroundings.

“Where am I?” he wondered. Then he remembered the nurse Randi and that this was her apartment. He felt his cell phone vibrating against him. Missed call it read. Checking the caller id, the number listed was anonymous and there was no message. “Could it have been John calling me?” he thought.

When the plane landed at the airport in Kansas, Lisa took out her cell phone after she and John left the terminal to try to call Cody. “I’m not getting a signal,” she said frustrated. John remained silent, which was beginning to aggravate her.

It was close to sundown, and she needed to see Cody to combat the helplessness she felt. Focusing her attention, she tried to speak to him telepathically. “Cody,” she said. “Cody, where are you?” she asked. Cody was walking along the road after resting for a night at a small mom and pop motel when he could see, in the far distance, his father’s farm. It was dilapidated from wear and tear, and the barn had collapsed into itself. He started to walk across the tall-parched grass when he heard Lisa calling to him. “Lisa,” he said. “I’m headed toward my father’s farm now.”

“How can I get there?” she asked while they walked out of

eyesight of the airport personnel and passengers. “This is where I wish I had Queen V’s power of illusion,” she said. She grabbed John’s hand. “Okay I need you to focus on me.” “Why?” John asked, holding on tight to their duffle bags. “You’ll find out in a minute,” she said. In a flash, she held him close to her as they flew in the reddening sky. “Don’t look down if you’re scared of heights,” she said. John couldn’t believe how fast they were flying. Before he could speak, they had landed in the parched grass, meeting Cody. John felt like he had whiplash, while his head spun. “Lisa,” Cody said, giving her a warm hug. John watched them, feeling like the third wheel. “So this is your home?” Lisa asked while they walked through the grass and looking back at John swatting at gnats. “This is where I lived,” Cody said fondly.

They came upon the collapsed barn, staring at it for a moment then slowly walked toward the house. John sat their bags down on the ground. “My pa used to keep his horse and other farming equipment in there,” Cody said. “If he was alive, my pa would be one hundred years old,” he said. He walked to the door, leaning his hand slightly on it and it opened, surprising him. “Do you think someone lives here?” John said. “Only my pa lived here,” Cody said. “The neighbors would come by from time to time to help out, especially after my fiancée died.”

As soon as they walked inside, a pungent stench assaulted their senses. “What is that smell?” John said feeling nauseous. Lisa looked at the layers of crusted dirt and grime on the floor and on the wall. John felt as though he would upchuck at any minute. Cody became anxious as he turned the corner. “My pa’s room is right around the corner,” he said. “My room was here,” he said. It was a small room with a rusted iron rollaway bed and hand-carved dresser.

The pungent odor grew stronger as they neared his father’s room. The door was closed. Cody took a breath, looked at Lisa, and

pushed the door open. He gasped. An old, frail, emaciated man lay in the bed; the blanket caked with urine and feces. Overwhelmed by the putrid smell, John bolted out the house, running outside throwing up. “Pa,” Cody said. The man opened his eyes clouded with cataracts.

“Cody,” he said weakly. Cody ran over to his father. “Pa,” he said, stunned that his father was still alive. He lifted up the sheets, choking back the bile. Lisa covered her nose, sickened.

Runny bedsores covered his father’s body and maggots infested his legs. Cody’s lip trembled, heartsick. “Timmy was supposed to be looking after me, but he left me here,” his father said. “I’ve been lying in this bed for a year or so. I hoped one day to see you again, my boy,” he said weakly. “I prayed to see you again before I die.” Buckets of tears flowed from Cody’s eyes. “I’m sorry that I didn’t let you grieve for Cynthia when she died,” his father said.

“That’s water under the bridge, Pa,” Cody cried. “I’m sorry I left you,” he said. Tears trickled down Lisa’s eyes. “When I die, I want you to burn this house down. I don’t want to be buried. The matches are in the kitchen.” “I love you, Pa,” Cody said, kissing his forehead. “I love you, Cody,” his father said, wheezing and gasping until he lay still, his mouth open. “Pa,” Cody said. He lay motionless.

Tearfully, Cody went to his room rummaging until he found some kerosene oil. He sprinkled it throughout the house while Lisa dug through the dirt in the kitchen until she found the matches. Cody looked once more at his father and struck the match without success. After two more attempts, the match caught fire. He threw the match to the floor, and the flames on the dry, rotted wood went up instantly, spreading quickly. “Cody c’mon,” Lisa yelled grabbing his arm, running out the house. “There was no one to look after him,” Cody said guiltily. “No one.” The whole house went up in an inferno while they watched. Distraught, Cody tried to dart inside

the burning house, but Lisa held him back with all her strength. He clung to her sobbing profusely while John looked on dazed.

Cristian awakened Sage, kissing her lightly. “What time is it?” she asked. “It’s about five in the afternoon,” he said. “I’m going to take the painting back to the gallery.” “Okay,” she said, worried. “Everything will be alright,” he said. “I never expected the portrait to get this kind of attention. I’ll make sure that the attention doesn’t infringe on our privacy. And when this is over, we’ll go to Egypt.” He wrinkled his nose. “I really don’t want an elaborate ceremony.” “My coronation was a small affair,” Sage said. “We’ll discuss that later.” He kissed her and put on his sunglasses. “I’ll be back,” he said. She got out of bed and watched him get on the elevator. After she dressed, she came out into the living room, staring at the massive dent in the wall. Suddenly, the darkened hallway of her loft appeared in the room like a spectral vision. She began to walk toward it, through the wall, and found herself inside her loft.

She walked down the hallway feeling a presence in front of her. “Pedro,” she said. She saw the door to his room. It was closed, the shroud still covering it. “Pedro,” she said again. She grabbed her lantern and went to the insulated storage room hungry for blood. She stirred when she heard the sound of pounding footsteps as though someone had attached brass bells to their shoes. The noisy sounds stopped at the doorway. Waiting a few terrifying minutes before grabbing a bottle of animal blood, she uncorked it with her fangs. As she started to lift the bottle to her lips, her mind flashed to biting Cristian’s neck and tasting his blood, likening the flavor to that of pomegranate. She could still taste it on her tongue. Shaking her head to dismiss those thoughts, she placed the bottle to her mouth, taking a sip. The liquid stuck to her throat and had a bitter taste like tar. Repulsed, she spewed it out. Frustrated by her endless hunger, she hurled the bottle against the wall, shattering it to pieces.

Chapter Twenty~seven

Before stopping by the gallery, Cristian decided to go by his manager's loft, since it was a few blocks away from his. He rang the intercom several times, and there was no reply. "This confirms that something happened to Robert," Cristian thought. Holding the covered painting in his arms, he hailed a taxi, instructing the driver to take him into town. After paying the taxi driver when he arrived at the gallery, Cristian used his powers of illusion and walked past the security guard. "That was too easy," he thought smugly. Walking toward his office, he opened the door, set the painting down on his desk, and waited in the darkness. "I'll wait until the gallery is closed before I put the portrait back," he reasoned. Looking down to the floor with his sharp vision, he didn't see the red spots anymore. "Housekeeping must've cleaned it up," he said, disappointed. He picked up the phone to call Sage, but her cell phone went straight to the voicemail. "Why aren't you answering the phone, Sage?" he wondered.

Sage grabbed her stomach in anguish. Her hunger was overwhelming her, and the animal blood lost its savor to help her control the longing. The sounds of footsteps started again and a gust of air blew out the lantern. "Pedro," Sage yelled angrily. "Speak

now, Pedro!” “Stop playing games with me.” The force of her voice shook the walls. There was silence. Looking around in the darkness, she saw nothing. She walked into the grand living room, noticing that the white cloth covering the furniture seemed to radiate in the dark with an eerie glow.

She felt the prickly sensation of being watched. Ignoring the sensation, she walked to the window and watched the sunset, thinking back to when Cristian told her he wanted a family. “Something I can’t give you,” she said aloud. The gnawing ache of her hunger along with the ache of her inability to have children tormented her. She imagined standing in the mirror rubbing her growing belly watching, with amazement, the life growing inside of her, feeling the baby kick for the first time, the miracle of giving birth, holding the newborn in her arms, and watching the child grow from an infant to a toddler...reading it bedtime stories of princes and princesses and happily ever after, playing on the beach making sandcastles, and taking it to see the wonders of the world.

Tears flowed down her eyes of anger and regret. Anger, because she would never experience having a baby due to her father’s selfishness, and regret for cursing Cristian with this life of hunger and darkness. Her mind reeling from loneliness, depression, anger, revulsion, and frustration, she flung the window open and stood on the ledge. Tipping over, she let herself freefall morphing into a raven flying through the sky and perching on the torch of the Statue of Liberty. She shifted back into her physical form, staring out toward the city as the wind caressed her cheeks. “This statue is a symbol of freedom,” Sage said. “I want to be free of this curse.”

With the gallery now closed, Cristian came from the back waiting for the moment to return the portrait. “Business has been down since the painting was stolen, and no one has still seen Robert,” he heard the director say. “Has anyone seen Cristian?” the security

guard asked.

“He was away, but I suspect he won’t be happy when he finds out his masterpiece is gone,” the director said, stroking his goatee. “You’re right about that,” the security guard said. “The police are looking for a person of interest.” “There was a strange man who would come in and stare at the painting like he wanted to jump it.” Cristian chuckled. “He was always asking for Robert or Cristian.” “Rafael,” Cristian thought. The lights dimmed, giving Cristian the moment he waited for.

He set the painting quickly on the stand where it had sat originally and walked out behind the director and unnoticed by the guard. The security guard looked back doing a double-take. “You won’t believe this,” the security guard called to the director. “Check this out.” The director turned back while Cristian kept walking, smiling that his plan worked.

Sage listened to the breeze in the air, taking her mind off her hunger while she stood within the torch of the statue. She missed the coven terribly. She knew they needed time for themselves, but she had become so accustomed to their presence that now, without them, she felt alone. Even being with Cristian didn’t fill the void she felt. Once the blue and grey shades in the sky turned dark, she flew from the statue overlooking the city and landed just outside of Central Park, using the cover of the trees to avoid detection. Wandering aimlessly through Manhattan, she found herself standing outside of a cathedral. “I was a spiritual person once,” she said looking up at the steeple. “I prayed. I believed. That should count for something.”

She walked toward the door to open it, but she felt as if something was holding her back. “Don’t forsake me,” she pleaded, reaching for the door again, but a force sent her flying backwards. She looked up toward the heavens, the sting of the reality of her

struggle against her evil nature pouring out from deep within her as she yelled in the Arabic tongue, "I never wanted this life." She turned and saw the apparition of her father holding out his arms to her. "Accept what you are," he said. "No!" Sage yelled.

Cristian arrived at his loft. "It's done, Sage," he said. There was no reply. "Sage!" he called. "Where are you?" Feeling a chill, she clung to herself and began to walk back toward Greenwich Village. Suddenly, she was jerked forcefully into an alley. "Let me go!" she shouted.

The hooded man shoved her against the wall placing a knife against her throat. "Give me your money," he demanded. "I don't have any money," she snarled. He punched her. "Well then, you'll have to do," he said, trying to grope her. She grabbed his arm digging in her claws until he dropped the knife, and with a crackle, snapped it. The hooded man screamed in agony. He looked at her and saw her red eyes and sharp fangs. Trying to run, he tripped over his untied shoes and fell. Sage grabbed him from his hood and jerked him back, hurling him against the wall. He fell with a thud to the ground. He tried to crawl away, but Sage stepped on his back with her stilettos grabbing him by the neck and lifting him up. "I guess you'll have to do," she snarled, sinking her fangs into his neck and pressing him against the wall as he struggled against her.

She drank until she could feel the life leaving the man's body, his arms falling lifeless at his side.

Horrified by her actions, she dropped his limp body to the ground, his blood dripping down her chin. "No," she said repeatedly. She screamed an ear-piercing scream that only dogs and other four-legged creatures could hear. Cristian, who also heard her screams, flew out the window looking for her.

Chapter Twenty-eight

Daniel woke up feeling sore throughout his body. He looked at Anna wrapped in a sheet, sitting at the foot of the bed grinning at him. “You’re in better shape than I am,” he said, groaning and rising slowly out of bed. He looked around at the room in disarray. Tables overturned, pillows shredded, sheets, and blankets cast on the floor, scattered clothing, broken chairs. “I think we used just about every bit of furniture in this room, not counting the walls, of course,” Anna smiled. “You have a lot of stamina,” he said. “It’s been awhile,” she said clearing her throat. “We haven’t left this room since the day before yesterday,” Daniel said. “I’m sure you’re going to need this,” she said handing him a flask of animal blood. “Yes,” he said taking it and drinking heartily in gulps. “I feel refreshed. So what’s on the agenda for today?” he asked.

“I’m ready to go back to the States,” Anna replied. “I have this feeling in my gut that’s been troubling me. Sage needs us,” she said. “I felt it too,” Daniel said.

Randi watched Rafael as he slept on the sofa. Trying not to wake him, she went to fix a cup of coffee. “Can’t sleep either,” he said startling her. “Just a little,” she said. “It’s a lot to take in... what I told

you,” he said, “vampires and such.” “Actually, this isn’t my first time hearing about vampires,” she said. Rafael sat up, intrigued. “How so?” he asked. “I have a friend who is a biochemist,” she started. “Well, we used to date,” she smiled shyly. “He believed strongly in vampires.” “He actually concocted a formula that he says can cure a vampire of vampirism. It’s an experimental drug and takes multiple injections, but he says it works.”

“Really?” Rafael said. “I thought that vampires can’t be cured of it unless the top vampire dies.” “How does he know this formula will work?” he asked. “Because he used it on himself,” she said. Rafael gasped. “He told me that he was bitten by a vampire, and he used the formula on himself before the vampire symptoms took hold, and he’s still human.” Rafael cocked his head in contemplation.

Sage flew in a mad dash to Central Park crazily splashing water on her face from the pond to remove the blood. “Nothing will ever remove this stain,” she said wiping harder. “Sage, what happened?” Cristian asked, standing behind her, aggravated. She whipped around. “I killed someone,” she said. “I drank their blood.” “Tell me,” Cristian said. “I needed air,” she said. “I was headed back to your loft and I was grabbed. It was a mugger. Before I knew what was happening, I was drinking his blood until I could feel their life leaving his body.”

“Why are you feeling sad for defending yourself?” he said. “What other choice did you have?”

Sage was stunned by his seemingly indifference. “Cristian, I took a life,” she yelled as thunder began to rumble. “This is getting tired, Sage,” he said, exasperated. “You’re a vampire. You drink blood.” “I didn’t want to be a vampire, Cristian,” she shouted, a clap of thunder and a flash of lightning breaking in the sky. Cristian looked up at the sky realizing that the weather corresponded to Sage’s

mood. “Sage, you need to stop resisting what you are,” he said. “Even if you didn’t want this life, you are a vampire. I’ve watched you for days moping, and I can sense your regret for turning me. I’ve tried to compromise. I even tried to drink the animal blood, even though I’d rather drink human blood,” he said. Sage dropped her head, dejected.

“You need to snap out of this and stop resisting your nature,” he said. “If this continues,” he sighed, “I don’t know if I want to spend eternity with the constant mood swings.” He vanished as a torrent of rain began to fall, leaving Sage standing in the heavy downpour.

Rafael looked out the window at the sudden downpour and wrinkled his brow. “That’s odd,” Randi said. “This sudden downpour may not be the work of mother nature,” Rafael said. “Vampires can control the weather?” she asked in disbelief. “Powerful vampires like this vampire can command the elements and wield them as they please.” “Wow!” Randi said, impressed. “I hope you’re not starting to admire vampires,” he said. “No,” she said quickly.

“I just didn’t know that vampires are so powerful.” “All vampires aren’t as powerful. But the vampire queen is the most powerful of them all,” he said. She clicked on the television and the regular programming was interrupted by breaking news. “Just as the mystery surrounded the disappearance of the masterpiece, a new mystery surrounds its sudden reappearance,” the newscaster said. “The portrait, *Beauty Mysterium*, depicting a mysterious woman, resurfaced tonight at the gallery. There is no explanation for its sudden reappearance.”

“She’s back,” Rafael smiled. “The vampire has returned.” His cell phone began to ring. He answered it quickly.

“Hello,” he said tentatively. “Who’s this? I see. I can do that. Okay good-bye.” “What was that all about?” Randi said. “That was

Cristian West's mother calling me. She wants me to help her son. Things are falling into place" he grinned.

Lisa, John, and Cody waited at the bus station, sitting quietly. It took all her strength to pull Cody away from the burning shell of the house and talk him into leaving before the fire trucks arrived. She knew he wanted to run inside and sacrifice himself, but she couldn't let him do it. Weary with sadness, Lisa felt great relief at the thought of returning to New York and to Sage and the others. She felt as though they all got their strength from being together. They were the coven seven, and ever since they split for a short time, she'd felt the separation keenly.

She was sure the others felt it as well. They needed to be together again. She grabbed Cody's hand as they boarded the bus. John opted to sit behind them. Cody leaned and rested his head on Lisa's shoulders. She was glad to be able to comfort him, but she felt bad that John seemed isolated. Here his father rejected him, and yet Cody was able to find forgiveness and love from his father and be with him during his last moments on earth. She noted that both men mourned the losses of their fathers. She looked back at John who was staring out the window crying softly.

"Wake up, Billy, we must haste now," Samuel said, shaking him. Billy sat up groggily. "We need to get going," Samuel said. "It's Queen V," Billy said suddenly alert. "You felt it too." "Yes, and we need to get going, for I fear she's in danger." "You don't have to tell me twice," Billy said getting up and flying into the bathroom to shower. "I felt it strong last night," Samuel said. "She's in trouble. I know the others felt it as well." He looked at the early morning newspaper that headlined the return of the portrait at the gallery. "This is not what she wanted," he said. "Cristian had to know that. I'm beginning to think perhaps Pedro was onto something after all."

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An ominous figure stood over the broken fragments of the shattered bottle. A piece seemed to float in the air by itself as the figure held it up. “It pained me to see you in so much turmoil,” the figure said.

“Not too much longer. I’ll be whole again. Now maybe she’s realizing that she made a mistake not listening to me.”

Chapter Twenty~nine

Sage stood immobile after Cristian's departure, letting the rain drown out her sorrows and wishing for the ground to open up and swallow her. His apathy to her plight stung her more than his reproach for her moodiness. She noted the irony of her situation. She was with Cristian, yet she still felt lonely. She couldn't explain it. She had lived a melancholy life since she became a vampire, with a constant struggle with herself. However, she found that she could withstand it because she wasn't alone. The coven was always there with her giving her the strength she needed.

Without them, she felt lost. She thought of his mother's negative reaction to her. "I didn't think she would react like that," she thought. "It was as though she looked right through me and saw my nature. She'll never accept me in her son's life nor forgive me for turning him into one of the undead. If she knew I didn't have a choice, would she understand? Probably not," she thought, "She probably would've preferred that I let him die instead of damning him."

Cristian walked into the club wringing his hair taking off his soaked leather jacket. "Hey, West, haven't seen you in awhile!" the bouncer yelled over the blaring music. "Been busy," Cristian said.

“Yeah, I bet” the bouncer remarked. He ordered a bottle of scotch and went to the back to sit in his familiar seat. Thunder rolled outside rattling the building. “Sage,” he said knowing that she was the cause of the downpour. “Let’s see if alcohol will still affect me like it used to,” he thought, taking a swig from the bottle. The taste was tart, but he forced himself to drink it. He was irritated, because he knew Sage regretted turning him and it was driving a wedge between them. “Cristian,” a woman purred in his ear. It was Tania, an old flame. She was dressed in a strapless, skintight black dress and heels with her blonde hair hanging on her shoulders. She had a look of mischief in her crystal-blue eyes. “What’s wrong, Cristian?” she said, slinking beside him, “Problems at home?” He shrugged his shoulders nonchalantly. She massaged his shoulders. “You’re wound up tight,” she said. “You need to release that tension.”

She looked around smirking to see if anyone was watching and knelt underneath the table unzipping his pants. “Let me make it all better for you,” she said. Cristian inhaled sharply, closing his eyes and gritting his teeth. Even with his eyes closed, he could see Sage’s eyes filled with sadness as though she was standing in front of him. His eyes flew open. “No,” he said. He shoved her head forcefully away from him. “Stop this,” he demanded.

Lisa looked back at John finding him asleep, his head resting against the window. Cody grabbed her hand. “Hey,” he said. “How are you?” she whispered. “I’ll manage,” he said. “We’re almost in New York,” she said. “I saw the sign a ways back.” “Good,” Cody said. “I’ll be glad to see everyone together again.” “Yeah,” she said looking back out the window. While staring out the window, she caught a glimpse of a crumbled steeple of an abandoned church.

The stained-glass windows were broken and the door boarded. It seemed disquieting to her to see the place of worship empty and menacing in the darkness as if the building had lost its light. John,

who had awakened, stared at the empty brick building with sadness that even churches can die if there is no more life in them. Straining his neck, he continued to watch the building shrouded in darkness until he could no longer see it.

Anna and Daniel sat on the plane, both deep in thought. “We caused an extensive amount of damage to the room,” he said. “We had no choice but to pay for the destruction,” she said.

“We both were a bit crazy.”

“Just a bit,” he said, grinning. “I’m anxious to get back to New York,” she said. “I’ll be glad to see Sage again.” “I missed everyone,” Daniel said. “Not that I didn’t enjoy our time together,” he said.

“Understood,” Anna said. “I’m looking forward to hearing how everyone else’s holiday went,” Daniel said. “I know,” Anna said. “But first I need to know if Sage is alright. I just feel something isn’t right.” Daniel looked at his watch. “We still have a ways before we’re back in the States.” Anna sighed impatiently.

The cage to the elevator opened and Cristian solemnly entered the loft. “Sage,” he said looking around, thinking maybe she returned. “Cristian, you idiot,” he said, thumping his head, disgusted by what had happened at the club. “How can I look at Sage after that?” he said. “She can sense my thoughts just as I am able to sense hers.” He checked the phone for messages.

“Cristian, I don’t know if you’re back in town, but we need you to come by the gallery first thing in the morning,” the director said. “It’s about the portrait.”

“I probably should’ve let the painting stay missing,” Cristian said remorsefully. “Sage and I were happier when we were in Prague. I knew she didn’t really want to come back, but she did it for me. And what has happened since we came back? My mother treats her badly, she gives in to her hunger, and I lash out at her because I was frustrated. I should’ve stayed and comforted her instead of leaving

her like that. Sage, I'm sorry," he said. "Please forgive me."

Samuel and Billy sat at the window seat on the airplane. "I'm sure everyone else is on their way back to New York like us," Billy said. "Queen V will be happy to see us." "She's not the only one," Samuel said, thinking of the sadness in her eyes when they all parted. From all the years that he had known her, she had always had sadness in her eyes. Even after she met Cristian, the sadness remained. The one time he didn't see the sadness was the night they shared together. She had a twinkle in her eyes and a smile that would melt even the hardest heart. "I think Queen V needs us as much as we need her," Billy said. "I think you're right," Samuel said. "I'm looking forward to seeing her and everyone else again."

Rafael got up and began getting dressed. "What are you doing?" Randi asked staring at his six-pack abs, practically drooling at the mouth. "I need to take care of something," he said.

"I need to replenish my supplies. I need a bow and arrows, stakes, holy water. It's imperative that I get those." "Will you be coming back?" she asked. "If you don't mind my company?" he asked. "I don't mind," she said. "I actually like having you around." They stared at each other for a moment.

"Can you take me into town?" he asked. "I have a meeting with Cristian West's mother." "That should be interesting," she said.

"I'm expecting her cooperation in taking down the vampire queen," Rafael said. "A mother will do anything to protect her child from danger and that's what I'm counting on."

"Just give me a minute to shower and dress," Randi said while Rafael watched her sashay into the bathroom.

"We're back in New York," Lisa said excitedly as the bus pulled into the bus station. Cody grinned. They hugged. John stared at them silently. They got off the bus and stretched in the light drizzle.

John pressed his jacket closer to him. "It's a bit nippy." "We'll be out of the cold soon," Lisa said.

They walked near the back of the bus station enclosed in darkness. John held on tightly to Lisa who tightened their duffle bags around him, and they flew back to the loft. "I don't think I could ever get used to this way of traveling," he said. They landed right outside the door. "Home," Lisa said. They opened the door. "Queen V!" "Cristian!" she yelled. They walked down the darkened hallway. "It doesn't seem like anyone is here," Cody said.

"This is strange." Lisa replied, "Unless they are staying elsewhere."

"I smell a presence of a vampire," Cody said. "It's a faint smell."

They walked into the grand living room. John stumbled across the furniture in the darkness. "I'll go turn on the lights," Cody said. Lisa walked toward the insulated storage area. "What's this?" she said looking at the shattered bottle on the floor. "Cody!" she yelled. He and John ran back to the storage area. "Look at this," Lisa said. "Someone was here," Cody said. "It had to be Queen V," Lisa said. "She always uses a lantern. Something obviously happened." "Where are she and Cristian?" Cody said. "I don't like this at all." "Unless Rafael found them," John said. "I don't like this," Lisa said, alarmed.

Chapter Thirty

Sage sat huddled within the torch of the statue where she took refuge after her quarrel with Cristian, listening to the melodic tunes in the wind. She could hear him calling for her, but she blocked him from reading her thoughts. She could see the sky turning bright red and lavender as the sun was beginning to rise. Standing to her feet, she watched as the sun rose higher, the rays nearly blinding her. In the blinding light, she remembered watching a fire burning from a golden torch as a throng of people gathered. She was an infant held in the arms of an androgynous person with dark hair with jewels and painted eyes, wearing white and gold attire. They were in a chamber adorned with Egyptian sculptures and paintings that told the story of the many coronations of her descendants.

Her father robed in a gown draped with black and gold wore a gold and sapphire crown. He was holding a gold crown in his hands. Her mother, also wearing black and gold, was kneeling at his feet, her head bowed, and he placed the crown on her head. They arose and the people shouted, “Hail to the king and queen!”

Sage shielded her eyes from the sun, remembering her own coronation. It was subdued. There was no throng of people for the event. It was just herself, Anna, and the vampire that held her

as an infant. He placed the gold and sapphire crown on her head, and they bowed before her. Cristian, in his reproach, was right about one thing: Even though she didn't choose this life, she was a vampire and that would never change.

Cristian, fully dressed, stared out the window of his bedroom looking at the sunrise filled with remorse. "Sage didn't come home," he thought sadly, remembering their argument. "She knows what happened at the club." He wanted to kick himself for having a moment of weakness and allowing that to happen. "There's no excuse for what happened," Cristian said aloud. "How can I explain myself to her?" He checked his watch. "After I've finished my business at the gallery, I'm going by the loft to try to fix things between us," he reasoned.

He put on his sunglasses and left.

Orderlies wheeled a body bag solemnly into the morgue and placed it on a slab. The toe tag had the inscription: John Doe. "This body was found at the Lake Cemetery," the orderly said. "Volunteers were there to clean up the area of debris and found a shallow grave, and this body was visible from part of an opened coffin." The coroner unzipped the bag. The body had badly decomposed beyond recognition. "We'll need to check dental records to find out this person's identity," he said.

Samuel and Billy arrived at JFK airport hurrying to get their luggage when Billy could see Anna and Daniel headed their way. "Anna!" Billy yelled. They all greeted each other warmly. "It's good to see you again," Anna smiled. "We had just gotten off our flight," Samuel said, "and we were headed back to the loft." "So you felt it too," Daniel said. "Yes," Samuel replied. "Queen V needs us." "Let's go," Anna said. They hailed a taxi. A taxi pulled up and they

decided to ride together, cramming inside.

“I can feel it,” Anna said telepathically to them. “Something is amiss.” “Then you haven’t seen the news,” Samuel said to her telepathically.

Anna looked at him, puzzled. “The painting was returned, but it has brought more attention to Queen V than she ever wanted.” “Cristian didn’t realize that in returning the painting that he would be exposing her even more,” Anna thought, irritated. “Especially since we all know Pearson is waiting for the moment to strike again.” When the cab driver looked in the rear view mirror, he was puzzled that the four passengers didn’t reflect in the mirror. Turning his head to stare at the backseat, he saw them sitting in silence yet making animated gestures as if they were in conversation. “You need to watch the road,” Anna glared at the driver. He turned around quickly in obedience.

“Well, I think Cristian just thought he would return the painting and that would be the end of it,” Billy said resuming the conversation. “He didn’t realize that it would bring more attention.” “Well, he knew that Sage was a private person when he met her,” Anna replied.

“He should’ve never painted that portrait. He should’ve destroyed it when he had the chance instead of returning it like a bloody imbecile.”

Randi dropped Rafael off at the corner across from a diner. She gave him her phone number. “Call me when you’re done,” she said.

“Alright,” he said. He watched her drive off. Walking inside the diner, he looked around for anyone whom he thought could be Mrs. West. An older couple was eating breakfast at the counter, and a young man and woman who looked to be sweethearts sat in the

corner, drinking coffee, wearing matching blue sweaters. He took a seat at the table and ordered a vegetarian sandwich and a glass of water.

The door opened and a woman with short brown hair, a cashmere jacket, and beige dress pants came in looking around anxiously. She caught Rafael's gaze and approached him cautiously. "Are you Rafael Pearson?" she asked breathlessly. "I am," he replied. She breathed a sigh of relief. He stood up and held the chair for her as she sat down. "Thank you," she said. "You're welcome," he replied. He noticed, as she leaned forward, her crucifix necklace. He grinned slightly. "So Mrs. West, how can I help you?" he asked. "Please call me, Jillian," she said. "Okay," he said. "My son has been acting strange," she started. "He's not himself." "Can you explain?" Rafael asked, intrigued.

"He acts...she paused, "he acts like he's...she took another breath. "Robert would always joke with him of living like a vampire," she whispered. Rafael placed his hand to his chin upon her statement. "Now it seems like he's taken it literally," she said. "This happened after he met a strange woman," she said. Rafael grinned broadly. "Is her name Sage?" he asked. "Yes," she said astonished. "How did you know?" "Because I've been tracking her for a long time," he said, realizing that Cristian was now a vampire. "Can you help my son?" she asked.

"Can he be cured of this?" "Do you know where she is?" he asked. She caught herself before answering, not wanting to give away her son's location. "No," she said. "I don't know where she is." "There may be a way to cure your son," he said. "It's not foolproof, and there's some risk involved," he said. "I just want this evil out of his life," she said. "You would do anything for your son, wouldn't you?" he said. "I would walk through the flames of hell to save my son," she said sternly. "Just what I thought" he

replied, smirking.

Cristian walked inside the gallery greeted by the security guard and the director. “Glad you’re back,” said the tanned director. Cristian saw the portrait now enclosed in a glass case.

“You missed a lot during your vacation,” the director said. “The painting disappeared and, just a day ago, reappeared. Cristian nodded his head wryly. “Robert has been missing since the night the painting disappeared, and the police are looking for a person of interest that has been seen here talking to you and Robert.” “Do you know this person’s name?” the director asked. “His name is Rafael Pearson—that’s all I know about him,” Cristian said. “Well, that gives us more to go on,” the director said. “I’ll pass it on to the police.”

A smile formed in the corner of Cristian’s mouth. “Maybe this will get him out of Sage’s hair, and he won’t be able to bother her anymore,” he thought. “Now about the portrait,” the director said. “This painting is unlike anything that’s ever been displayed. It draws you in.” “I’ve heard that before,” Cristian thought. “There’s a mystery about this portrait and the beautiful woman that graces it,” the director continued. “Robert told me, before he disappeared, that she exists.” “I don’t want to involve her,” Cristian protested. “But she is already involved,” the director said, his dark eyes twinkling. “You involved her when you painted her portrait.” Cristian let out a heavy sigh.

“I’ve come up with an idea,” the director said. “To celebrate the return of this masterpiece, I want to throw a masquerade ball. I’ve scheduled it for this Friday at the grand hotel ballroom. I’d like you to bring the inspiration for your portrait to the ball.” Cristian shook his head. “No,” he said firmly. “I won’t put her on display.” “Look, Cristian, I can understand your hesitation,” the director said,

smoothing back his gelled hair, “but frankly you don’t have a choice in this matter. There’s a public demand to see her. Bring her.”

Rafael walked inside the cathedral, filling a flask with holy water and tucking it into his jacket pocket. He walked toward the altar and sat in the pew bowing his head in supplication. “All I ask is that I can finally dispatch this evil and send it to hell. Let me finally end this.” The taxi arrived at the entrance and Anna, Daniel, Billy, and Samuel scampered out and hurriedly opened the door. “Sage!” Anna yelled. “Queen V!” Billy yelled. Lisa, Cody, and John came around the corner. Excitedly, they all greeted each other. “I’m so glad to see you all again,” Lisa said.

Cody and Billy hugged. Anna looked around. “Where’s Sage?” she asked. “She isn’t here,” John said. “What!” Anna exclaimed. “We got in very early this morning and she wasn’t here,” Lisa said. “But there’s a sign that she was here.”

“What is it?” Samuel asked. Lisa took a breath. “Follow me,” she said leading them toward the insulated storage room and showing them the shattered bottle.

“Sage,” Anna said. They all looked at the broken fragments. “Any sign of Cristian?” Samuel asked. “We ain’t seen neither one of them,” Cody replied. “Something has been off with Sage since the day she turned Cristian,” Anna said. “Since the day she tasted human blood,” Samuel said. “She’s in turmoil. I can feel it.”

They heard the sound of the door creaking open and clanging shut. Looking at each other, they all ran into the grand living room to find Sage standing facing the window, her back toward them. Her hair was hanging loose in soft curls, her damp dress clinging to her body, and her complexion chalky.

“Sage,” Anna said. She turned around slowly, her eyes still seeing spots from the sun’s rays. Focusing her eyes, she began to make out the coven’s faces. Smiling, she ran over to them, giving

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them a group hug.

“We missed you, Queen V,” Billy said. “I missed you too,” she said tearfully as she hugged each one individually. “I missed you, my queen,” Samuel said, hugging her. She held on to him tightly while Cristian, who entered the room, silently watched in dismay.

Chapter Thirty~one

Cristian cleared his throat and everyone turned to stare at him. He felt like an outsider interrupting a private moment. “Hey, Cristian.” Billy said greeting him. The others greeted him with a wave or a nod. He looked at Sage awkwardly trying to think of what to say. The others noticed the strain between them. “Sage, I need to speak to you,” he said softly.

“Whatever you have to say to her, you can say in front of all of us.” Anna spat. Cristian stared at her, irritated.

“What is it, Cristian?” Sage asked calmly. “I took the painting back, as you know,” he started, “and I thought that would be the end of it.” “I told you,” Billy said telepathically, looking at Anna, Daniel, and Samuel. Sage braced herself for the inevitable. “But the director wants to hold a celebration of the portrait’s return by having a masquerade ball this Friday.”

He reached out to grab her hand but stopped in mid reach. “He wants me to bring you,” he said sorrowfully, dropping his hand back to his side.

“No!” Anna snapped. “I knew this would happen,” she said angrily. “When you painted her portrait, you exposed her to the whole world even though you knew this was not what she wanted.

Are you that hell-bent for money and fame to sell out the woman you proclaim to love?"

Cristian winced. "Rafael will be there," John said. "Pearson will come look for me no matter where I am," Sage said. "They didn't give me a choice, Sage," Cristian pleaded. "If you have to go, Sage, we're all going with you," Anna said, glaring at Cristian in disgust. "We're not going to stand by like spectators watching the sheep being led to slaughter." The ominous figure standing at the doorway listened silently.

"Can I speak to you alone?" Cristian mumbled. The ominous figure disappeared when they turned the corner and walked down to the doorway. "Sage I...he paused, "I don't know how to explain to you," She lifted her hand to silence him. "I don't want to hear excuses of what happened at the club," she said plainly. He dropped his head in shame knowing that she did in fact see him and Tania at the club. "I...I... he stammered.

"Sometimes we blurt things out in anger that would've never been said under different circumstances," Sage said. "I didn't mean what I said," Cristian said. "I was just frustrated. You did mean them Cristian," she said. "You spoke truth."

"This isn't really the time or place for this conversation," he said knowing, that the others could hear him. "I'm going to speak to my mother about how she treated you the other night, and I'd like to continue this conversation but at my place," he said. He stared at her face, at her lips, wanting to kiss her but knowing that he had no right. With no more to say, he silently turned and went out the door.

Randi decided to stop by the morgue to visit her friend before returning home. She overheard an orderly mention that another

John Doe was brought into the morgue. His body was found in an alley drained of blood, and he also had animal-like slashes on his arm. She noticed, as her friend approached, the serious expression on her freckled face. “What’s happening?” she asked. “This is between us, okay?” the assistant said. “A decomposing body was wheeled in this morning and we couldn’t make out their identity.” Randi nodded her head, intrigued. “Was this body drained of blood like the others?” she asked. “Yes,” her friend replied.

“But that’s not all. After checking the dental records, she looked around and leaned into her ear, “This body is that of Robert Scott, the manager of Cristian West, who went missing weeks ago.” “It is!” Randi said astonished. “Yes. Please don’t tell anyone, because it hasn’t been made official yet.” “Okay,” Randi said. “I won’t tell a soul.”

“Did you notice the tension between them?” Daniel asked. “Yes,” Anna replied. “You couldn’t help but notice the sudden chill that crept in the room when they faced each other.”

“Something obviously happened.” Sage came back into the room while everyone stared at her.

“So how were your trips?” she asked, trying to keep an even tone. “Sage, first I need to ask you about the shattered bottle that we found,” Anna said. “I broke the bottle,” she said, “After I felt a presence of a vampire.” “Pedro,” Lisa said. They rushed down the hallway to his room.

The door was closed, the shroud still covering it. Sage opened the door and they all walked inside. John, running behind trying to catch up with them, looked at all the glowing eyes staring throughout the dark room. It was immaculate and the bed looked as though it wasn’t slept in.

His scent, however, was fresh in the room. “Can you smell it?” Sage asked. “Yes,” they said.

“Like fire and ash,” Anna said. “I can’t smell anything,” John said. “You’re not a vampire,” Lisa said. “All vampires have a scent, and Pedro’s is strong in this room.” “He’s been here,” Samuel said.

“I felt his presence strongly the other night and I know he was here,” Sage said. “But he will not make himself known to me. He’s waiting.” “If he tries to come after us, he’s our enemy, and he’ll be treated as such,” Anna said. “One enemy we can expect to see again is Pearson, thanks to Cristian’s utter stupidity.”

“In all fairness, Anna,” Sage said, “he didn’t know I existed when he painted the portrait, and if I hadn’t been at the gallery the night of its unveiling, he would’ve never seen me. I should’ve never.” She stopped mid sentence. “It’s too late to undo things now,” she said somberly.

The others looked curious at her revelation, wondering what happened between her and Cristian.

Cristian arrived at the doorstep to his parents’ home, taking a breath before ringing the doorbell. The housekeeper answered the door. “Good morning, Mr. West,” she said, opening the door. “Are my parents here?” he asked, peering at her through his sunglasses. “They are,” she said. “Come in.” He walked inside and walked over to a glass table that contained family portraits of him and his parents during happier times. He heard whispering. “Are you sure there’s a cure for it?” he heard his father ask. “Yes. I was told that it could cure him,” his mother said. The housekeeper interrupted their conversation to tell them of Cristian’s arrival.

He heard the sounds of footsteps approaching. “Cristian,” his father said, rushing over to him but stopping short of giving him a hug. “Dad,” he said solemnly. His mother walked over stiffly.

“Son,” she said. “Mom,” he replied. “Is she here?” she asked frowning. “No,” Cristian retorted.

“I didn’t want to subject her to anymore disrespect from you.”

“I wasn’t being rude, Cristian,” she said defensively. “I wasn’t just going to act honky dory around a person so evil.” “Don’t start this up again,” he said, bristling. “I saw it with my own eyes, Cristian,” she yelled. “She’s a...,” she looked at him as if he was a stranger, “you’re a...vampire,” she whispered in disbelief at what she was uttering. “She saved my life,” he protested.

“Don’t think I’m so old I don’t know how vampires are made,” Jillian snapped. “She destroyed you. Why did you lie to us about her?” his father asked, his eyes brimming with tears. “Because I knew you would react this way,” Cristian said. “You’ve got to get away from her,” his mother said. “She’s evil.” “I love her, Mother!” he shouted. “I’m not leaving her, ever.”

“What has happened to you?” she said. “You just go from bad to worse,” she said, shaking her head, “First, you stop coming to church and start that new age crap with all the chanting.” “Mother, Buddhism isn’t the same as new age,” he said. “And I’m not going to argue with you over it,” he snapped, knowing that she was using that as a cover for her argument.

“You’ve broken one of the Ten Commandments,” Jillian yelled.

He sighed, irritated by her stubbornness. “And that wasn’t bad enough—you lose your soul to become a vampire. I know Robert joked about this, but you didn’t have to take it so literally,” she said dumbfounded.

“I made this choice, Mother,” Cristian yelled. “Don’t make me choose between you or Sage, because you won’t like the results,” he warned.

Randi sat at her kitchen table reading the morning newspaper and eating a blueberry muffin while she waited for Rafael to call. Skimming through the pages, she saw a sketch of a man that the

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police are looking for in their investigation of the disappearance of Cristian's manager. The name under the sketch was that of Rafael, named as a person of interest. Also pictured in the article was the director from the gallery. "Why are the police looking for Rafael?" she wondered.

"Am I harboring a possible fugitive?"

Chapter Thirty-two

“**Y**ou don’t mean that!” Jillian exclaimed. “Yes, I do mother,” Cristian replied. “Nothing will tear Sage and me apart.” “So you’re willing to choose eternal damnation for this creature?” she asked. “Stop it, Mother.” He looked at his father with eyes pleading for help. “Cristian,” his father said slowly and deliberately, his eyes focused on him, “I love you, but I’m on your mother’s side on this. If you are choosing this woman—and I use that word lightly—over us, then all I can say is good-bye.” Cristian’s mouth dropped slightly as he stared, stunned at his father. “I can’t and won’t ever accept this relationship. Until you see the light and turn from this darkness, I’m going to have to ask you to leave our home.”

“Very well,” Cristian said defiantly. “That’s how you want it.” He turned toward the door. “Good-bye, Mother and Father.” He opened the door swiftly and walked out, leaving it wide open. Jillian started to run after him, but Christopher held her back. “Let him go,” he said softly. “We have to do this in order to save him.”

Sage and the others walked back into the grand living room after scouring Pedro’s bedroom. “We know Pedro is around somewhere,” Billy said removing the cloth from the furniture. “We’ll just have to

wait to see when he will make his presence known,” Sage said.

“We’ll be ready for him,” Anna said. “I don’t think Pedro will be stupid enough to want to come against us,” Samuel said. “He turned to Pearson,” Lisa said. “Who knows what he’s capable of?” Sage shook her head in uncertainty. “So how were your trips?” she asked, wanting to change the subject. “I had a good homecoming,” Anna smiled, glancing over at Daniel. Billy and Samuel noticed the exchange.

“It was good to revisit the past and put it to rest.” Daniel smiled at her. Sage smiled slyly at them. “Seems you and Daniel had a great time,” she said to Anna telepathically. Anna grinned.

“By going home, I was able to come to terms with my mother’s death,” Lisa said softly. Both Cody and John lowered their heads solemnly.

“John, were you able to see about your father and brother?” Sage asked. He took a deep breath. “I found out that my brother was in the hospital, but he left and my father...,” he paused. “It didn’t go as well as I’d hoped.” Lisa grimaced, remembering his father’s cruelty toward him. Sage nodded her head quietly.

“Samuel’s home is so cool,” Billy blurted out excitedly. Samuel thumped him on the head for his seeming insensitivity. “Hey,” Billy said. “I’m sorry,” he said regretfully to John and Lisa. “It’s okay,” Lisa said. John nodded his head in agreement.

“Samuel’s home is made up like a castle,” Billy continued. “It’s made of stone.” Sage smiled. “My home was turned into a museum,” Samuel said. “And there’s a family portrait that you need to see, Queen V” Billy said, “Especially Samuel’s get-up.” Samuel rolled his eyes.

Sage smiled at Billy’s exuberance.

“It’s still a beautiful place,” Samuel said, “And if you’d like to see it one day, that is fine with me.” Sage flattered by the invitation

replied, "I think I'll take you up on it," she said, looking at him. Billy noticed the eye exchange between them and thought he could see a flush of redness color Samuel's pale cheeks.

"Cody, how did things fare with your visit?" she asked, turning her gaze to him. Cody looked at his cowboy hat, fumbling with it. "I, uh," he cleared his throat, "I went home to find," his lips quivered as he fought back the tears threatening to spill from his eyes. "My father was still alive when I got home," he said rapidly.

Sage and the others gasped.

"He had been bedridden and he held on," he buried his face in his hands, sobbing and unable to speak. "His last wish was to see Cody again before he died," Lisa said, rubbing his back in comfort. "He died, and he asked Cody to burn the house down because he didn't want to be buried."

"I'm sorry Cody," Sage said as his body shook, wracked with pain and grief.

The others gathered around him to comfort him. "We're here for you," Samuel said. "We're family," Billy said. Lisa looked at Sage. "He wanted to end his life by running into the flames," she said telepathically. "I used all my strength to stop him."

Sage noticed John sitting alone in the antique chair, crying. "You're not alone," she said sitting beside him. He looked at her, his eyes bloodshot and puffy. "Thank you," he said, falling into her arms and finally releasing the pain he felt of his father's rejection.

Randi stared, stunned at the police sketch in the newspaper when her phone began to ring. She contemplated whether she should answer it. After the third ring, she answered the phone.

"Hello," she said tentatively. "Randi?" Rafael asked anxiously. "Yes," she said hesitantly. "You said to call you when I was finished with my business," he said. "Yes, I did," she replied. "Well, I'd like

it if you can pick me up,” he said. “I’ll be at the corner where you dropped me off.”

“Okay, I’m on my way,” she said hanging up the phone. “What do I do?” she wondered. “Should I call the police or do my own investigating?” She put on a jacket and grabbed her car keys, heading out the door.

After everyone was spent of their tears, they all retired into their rooms to unpack their luggage. John sat down at the desk with his laptop and began to type incessantly, beginning with the heading: *A Moth to a Flame, A Vampire’s Tale*. “What are you doing?” Lisa asked, peering in at the doorway. “I’m just putting my feelings down into words,” he said.

“Like a diary?” she asked. “Something like that,” he said. She walked over as he minimized the page so she couldn’t see it. “It’s private,” he said. “I wasn’t prying,” she said.

He sighed, knowing what he was about to say would be painful. “Lisa, I like you. A lot.” He stared into her searching eyes, “But there’s no future for us.”

“You think I didn’t know that?” she said, annoyed, trying to conceal her sadness. “I don’t want to be a vampire,” he stammered. They stared at each other for a lingering minute. “Being around Rafael, I heard only the bad stuff about vampires,” he said, turning away from her eyes—that you’re evil bloodsuckers.” “But now that I’ve been around vampires, I realize he was wrong. There is good and bad in everything.”

“Not everything is so black and white,” Lisa said softly.

“There are shades of grey too.” “The blood drinking is disgusting—no offense,” John said. “None taken,” she said. She sighed. “Well, I’ll leave you to your thoughts,” she said heading for the doorway. He nodded, his head his lip trembling slightly.

She walked out the room swallowing hard, her eyes smarting,

taking a breath.

Samuel finished unpacking when Sage stood in the doorway. “You can come in,” he said, his back still turned to her and placing his clothes into the dark-stained oak dresser. She beheld the inviting room of comfort, taking in the quilted oak bed with a canopy and curtains in the corner, Parisian rugs adorning the floor, a bookcase against the wall, and a hanging portrait of a castle with a lake in the background.

She walked inside and shut the door, flicking her hand. He turned around smiling at her. “So, my queen, what’s troubling you?” he asked.

“Samuel, you’ve known me long enough to call me, Sage,” she said. “Okay,” he grinned. “Sage, what is troubling you?” “What happened while we were gone?” “I’ve been consumed with an appetite for human blood,” she said. “Ever since the night I tasted Cristian’s blood. The animal blood isn’t taking the thirst away,” she said.

“That’s why you smashed the bottle?” he asked. She nodded her head. She looked at him, her eyes darting back and forth rapidly. “I killed someone.” He gasped. “It happened a night ago. He was a mugger. He attacked me, and before I knew what I was doing, I was drinking his blood.”

“Sage,” he said, realizing that was the distress that he felt the other night. “I was disgusted by my actions. I gave into the hunger and killed someone. Cristian was angry with me for being emotional about it. He said I shouldn’t be upset that I defended myself.”

“Sage, we all know that you never wanted to drink human blood and wouldn’t have if Cristian wasn’t near death.” “I had no choice,” she said. “But you regret your decision?” he asked.

“Yes,” she confessed, her dark eyes glistening. “I never wanted to turn Cristian into a vampire.”

Chapter Thirty~three

“So what now?” Samuel asked. “There’s nothing I can do to undo it,” Sage replied.

“Unless...,” her voice trailed off. “Don’t even think that Sage,” Samuel said sharply, reading her dark thoughts. “We won’t let that happen. I won’t let that happen.” She looked at Samuel, amused and smiling at his feistiness. “I’m glad that you’re back,” she said, giving him a hug. He held her close, inhaling her scent and resting his hand on her thigh. “You smell like jasmine,” he purred. “You smell like spices...,” she grinned, leaning into his chest, “myrrh.”

“This isn’t the first time I’ve smelled it,” he said. “Even when you’re not in the same room, the scent lingers.”

Their eyes still closed tight, they continued to enjoy each other’s scent. Feeling flushed, she took a breath and, opening her eyes, gazed at his devastating beauty. He was staring at her with intensity, his eyes beaming with an amber glow, taking slow breaths to ease his growing desire. “I’d better go,” she said, feeling vulnerable against his intense stare. “We have much to prepare for.” He nodded, still taking deep breaths, letting her go. She looked back once more before walking out the door. “It’s time I confront, Cristian,” she

thought, wiping her brow.

Randi pulled her car to the curb as Rafael jumped inside with a plastic bag in his hand. “Thanks,” he said. She nodded her head silently. “So did you get your supplies?” she asked.

“Yes,” he replied. Rafael noticed that they weren’t driving the same route as before. “Where are we going?” he asked. “I’m taking a different way home,” she said. She pulled to the side of the road opposite a police station, taking the key out of the ignition. “What’s going on?” he asked. “That’s what I’d like to know,” she said staring at him. “I want the truth. Did you have anything to do with the disappearance of Mr. West’s manager?” “No,” he said, perplexed.

“Then why are the police looking for you as a person of interest?” she asked. “What!” he exclaimed. “The police have been searching for you,” she continued. “Seems you had been hanging around the gallery and you spoke to this Robert guy. That’s not all,” she said. “His body was found today. He’s dead.” Rafael swallowed hard.

“So I’m going to ask you again: Did you have anything to do with his disappearance?” she asked. “I didn’t,” he said. “I had nothing to do with his disappearance. A vampire was behind it,” he said. “How do you know?” she asked. “Because I found his body!” he yelled. “I was at the cemetery waiting for the vampire queen to show up, but this thing showed up,” he said. “It wasn’t human. I found Robert’s body and I got out of there. His body was found?” he asked again, surprised.

“Yes,” Randi said. “It wasn’t made official yet.” “Then I’ll need to get out of town after I kill the vampire queen,” he said. “You can go to the police station and clear this up,” she said. “No!” he yelled. “I used Robert’s credit card to pay for the supplies,” he said. “It makes me look like I’m guilty even though I’m not.” He looked

at her fearfully. "Can you help me? Please."

Jillian hung up the phone after talking to the director of the art gallery. "Friday, the gallery will be hosting a masquerade ball in honor of the portrait's return at the grand hotel," she said to Christopher who was staring at framed pictures of Cristian when he was a little boy. In one photo, he was dressed in a baseball uniform; in another he was dressed as a superhero for Halloween; in the last photo, he was dressed as a boy scout.

"This might be our only chance to try to save our son. This doctor that this guy Rafael told you about," he said. "We need more information about him and if he'll be able to help." "I have an idea," Jillian said, wringing her hands.

"This might kill quite a few birds with one stone." She picked up the phone and dialed a number. "Rafael, this is Jillian. I have an idea that I think might help us both."

Anna looked around in the grand living room for Sage. "Where's Sage?" she asked. "She probably left to talk to Cristian," Billy said. "That's where she went," Samuel said with an uncharacteristic huskiness to his voice. Billy stared at him, curious. "They need to fix whatever happened between them," Samuel said, staring at Billy from the corner of his eye. Anna shrugged her shoulders. "Love sometimes isn't always enough nor does it conquer all," she said. "You're such a skeptic," Samuel said. "Not so," Anna replied. "I just don't look at the world through rose-colored glasses, that's all," she said. "I see things for what they are. Anyway," she sighed, "we need to get costumes for this masquerade ball. Who's coming with me?"

"Lisa is with Cody and I saw John sleeping at his desk," Daniel said. "Then you'll do," she said, staring at the three men. They

looked at each other worriedly. “I think I have some great costumes in mind for you,” she said biting her lip. “Somehow I don’t think I’m going to like it,” Samuel frowned.

Cristian sat in silence on the couch waiting for Sage’s arrival. “She’s not coming,” he thought glumly, getting up from the seat, when he heard her calling him. “Cristian,” she said standing behind him, her voice resonating against the wall. He got up, staring at her approaching cautiously. “So what happened with your parents?” she asked, keeping a distance between them.

“My parents still think you’re evil and they will never accept our relationship,” he said. She shrugged. “I’m not surprised after how your mother reacted toward me, and I don’t blame her.” “When she looks at me she sees someone who destroyed her son’s life.” “You saved my life,” he protested. “I turned you into the undead, Cristian,” she said. “I took your life. That’s what she sees.” She looked into the brown pools of his eyes so deeply she felt as though she could swim in them. “I never wanted to cause problems between you or your parents. That was never my intention.”

“I know that,” he said quietly. “I wanted to become a vampire, remember?” “Yes,” she sighed with resignation for that fateful decision. “Sage, don’t regret your decision,” he whispered, sensing her thoughts. “Cristian, I warned you of what being a vampire entails. It’s not fun and games. You give up the life you knew.”

“Anna was frosty toward me,” he said, shifting his feet awkwardly. “She blames me for bringing attention to you.” “I told her that when you painted the portrait, you didn’t know I existed,” she said pointedly, “and you still wouldn’t know if I hadn’t come to the gallery that night.” “Don’t say that,” he said.

“It’s true, Cristian.” “If I hadn’t come to the gallery that night, we would’ve never met.” “That night changed my life,” he said.

“And who’s to say that our paths wouldn’t have crossed? What if you were somewhere overseas, and you saw an article about the portrait that would’ve brought you to New York—our paths still would’ve crossed.” He walked slowly toward her. “You can’t fight fate, Sage,” he said. “We belong together.” She glared at him, remembering the image she saw in her mind. “You weren’t thinking about me while you were being serviced at the nightclub,” she snarled.

He could feel her eyes staring into him like daggers. “Sage, it was a...”

“A mistake, right!” she shouted sarcastically, interrupting him. “I don’t want to hear it, Cristian. Who was she?” “She was someone I used to date in the past,” he said ashamedly.

“Seems she still knew where to find you,” she said. “Don’t let this incident tear us apart,” he said. She began to laugh. “Incident,” she said, incredulous. “That was more than just an incident.”

“Look we both had lovers in the past before we found each other,” he stammered. “You even told me that you only slept with vampires before me.”

“That isn’t the same, Cristian!” she yelled. “I didn’t have relations with another vampire since I’ve been with you. But you...” she stopped.

“You let another woman...” she gestured, staring downwards toward his pelvis. “I have to go,” she said, disgusted. “Sage, please let’s talk this out,” he said. “I can’t look at you right now, Cristian,” she said, vanishing.

Police tape depicting a crime scene surrounded the area in the cemetery where the decomposing body of Cristian’s manager was found. A lone figure stood over the open grave peering down. “On Friday, there will be a masquerade ball held in honor of the queen’s portrait,” the figure said. “There’s no way I’m going to miss out on

all the action,” he said, lifting a clawed finger to his face. “All the torment and pain I went through wasn’t for naught,” he said.

“Robert paid the price, and Rafael only got a taste of what’s to come. He will see what pain feels like.” The figure turned out to be Pedro in the flesh staring into the grave. “Now that I’m finally back in my physical form, I will make myself known to the queen and to the others.”

“Especially that artist,” he frowned, his eyes enflamed. “He has to pay for staking me, and I look forward to returning the favor.”

Chapter Thirty~four

Lisa sat on a timber chair and watched Cody, who had his face covered with his cowboy hat, lying on his bed made of unpolished hickory. She stared at the display of cowboy hats of different sizes and colors hanging on a hat rack thinking of what to say. “Cody,” she said softly.

He lifted up the tip of the hat and gazed at her. “Please don’t shut me out,” she said on the brink of tears. “What happened with you and John?” he asked, knowing the source of her pain.

“Nothing,” she said, not wanting to let on to her disappointment of his rejection. “I know you liked him,” he said, staring at her. “I did, but...,” she glanced down at the floor, “it would’ve never worked. He’s human and I’m a vampire.”

“Come here,” he said, motioning for her to join him on his bed. She sighed heavily and crawled onto the bed, needing his comfort. “Rest your head on my shoulders,” he said. She smiled slightly and laid her head on his shoulders. “It’s okay,” he said. “You don’t have to put up a wall around me. You can let it out.” She buried her head in his shoulders and began to weep. “I’m here, Lisa,” he whispered, caressing her hair tenderly.

“I’m not going anywhere.”

Anna, Daniel, Billy, and Samuel walked into the department store while the customers stared at the gothic foursome curiously. Walking directly over to the costume section, they began to peruse through the varying costumes. “I saw the way you looked at Queen V,” Billy said teasingly to Samuel. “She’s beautiful—what can I say?” Samuel said. “Somehow I think there’s more to the story than you’re letting on dude,” Billy said. Samuel didn’t answer and continued to look through the costumes.

“Here, Anna,” Daniel said, showing her a Snow White costume. “No way,” Anna said laughing. “Besides, I can’t reflect in a mirror to see how fair I am,” she joked.

Daniel stared her. “I can tell you how fair you are,” he said, his voice taking a serious tone. “You have a sparkle in your eyes when you’re excited about something.

They change colors like a kaleidoscope. Sometimes they’re blue as sapphire. Other times, they are crimson as hot lava, green as an emerald, and yellow as the sun.” Anna stood still, struck by his words. “Your skin is smooth as satin and white as pearls, and your hair black as a stallion yet soft as silk. It shimmers like a sparkling diamond in the light.” He stared at her lips. “Your lips are red as rubies and your kisses hotter than a sultry summer’s night. You are beautiful Anna.” Her breath in her throat caught speechless as she stared at him moved.

“Wow!” Billy said, startling them misty-eyed.

“That was beautiful, dude.” Samuel smiled at them. “Very poetic,” he said. “Spoken like someone who was touched by love.”

Anna swallowed hard still unable to speak.

Randi and Rafael entered her apartment. “So how did you hide

the credit card?” she asked, setting her purse aside. “It was hidden in my shoes,” he said remembering how John hid his silver stake in his shoes. “I still think you need to speak to the police, and then they won’t be looking for you anymore,” she said. “I was at the cemetery—my fingerprints will be on his body,” he said. His cell phone began to vibrate. He picked it up and saw that Jillian had called. He listened to the voicemail. “Excellent,” he said, hanging the phone up. “What is it?” Randi asked.

“I asked you if you’ll help me,” he said. “Will you?” “I’m involved now whether I like it or not,” she said. “What is it?” “Friday, the gallery will be hosting a masquerade ball in honor of the return of the portrait, and I’m sure that artist will be bringing the vampire.”

“Will you help to distract her coven while I finish her off?” “Her coven?” she asked. “Yes, she has seven vampires that live with her and they are inseparable. If you can help me, then this will be all over.”

Samuel stared at a rock star costume while Billy and Daniel joked over a vampire costume when Anna approached him. “What did Sage tell you?” she asked telepathically. “I saw her go to your room.” He put the costume back and faced her. “She told me that she killed someone,” he replied. “Her thirst for human blood consumed her to the point that animal blood isn’t satisfying the thirst anymore.”

“She killed someone...,” Anna replied. “I know she was devastated.”

“She was,” Samuel said. “Cristian was upset with her being emotional about it, and they had a misunderstanding.”

“No wonder there’s been so much tension between them,” Anna said. “And she feels guilt for turning him.”

“I know,” Samuel said. “She really didn’t want to turn him, but

when he was injured, she had no choice. The guilt is eating her alive.”

“Not only that,” Anna said, “We haven’t seen her feed since we’ve been back.” “No,” Samuel said in agreement. “We haven’t.”

“We both love her,” Anna said with a fleeting glance to signal her knowledge of his obvious fondness for her. “We can’t let her give in to the guilt.” She looked over at Billy and Daniel fussing over the cloak.

“Anyway, I’ve chosen our costumes,” she said.

Samuel winced. “Don’t look at me like that,” she said. “It’s perfect.” “I think you’ll be pleasantly surprised by the response.”

She called Daniel and Billy over so they could pay for the purchases.

Cristian wandered around his loft hours after Sage left, replaying her words in his mind. “I have to win back her trust,” he said. “She loves me and I love her. We can overcome this.”

He remembered the first time they made love. Not only the intensity of the encounter but also how frightened she was of giving in to her urge to bite him. “Sage wanted to spare me of this life that she detests,” he thought. “She didn’t want me to live in the same torment. But what she doesn’t understand is I wanted this, so I don’t feel guilt or torment. How can I make her see that she doesn’t have to feel guilty for being what she is,” he said, “and that we can overcome this roadblock between us?”

He closed his eyes imagining her bedroom and found himself inside her room as though he was dreaming, yet he was awake. She was lying on her bed clasping the old newspaper clipping in her hands. Her eyes were closed, but he wasn’t sure if she was asleep.

“Sage,” he whispered. She didn’t respond. He leaned over her and swept his fingers across her cheek. “I love you, Sage,” he said. “I want us to go back to how it was when we fell in love with each other.”

He knelt at her side and watched her lying still like a corpse. “You’re so beautiful,” he said. “After the ball Friday, I’m going to use all my efforts to win you back. You and I will leave for Egypt and be together forever. Mark my words, sweetheart,” he said. “Nothing will separate us.”

“So this is the plan,” Randi said. “Yes, if all goes well,” Rafael said, sharpening the wooden stakes with his new silver hunting knife. “I must admit I’m a bit nervous about this,” she said. “What if something goes wrong?” “It shouldn’t, but a word of warning to you...,” he said. “Vampires are very strong and they will rip out your arms if you get too close. I’ve had my share of battles with them, and they don’t have supernatural strength for nothing.” “The vampire queen?” she asked. “She knows how to get inside your head. Don’t let her,” he said.

“She uses power of suggestion to bend people to her will; she can shift her form.” “Shift her form?” Randi asked. “How?” “She can change into mist, fog, an animal, or insect.” “Oh my God!” she said, astonished. “She has other powers, but those are the ones I’ve seen,” he said. She swallowed. “And we know she can command the weather too,” she said. “But if things go as planned, you probably won’t have to worry about getting too close to her,” he said. “I guess we need to go shop for costumes then” she said wearily. “Thank you for believing me” he said. “It means a lot to me.” “You’re welcome,” she said quietly.

Sage in her dreamlike state remembered meeting Cristian at the furniture store vividly. The way he looked at her...her heartbeat quickening as they stared into each other’s eyes. Then she saw him lying dead on the floor. The next procession of images was from the night at the gallery. Cristian was standing at the podium smiling as he unveiled the portrait that changed both their lives.

She trembled remembering the night he nearly died, forcing her

to make the decision to turn him against her wishes, along with the guilt that she has carried ever since and the hunger it awakened in her for human blood.

Suddenly, she saw herself in a structure that was ablaze. Flames were licking at her feet. She could hear screams as she saw her skin begin to prickle and blister; the pain unlike anything she had ever experienced. The scorching heat was so severe it singed her eyebrows and eyelashes. Her lungs ached as she struggled for breath.

She couldn't see anything but flames in front of her. As the screams became increasingly louder, she realized that the sounds were coming from her. Sage woke up with a start, her body drenched in sweat. The nightmare felt real, as if she was actually experiencing it. Looking around terrified, she realized she was in her bedroom, but the smell of smoke and burning flesh still lingered, making her wonder if she had a glimpse of hell and of her fate.

Chapter Thirty~five

Anna, Daniel, Billy, and Samuel arrived at the loft arguing over the costumes she'd selected. "It fits your personality," Anna said. "My personality," Samuel scoffed. "It looks like something you'd wear," she said grinning. "I happen to agree with her," Billy chimed in. "Bollocks," Samuel said rolling his eyes. "Wait until the others see their costumes," Daniel replied. "That gives me an idea," Billy said grabbing one of the plastic bags and heading toward John's bedroom. Anna shook her head. Billy peered into the room watching John sleeping on the desk, drooling. He slowly crept over to him, kneeling at his side, nudging him.

Samuel checked his watch. "Any minute now," he said dryly. Minutes later, a hair-raising shriek resonated throughout the hallways. Anna's shoulders shook from laughing quietly. Lisa and Cody flew out into the hallway. "What's going on?" she asked. "Billy scaring John as usual," Daniel said chuckling. "He shouldn't do that," she said annoyed. "It's just for fun—don't get your knickers in a twist," Anna said. "Besides, it's funny." "Is Sage around?" she asked, becoming serious. "She might be resting in her room," Cody said. Anna glanced at Samuel, requesting his presence. She knocked on the door, calling Sage's name. When she didn't get a response,

she opened the door. The room was empty. “I think I know where she is,” she said.

Sage stood on the rooftop looking down to the streets replaying the nightmare in her mind. “Sage,” Anna said, standing behind her. She turned around slowly. “I thought I’d find you here,” Anna said. “Samuel told me.” “He told you that I killed someone,” Sage said. “Sage you can’t feel guilty for the dead.” “It’s maddening.” “I know that was the point of contention between you and Cristian,” she said, “but what precipitated it?” Sage inhaled deeply. “It was Cristian’s mother,” she said exhaling. “She is a devout Christian, and she could see my evil nature. Needless to say, she disapproves of our relationship. Just like Jonathan Thomas disapproved of me,” she thought.

“She doesn’t understand that Cristian would’ve died had you not turned him?” Anna said. “No. She sees me as the evil that destroyed her son.”

“I’m sorry, Sage.”

“That, along with my guilt for giving into my hunger, has put a wedge between us,” Sage said. Anna approached her, grabbing her hand. “Is that all?” she asked, sensing there was more than what was said. She shook her head. “Cristian had a moment of weakness with an ex-lover.”

“What do you mean ‘a moment of weakness?’” “Did he sleep with another woman?” Anna asked.

“Yes...no,” Sage stammered. “He let her service him at a nightclub.” “You mean,” Anna gestured with her finger, pointing downward. “At a public place?” she said, incredulous. “That blasted dirty dog. What are you going to do?” she asked.

“I don’t know, Anna,” Sage said. “I can’t look at him right now.”

Anna rubbed her shoulder compassionately.

Cristian arrived at the gallery without stopping to speak to the security guard as he normally did. “What’s wrong with him?” he heard the security guard mutter. Sighing, he stopped and stared at the portrait, looking into Sage’s eyes staring back at him. The portrait seemed lifelike as if she would step out of the painting any second. Then he remembered the look of pain in her eyes as she told him that she couldn’t look at him because of his indiscretion.

“How did things change so quickly,” he wondered. “Tomorrow night, things will go back to the way it was,” he mumbled. “It has to.” Walking into his office, he set up the easel to start a new painting. After adjusting the fixture and canvas, he dipped his paintbrush into the various colors, painting erratically in an attempt to release the tension and frustration he felt through abstract images, seeing Sage’s face, his parents’ faces, and the coven’s faces. He was so concentrated on the painting that he didn’t hear the knock at the door. “Cristian!” the director said loudly. “Open the door.”

He stopped painting, grabbed a towel, and opened the door.

“The police just called,” the director said. “Robert’s body was found. He’s dead.” His fears now confirmed, Cristian knew that his manager met a bad end when he saw the spots of blood on the floor the night Pedro attacked him. “The police are still looking for that Rafael person,” the director said. “I hope they can get that guy before it gets worse,” he said.

“I need to tell Sage,” Cristian thought with hopes that things would fare better than their last conversation.

“Don’t think I didn’t notice that you haven’t been feeding,” Anna said staring at Sage’s ashen skin. “You have to feed, Sage.” “The animal blood isn’t quenching my thirst,” Sage said.

“It consumes me. It’s unbearable.” “There’s one way to alleviate

it,” Anna said. “You can decide to consume human blood even though you hate it.”

“No,” Sage said fretfully. “I just need to get a handle on the hunger.”

“Well, starving yourself isn’t an option,” Anna said handing her a bottle of animal blood. “I won’t be satisfied until I see you drink it,” she said tapping her foot.

“Very well,” Sage said, opening the bottle and taking a gulp. She grimaced from the bitter taste.

Anna smiled faintly. “You know I care about you. We all do,” she said, “and I won’t let anything happen to you.”

“Understand.” Sage smiled. “I understand.” They hugged.

Samuel appeared from the shadow of the doorway, approaching them as they refrained from embracing. “She’s right, Sage,” he said.

“Sage,” Anna said teasingly. She squeezed her hand. “We’ll talk later,” she said telepathically. She looked at Samuel, smirking, leaving them alone.

“We’re only concerned about you, Sage,” he said. “I don’t like seeing you so melancholy.”

“How much did you hear?” she asked. “I wasn’t trying to eavesdrop,” he said flustered, “but I heard everything.” “I’m sorry.” He took her hand gently. “Just a word of advice,” he said. “I believe if something is meant to be, it will happen, and no one and nothing can stop it. Those of us who are lucky to find true love should cherish it and not let anything come between them.”

Sage stared deeply into his eyes as she regarded his words. “Sometimes we don’t realize...,” she stopped. “Go on,” he said urgently. “It’s...”

“Cristian is here,” Anna announced interrupting them, “He wants to speak to you.” Samuel let go of her hand. “Maybe we can

finish our talk later,” Sage said.

They followed her into the grand living room where Billy, Daniel, Cody, and Lisa were waiting for them. Cristian got up from the antique chair. “What is it Cristian?” Sage asked.

“It’s Robert my manager,” Cristian said. “He’s dead. He was murdered. The police are looking for Pearson.”

The coven all stared at each other with intrigue. “He’s going to be at the ball tomorrow night,” Sage said. “He won’t pass up an opportunity to kill me.”

“Well he won’t succeed,” Cristian said. “Not if I can help it.” “Whatever he’s planning we need to outsmart him.”

“Rafael always has a backup plan,” John said entering the room, startling them. “He always looks for other options. Keep in mind he may not be working alone.”

Randi and Rafael arrived at her apartment after shopping for costumes. “Security will probably be really tight at the hotel,” Randi said. “As long as I can complete my goal, I don’t care,” Rafael replied. “Are you sure he will cooperate?” “You’re kidding me,” Randi said. “He lives for this stuff.” “I’m just concerned about the vampires’ strength and there’s your broken arm.” “Let me worry about that,” Rafael said. “This is what I’ve trained for.”

“Tomorrow is it,” she said. He sat the bag down and awkwardly caressed her cheek. “You’ve done so much already,” he said. “How can I ever thank you?” “Just make sure that nothing goes wrong,” she said. He stared at her lips, feeling a desire to press his against hers. “Yeah,” he said, swallowing hard. Silence fell between them as they both continued to stare at each other’s lips while he stroked her face. Impulsively, he grabbed her and pulled her into a passionate kiss.

Chapter Thirty~six

Rafael abruptly broke the kiss, embarrassed. “I’m sorry,” he said. “For what?” she said breathlessly. “We both wanted it.” He took her hands carefully. “Randi, this isn’t the kind of occupation for a long-lasting relationship,” he said. “It wouldn’t be right for me to take advantage of your kindness and hospitality.” “But...,” she started. “Randi,” he sighed, “I like you, I really do, but being a vampire hunter is my duty. It is my calling. I can’t let anything come between that and me.” “I can’t give you what you what.” She took a breath. His cell phone began to ring. “I have to answer it,” he said. She nodded her head while he answered the phone.

“How do you know that Robert was murdered?” Anna asked. “Because the night Pedro attacked me, I saw droplets of blood on the floor at the gallery,” Cristian said. “Robert had called me to meet him there, but when I arrived, he was nowhere to be found. Someone killed him.”

“It could’ve been either Pedro or Pearson,” Sage said. “There’s no way to be sure.” “Robert was helping Pearson and maybe he turned on him.”

“I’m sure that Rafael found someone else to assist him by now,” John said. “He was still recovering from a concussion and a broken

arm, and I'm sure he needed new supplies. I've seen how his mind works. If one plan fails, he always has another."

"Then we should have a back up plan as well," Sage said. "If you don't mind, I'd like to stay the night," Cristian said. "It would give me peace of mind to be near you."

Anna cast a glance at Samuel who gave no hint of a reaction. "Please let me do this," he pleaded.

"Okay," she said. "I just need to go pack a few things and I'll be back," he said. Sage nodded her head silently.

Once Cristian exited the room, Anna grabbed Sage's arm. "We need to talk," she said.

They went to the rooftop to talk privately. "How do you feel about Cristian staying the night?" she asked pacing back and forth. "Maybe we can talk this time," Sage said. "I should hear him out at least."

"I have to ask you about Samuel," Anna said. "I remember when I introduced him to you that a bolt of lightning struck. It was very apparent the attraction between you two."

"Yes," Sage acknowledged. "It knocked the wind out of me. Now, mind you, I had only been consumed with thoughts of Cristian, and I thought I would never feel anything again. But at that moment when I met Samuel, something stirred in me, and I couldn't deny it."

"So you spent a night together?" Anna asked, arching her eyebrow.

"Yes," Sage admitted with a smile, remembering how they held each other close trembling, coming down from heightened peaks of pleasure after their encounter. "I never thought you would act on it," Anna said.

"We kept it between the two of us," Sage replied.

"You both did a great job of concealing it," Anna said.

“He’s a fine man, besides being very beautiful.”

“He is,” Sage said.

“He’s been respectful of my relationship with Cristian.” “How do you feel about Samuel?” Anna asked. “Samuel is special,” Sage said, her eyes sparkling.

“He’s a great friend and confidant. I trust him completely, as I trust you.”

“But I have been in love with Cristian for so long that that was all I could see.” “Perhaps you have been in love with the memory of Cristian for so long that you didn’t think that you could give your heart to anyone,” Anna said, “and that is why it has come full circle.”

“Sometimes we can’t move forward with our lives until we put the past to rest.”

Sage considered her statement. “Enough talk about me,” she said. Anna chuckled, knowing she wanted to change the topic. “What about you and Daniel?” “We spent a night together,” “A night and a day—we lost track of time” she chuckled. “It was indescribable. As far as continuing a relationship, I don’t know,” she said. “I don’t believe that love conquers all—no offense.”

“Maybe the thought of falling in love frightens you,” Sage said.

“I just want to have fun right now,” Anna murmured, remembering Daniel’s inspiring words at the department store with a shudder. No one had ever spoken to her in such a moving way.

“Fun, like the kind you had with Billy?” Sage grinned. “Billy is untamable,” Anna said, remembering how both were unable to move after their animalistic encounter. “He was absolutely wild.”

“I was surprised that you didn’t take Samuel as a lover,” Sage said.

“No, not after I saw the spark between you,” Anna said, “Out of the coven, Billy and Daniel are the only ones I’ve been with.”

“I’ve only spent the night with Samuel,” Sage said. “I really didn’t have that many vampire lovers.”

“Speaking of potential lovers, Lisa and John seemed to come to a standstill,” Anna said.

“I’ve noticed,” Sage replied. “He’s really shy; maybe he’ll outgrow it.” “Maybe he doesn’t want to get involved with a vampire,” Anna shrugged.

“If he waits too long, he’ll miss out, and someone else will come along and sweep her off her feet.”

“Maybe she’s already met that person,” Sage said.

“Cody,” Anna said. “I thought she and Pedro would end up together, because they were practically joined at the hip.” But as we know, Pedro was obsessed with you.”

“Good thing he never knew of you and Samuel.” “Can you imagine what he would’ve done?”

“Pedro,” Sage said. “We will need to deal with him once he makes his presence known.”

“I wonder if he is back in his physical form yet?” Anna said.

“When I felt his presence, I couldn’t see him,” Sage said. “Maybe he hasn’t completely regenerated yet.”

“We’ll know in due time” Anna said.

“That was Jillian West,” Rafael said, hanging up the phone. “We were going over the plan for tomorrow night.” Randi silently nodded her head and walked over to the refrigerator to fix a sandwich. “Are you hungry?” she asked.

“Yes,” he said, “but I only eat a vegetarian diet.”

“That’s fine,” she said. He walked over to her, tucking his hands in his pockets. “About earlier,” he began. “I’m a big girl, Rafael,” she said. “At least you told the truth and didn’t let it get too out of hand. Other men in your position wouldn’t have done that. But after tomorrow night, we’ll readdress the issue,” she grinned.

He began to laugh. Her phone began to ring. She answered it. “Hi,” she said excitedly, signaling to Rafael that it was her doctor friend returning her call.

“I have a request to ask you,” she said. “It has to do with vampires.”

Anna and Sage walked back into the grand living room to rejoin the others after having their girl talk. “Daniel, I need to speak to you,” Anna said with urgency, grabbing his hand as they left the room. “Fun, huh?” Sage thought as Anna flashed a grin. “Sure, she wants to talk,” Billy joked. “We won’t see them again for the rest of the night.” “Lisa, if you don’t mind I’d like your company tonight,” Cody asked. “Sure,” she said. “I don’t mind.” She said goodnight to Sage, glancing over at John as she left the room.

“Well, uh, goodnight,” John said with a wave walking out the room.

“Goodnight, Queen V,” Billy said, yelling for John to wait for him, leaving Sage and Samuel alone.

“Seems John and Billy are becoming fast friends,” Sage said. “When he’s not always scaring him,” Samuel joked. He stared at her longingly as the room became painfully silent. “Goodnight, Sage,” he said as he began to leave the room.

“Samuel, wait,” Sage said. “I’d like to continue our conversation from earlier.”

“I think you and Cristian need to resolve the differences between you,” he said gruffly. Sage blinked, taken aback by his firm tone.

“I want to see you happy and smiling,” he said, softening his voice. He sighed, caressing her face. “We’ll speak again when the time is right, but tonight isn’t the time.” “Goodnight,” he said with reluctance.

“What if you’re wrong?” she thought, watching him leave with a foreboding feeling that the next time may be too late.

Chapter Thirty~seven

Sage looked around the empty room after everyone left thinking of Samuel's words and her earlier conversation with Anna. Walking out the room and down the narrow hallway, she stopped by John's room, listening to him and Billy talk about videogames and how Billy was an ace at playing Pac-Man.

Chuckling, she continued down the hallway, walking past the door to Cody's room. She heard him speak in hushed tones about growing up on the farm while Lisa listened quietly. Turning the corner and walking down another hallway, she stopped at the door to Samuel's room. She started to knock but decided against it, while on the opposite side of the door, Samuel leaned against it holding the doorknob, sensing her. Sage continued down the hallway, stopping at the door to Pedro's room. "Somehow I feel our paths will cross very soon," she thought, "But whether as a friend or foe remains to be seen."

She continued down the hallway and up the stairs until she reached her bedroom, disrobing and changing into her nightgown.

Suddenly, a loud bang came from Daniel's room, followed by a gasp, a yelp, and a scream. Sage couldn't determine if the screams were a call for help as she deliberated what to do.

The screams became louder as she realized that Anna and Daniel were in the throes of zealous lovemaking. “My goodness!” she thought, bewildered. “I hope I didn’t sound like that. I can just imagine what the others might be thinking.” Just when she thought the shrill screams would cease, it reached an even higher pitch than she thought was possible. “Oh my!” Sage said, sitting down, covering her gaping mouth and imagining Billy collapsed on the floor crying from laughter as the sounds quieted down to whimpers.

She looked up to see Cristian standing at the doorway looking amused. “Someone is having a good time,” he said.

“Anna was never the bashful type,” Sage said. “She’s always emboldened.”

“I can recall the first time we made love,” Cristian said. “You’re not the quiet type either.”

“I seem to recall you yelling my name yourself,” she joked. He sat beside her on the bed. “It was better than anything I had ever experienced,” he said. She sighed softly.

“I long to touch you again,” he whispered, “to see the fire in your eyes and how you bite your lip in anticipation.” She shivered, remembering sweet kisses on her neck and fingers tracing the length of her back. She closed her eyes as she imagined her hands twirling through spools of dark hair and opening her mouth welcoming soft lips. She opened her eyes to find Samuel staring back at her.

She tensed. “Sage,” Cristian said, staring at her waiting for a response. She looked at him, dazed.

“I asked if I can lie beside you,” he said. “We don’t have to undress.” “That’s fine,” she said, startled by her wayward thoughts, letting him lie her down gently while he took her hand.

“Remember when we went to the Empire State Building?” he asked. “Yes,” she said quietly. “I was so happy to see you thrilled

by the view.” “That day was wonderful.” “It was,” she said, tearing up at remembering how happy she’d felt, and for just that moment, she could forget she was a vampire. He leaned on his elbow. “I want that back, Sage,” he said. “I promise you I will work to regain your trust.”

“We both have to work on our trust of each other,” she said. “I was too hard on you,” he said. “I was frustrated because of my parents’ reaction toward you, and then I could sense the guilt you feel for turning me.”

“Sage,” he said, “I’m not sorry for being a vampire, and I don’t want you to feel guilt over it.”

“That’s just it, Cristian,” she said. “You wanted this life.” “I didn’t.”

“Somehow, Sage, we have to get past this, or it will continue to cause problems between us.”

She thought of Samuel’s advice telling her if something is destined, it would happen regardless of the circumstances.

“Just imagine, in one hundred years, we can look back at this as an afterthought,” he said. “Wouldn’t that be nice?” Sage smiled wryly. “It would,” she said. “But that won’t happen as long as Pearson is out there waiting for the moment to kill me simply because I’m a vampire whether I wanted it or not,” she thought.

He leaned over and kissed her lightly on her forehead.

Randi came from her bedroom wearing her hospital scrubs. “Where are you going?” Rafael asked.

“I have to work the late shift tonight,” she said. She handed him a notepad with the hospital number written down. “In case something comes up,” she said. “Try to stay out of trouble,” she said sarcastically as she grabbed her car keys and walked out the door. He listened as she started her car and drove off.

Once he was alone, Rafael took out his arsenal of supplies,

staring at the holy water, bow and arrows, silver hunting knife, and sharpened wooden stakes. “I wish I hadn’t lost the silver stake I always use,” he thought, disappointed. His mind flashed to the night at the lair. He was peering into the darkened room staring at glowing eyes staring back at him. Before he could grab his stake, he was grabbed forcefully and shoved against the wall.

The holy water flew out of his hands, and the stake in his jacket pocket fell out. He tried to feel his way around crawling on the floor, but he had no idea of what was in front of him. He heard the sounds of heavy breathing as he was hoisted from his ankles into the air. The next thing he remembered was waking up at the hospital. “Whatever that was, it had to have been a vampire,” he thought. “Could it have been the same shrouded entity I saw at the cemetery?” he wondered.

“All I know is tomorrow night is the appointed time for me to complete my destiny and fulfill the promise I made to my father. The vampire queen will be eliminated, and I will savor this long-deserved victory.”

Chapter Thirty-eight

The aroma of freshly ground coffee brewing in the coffee maker stirred Rafael awake. Sitting up rubbing his eyes, he looked around. “Randi!” he yelled. “Right here,” she said smiling at him, wearing a robe. “When did you get in?” he asked. “Around seven this morning,” she said. “What time is it now?” he asked. “It’s twelve past noon,” she replied. “I better get up,” he said, casting the blankets aside. “Did you have somewhere you needed to be today?” she asked.

“No, everything is set for tonight, so all I have to do is prepare myself mentally and physically for battle.” “I’ll fix breakfast while you’re showering,” she said. “Thanks,” he replied while he went into the bathroom and shut the door. She took a cautious breath that all would go well.

Samuel walked inside the living room, taking a seat when Lisa and Cody joined him, both looking very tired. “You look the way I feel,” Samuel said referring to the loud screams the night before. “At least it quieted down...eventually,” Lisa said while Samuel poured himself a glass of animal blood. Cody chuckled. John soon joined them, still yawning. Samuel looked away laughing. John didn’t say anything and began to eat the fruit laid out on the tray. Billy

walked in next with his hand over his mouth, snickering. Samuel nearly spewed out the animal blood he was drinking, watching him. Cristian was next to walk inside, holding a bottle of animal blood in his hands. Sage came in behind him wearing a snug-fitting burgundy gown. “So how did everyone sleep?” she asked innocently.

Everyone laughed for a minute.

Cristian poured the blood into two goblets and handed one to Sage. “Thank you,” she said taking the goblet, their fingers brushing against each other. “You’re welcome.”

She glanced over at Samuel, who was staring at her while she took a sip.

Anna and Daniel walked inside the room lost in each other’s gazes before they realized that everyone was staring at them. Billy was shaking from laughter. “Sage,” Anna grinned sheepishly. “How is everyone?” she asked. “Tired,” Lisa said. “We didn’t get much rest from all the racket you two were making. Let alone the screams that would’ve wakened the dead.”

Anna swallowed and looked down, petrified. Daniel grinned. “Sorry,” they murmured. They took a seat quietly. Sage chuckled. “There’s nothing wrong with having pleasure and happiness where you can find it,” she said. “I’ve been thinking about our time together and how much you all mean to me.” She looked at each one of them, implanting their faces into her memory lingering on Anna and Samuel. “We’ve traveled many places, and you have been my family.” “Thank you,” she said with resignation.

“You make it sound as though we won’t be together anymore,” Anna said alarmed. “I’m not going anywhere.” “Neither am I,” Samuel said.

Sage sighed. “I don’t know what will happen after tonight,” she said, “but I didn’t want this day to go by without letting you know that I love you.”

Samuel's eyes welled up.

The others also had a look of sadness and unease in their eyes.

"We love you," Anna said unnerved by the finality of what she was hearing. "Anna's right," Cristian said taking her hand. "Nothing will happen tonight, because we know what to expect. We know that Pearson will be there, and he will not harm a hair on your body. So, no negative thoughts," he said.

Sage nodded her head, trying to be cheerful even though she still felt a sense of dread within her. "I want you all to go ahead of me tonight," she said. "I will see you at the hotel."

"I think we should go together," Anna said.

"I'm the anticipated guest of the night," Sage said looking at Cristian. "They'll be waiting for me, and I don't want to bring any attention to you. That way you can find out who is helping Pearson."

Anna started to protest, but Sage silenced her. "Please don't argue with me over this," she said. Anna shook her head, agitated.

Randi came out of her bedroom dressed as Florence Nightingale, while Rafael sat Indian style meditating and breathing, clearing out his thoughts in preparation for warfare. After he was finished breathing, he opened his eyes. "Nice costume," he said grinning. "Thank you," she said.

"So when are you getting dressed? I want to see you in your costume," she said. "Soon, I have time," he said. He stood up and she noticed a jagged scar running down the side of his back.

"How did you get that?" she asked. "Vampire scratched me with his razor-sharp claws," he said. "He paid for it by losing his head."

"Oh," Randi said. "You told me that you staked the vampire queen once," she said. "How is she still alive?"

"The stake missed her heart," Rafael said. "I missed it by a few inches. I don't plan on missing tonight," he said. She stared at him,

biting her lip. "In case I...in case we," she stammered. "What?" he asked. "In case..." she stomped her foot, irritated at herself. "What is it?" he asked. "Action is better than words in this case," she said, grabbing him and kissing him ardently. She felt him wrap his arms around her tightly, kissing her back.

Daniel walked into the living room dressed like Count Dracula with a long, flowing black cape. "Nice," Lisa said, dressed like Annie Oakley twirling two guns in her hands and placing them inside their holsters. "Looks like you," Daniel said, grinning. "Me," Lisa quipped.

Cody came into the room dressed like Billy the Kid. "I figure you would both dress like outlaws," Daniel said. "But I would've thought you'd dress more like Bonnie and Clyde."

"Very funny," Cody said sarcastically.

Billy walked in next dressed like a pirate with a patch over his eye and bandana on his head. "What do you know, a pirate?" Lisa said teasingly. "Argh," Billy growled. "Shiver me timbers."

They all laughed. "Hey, I like your costume," Billy said to Cody, "My namesake." Cody chuckled. Samuel peaked into the doorway, attempting to conceal his costume. "C'mon, Samuel, I've been waiting to see this," Billy said. He heard Samuel snort.

"C'mon Samuel," the others joined in. Samuel walked into the room, shoulders hung low, dressed like a musketeer with a feather hat on his head. Billy howled. "I knew you'd laugh," Samuel said scowling. "It looks like you," Billy said. "You look good, seriously," he said. "You do," Lisa agreed. "Leggings," Samuel griped, "Leggings." "Would you have rather dressed like an elf instead, mate?" Billy said. "No," Samuel said, horrified. "Then stop complaining," Billy grinned. "You look good," Daniel said.

John came into the room red-faced, dressed in a toga with a laurel crown on his head. "Wow!" Lisa said, "You look like Julius Caesar."

She could tell that Billy helped him apply eyeliner and a touch of lipstick to his mouth. “Can we switch costumes?” John groaned.

Cody covered his face with his cowboy hat, laughing. “You look fine, man,” Billy said laughing. “He’s really enjoying this,” Samuel remarked. “I think the costumes compliment everyone,” Billy said.

“Anna made a great selection. I’m looking forward to seeing her costume,” Lisa said. “She wouldn’t let me see it,” Daniel said. “I’m just as curious as you.” “Then wait no more,” Anna said walking into the room, astonishing everyone.

She was dressed as a dominatrix wearing a spiked dog collar and stiletto boots with her eyes a smoky black and her lips cherry red. Cody gulped. John’s eyes looked as though they would bulge out of his eye sockets. Billy and Samuel’s mouths dropped. Daniel’s throat went dry and he was unable to speak.

“You were never one for subtlety,” Lisa said smiling.

“Tonight, we will do all we can to protect Sage,” Anna said. “Be on the lookout for Pearson. I want this to be over after tonight, and I never want to hear Pearson’s name again.”

Randi and Rafael fell on the couch kissing passionately, his hands roaming across her body as she moaned against him. She began to unbuckle his pants when he stopped her.

“What!” she exclaimed.

“I can’t do this Randi,” he said frustrated. “I can’t have any distractions, remember?” “You’re so tense,” she said. “You need a release.” “I’ll release my tension when I kill the vampire,” he said. “You don’t know the adrenaline rush you feel after dispatching a vampire. There’s nothing like it.” Randi bit her tongue, wanting to say something. “Besides,” he said. “After tonight, all bets are off.”

“I’m holding you to your word,” she said. “Then we’ll see if dispatching a vampire is just as good as....” He silenced her with a kiss. “That’s something to look forward to,” he said getting up

to take a cold shower. “I was so close,” she thought, snapping her finger. “So close.”

Sage took out the newspaper clipping, staring at it before tucking it inside her dress. Her dress was black and gold like the one in the painting, and her hair upswept with sapphire beads woven in between. Cristian knocked at the door. “May I come in?” he asked. “Sure,” she said.

He was dressed like a prince wearing a white suit trimmed with gold thread and a white cape.

She gasped. “You look really handsome,” she said. “You look beautiful,” he said, staring at her in awe. “It looks as though you stepped right out of the painting.” She took a breath.

“Everything will be alright,” he said. He extended his hand. “Ready?” he asked. She nodded her head. “Ready,” she said taking his hand. “For whatever is about to happen tonight,” she thought, closing the door behind her.

Chapter Thirty-nine

The limo carrying the coven arrived at the hotel as they stared at the crowd heading inside and the media and paparazzi swarming the place. “Queen V won’t like this,” Lisa said. “That blasted Cristian,” Anna mumbled under her breath. They took out their Venetian masks and placed them over their faces. “Okay,” Anna said, “We have to make sure that Pearson gets nowhere near Sage.” She took a breath. “Ready?” she asked. Everyone nodded their heads.

“Let’s do this,” Daniel said. They stepped out of the limo and headed inside. Another limo pulled aside the hotel. The door opened and Jillian and Christopher dressed as a count and countess stepped out onto the curb. Covering their faces quickly with carnival eye masks, they walked inside.

Once inside the lobby, Billy took John aside to adjust his toga, while women and men ogled a perturbed Samuel. “That’s the price he pays for being so pretty,” Billy joked. John stared at him, feeling his face getting hot.

“At one time, I thought you and Samuel were...uh,” he stuttered. “I know,” Billy said, smirking smugly. “Because I wear makeup, and he’s a pretty boy.” “But, no, we’re best friends.” “Sorry,” John

blushed. “Nothing to apologize for,” Billy grinned broadly.

Hotel guests gasped, stared, and whispered at Anna’s attire, while she ignored them, looking for any signs of Rafael. She didn’t notice Jillian or Christopher who briskly walked by looking for Cristian. Billy stared at their costumes, thinking briefly about the portrait at Samuel’s ancestral home.

A sign in the lobby informed the bustling crowd that the ball was in the ballroom on the seventh floor. The coven huddled into the elevator. “No Pearson yet,” Cody said. “I know,” Anna said worriedly.

Just as the elevator closed, Pedro dressed as Zorro arrived in the lobby.

“Are you ready?” Randi yelled from the bathroom door as she readjusted her costume.

“Just about,” Rafael said. “We need to get going so I can find a place to park,” she said. “I’m hurrying,” he said. He opened the door and stepped out. He was dressed as a Viking warrior with his hunting knife tucked inside his kilt and bow and arrows hidden under his cloak. “Just one more thing,” she said taking a few strands of his hair and braiding them. “Better,” she said. “You look good.”

“I do?” he said.

“Yes, you do,” she said. She grinned wickedly. “You’re not by chance going commando are you?” she asked. “No,” he said weakly. After an awkward moment, he took a deep breath. “Okay, let’s go, he said, I’m ready to hunt me some vampires.” “Aren’t you going to wear a mask?” she asked. “No,” he said plainly. “Alright,” she said, chuckling. She grabbed a surgical facemask, her jacket, and her car keys. “May this night be fruitful,” she said as they went out the door.

The coven stepped out the elevator and headed toward the

ballroom. They could hear strings from a harp playing as they made their way toward the double doors.

Inside the spacious room, people in various costumes were chatting and eating hors d'oeuvres. Crystal chandeliers that sparkled like gemstone waterfalls hung from the ceiling. A banner hung over the door that read: The woman behind Beauty Mysterium will be revealed for the first time tonight.

Next to the door, a replica painting of Sage sat on a canvas. Samuel, who had briefly taken off his mask, fought off advances from women and men. Anna continued to scan the crowd with her eyes looking for Rafael. Jillian and Christopher walked inside the ballroom, both stopping to look at the replica painting. Jillian muttered under her breath, frowning. She looked around for signs of Cristian while Christopher snacked.

John accepted a glass of white wine offered from a waiter and took a sip.

Pedro walked inside the ballroom and noticed Lisa. Smiling, he eased over to her and brushed her shoulder lightly with his hand. Turning around, she didn't see anyone. She sniffed the air. "I smell Pedro's scent," she said to Cody.

"I better tell Anna," he said, getting her attention and speaking to her telepathically.

She looked over at Samuel, Daniel, and Billy, letting them know that Pedro was somewhere in the crowd. "Great," Billy said. "We have two worries now. Pedro and Pearson." Samuel noticed apprehensively that more photographers were making their way into the ballroom.

Randi pulled up to the side of the curb. "I'm going to have to drop you off here," she said. "It's going to be a headache trying to find a place to park."

“I’ll wait for you inside,” he said, jumping out the car. He watched her pull off. Noticing the security, he lowered his head and walked inside quickly. Looking around in the lobby, he eased over to a few people whispering in conversation.

“It’s rumored the woman in the painting will make her debut tonight,” a man said. “She’s the most famous woman in the world,” another said. “I’m looking forward to seeing her in the flesh,” a woman said. “This will be a memorable night.”

“Even more memorable when I kill the vampire,” Rafael thought, chuckling. Deciding to see if his prey had arrived, he glanced at the sign and got on the elevator. John, feeling a bit queasy after consuming the wine, left the ballroom to find a restroom. Just as he walked past the elevator, the door opened and Rafael stepped out. “Excuse me,” John asked a waiter. “Can you tell me where the men’s room is?” “Is that John?” Rafael wondered. “It sounds like him.”

Staring at him curiously, Rafael decided to follow him into the restroom, chuckling at him dragging his sandals.

Pedro stopped by the replica painting, staring at it. “I know this isn’t what you wanted, Queen V,” he thought. “I tried to alleviate that by taking the painting. I wanted to destroy it for you.”

Feeling the sensation of eyes watching him like a spotlight shining on him, Pedro decided to take cover, not ready to reveal his presence yet.

John walked inside the men’s room and splashed water on his face. While he reached for some paper towels to dry his face, Rafael walked inside the restroom, leaned against the faucet, and watched him with his arms folded.

John wiped his eyes, smudging some of the eyeliner and turned to throw the towel into the garbage. “Hi, John, long time, no see,” Rafael said, startling him. “Rafael,” John stuttered. “You remember

me,” Rafael said sarcastically. “You were supposed to lead the vampire to me, but instead you went off with them.” He leaned forward, “So how are your new friends?” he taunted. “How are the vampires treating you?”

“Better than you did,” John snapped. “He talks back,” Rafael said feigning incredulity. “You were wrong about them,” John said. “They aren’t evil.” “You were fooled,” Rafael said.

“Vampires are not to be trusted. They are evil.”

“They’re evil to you because they are different.” John said, “Because you never took the time to get to know a vampire.” “Oh, save me the virtues of vampires,” Rafael said. “You took one look at the vampire queen, and you were captivated by her beauty, and you fell for the okie doke.” John stared at him with newfound strength. After enduring his father’s rejection, he would never again let anyone hurt him with cruel words. “You don’t scare me.” “So you grew a backbone,” Rafael said clapping his hands. “Good for you.” “Now get out of my way.

I won’t let you hurt her,” John said.

“You won’t,” Rafael quipped. “Just try and stop me,” he said.

John lunged for him. “You won’t hurt her, I said.”

“Where’s John?” Lisa asked. “He was here a minute ago.”

“There’s so many people here, it’s hard to know where everyone is,” Cody said. “Queen V and Cristian will probably be here soon,” Billy said. “I know, and that means Pearson is here somewhere too,” Daniel said.

The crystal chandeliers flickered and the director, dressed as a king of diamonds, called for everyone’s attention. “May I have your attention please,” he said into a microphone. The crowd quieted down. “Thank you for being here,” he said. “Tonight is a night of revelations, and I know we are all awaiting the lady of the hour.” Samuel glanced over at Anna who looked at Billy.

Randi drove around in blocks still trying to find a parking space when her cell phone began to ring. “It’s the hospital,” she said frustrated. She picked up the phone. “Hello,” she said exasperated. “Now!” she exclaimed. “I’m on my way. Sorry Rafael,” she said as she drove away, her tires screeching.

Cristian and Sage arrived toward the back of the hotel. “I knew there would be a lot of media attention, so I arranged for us to come in through the back entrance,” he said. “Thank you,” she replied. He took his porcelain and gold Venetian mask and put it on. She looked at her feather mask for a few fleeting minutes before placing it on. Once they entered the building, they took a freight elevator up to the seventh floor and walked through the kitchen while Sage looked at the workers scurrying around preparing various meals with fancy decorations. She felt on edge with each step.

“Sage,” Cristian said, staring back at her. “I’m alright,” she said unconvincingly. They walked to a side door while the director was still speaking.

“This painting has become an enigma of itself,” the director said. “It has an appeal to it that draws you in. You look at the face of this mysterious woman and you want to know her story. Who is she? Where did she come from?”

The photographers moved forward with their cameras prepared to get the best shot.

“The artist who painted this portrait said he saw her image in his mind, and it was so unforgettable that he had to paint it. Cristian,” the director said. “We’re ready to see the painting in the flesh.” Cristian looked at Sage who appeared stoic. “It’ll be okay,” he said. “I’ll go out first.” He opened the side door and walked out into the hushed room, all eyes on him.

Anna, Samuel, Billy, Daniel, Lisa, Cody, and Pedro, who was

standing toward the back, looked on anxiously. “This is your hour,” the director said in his ear while he removed his mask. “Don’t disappoint us.”

Jillian and Christopher stared at Cristian tensely while he took the microphone in his hand.

“Sometimes there are no words for exquisite beauty,” he said. “And in this case, actions speak best for me.” Rafael walked inside the doorway unseen while Cristian spoke, preparing to reach for his bow and arrow.

“My love,” Cristian said. Sage took a deep breath and opened the door. She walked slowly toward him, her face still covered by the mask and feeling every stare cast her way. He looked at her reassuringly as she turned and faced the crowd. Taking a hand to the mask, she removed it to gasps and whispers. The coven looked on worriedly as the photographers prepared to snap their cameras.

Chapter Forty

John began to awaken, trying to decipher his surroundings. Sitting up, he felt a sharp pain shoot through his head. He'd taken a blow to the head, knocking him out when he fought Rafael. Focusing his eyes, he looked around at the mop bucket beside him, cleansers on a shelf, a mop and broom setting against the wall. He realized he was in a storage room. Getting up, his knees wobbled and he leaned against the wall to get his bearings. "I need to get out of here to warn the others," he thought. He tried to open the door, but it was locked. "Hey," he said beating against the door with his fists. "Hey, somebody let me out," he yelled.

Rafael grabbed an arrow and reached for his bow while everyone watched Sage, mesmerized. Security personnel looked over in his direction just as he grabbed the bow from under his cloak. "Hey!" the security person yelled. "Hey, you!" The crowd turned, startled to see whom the security guard was yelling at, and bystanders tackled Rafael to the floor, the impact snapping both the bow and arrows. "Over here!" a man yelled. "Get him," the director said, "that's the man the police are looking for." Cristian grabbed Sage during the commotion to get her out of the ballroom. Photographers stepped in front of her, trying to take her picture, but the cameras

malfunctioned. Using her kinetic power, the fuses short-circuited, and the lights in the whole hotel went out. Chaos ensued as the partygoers tried to run out the room nearly trampling each other.

Jillian and Christopher looked around and saw glowing eyes as the coven made their way out of room. “Did you see that!” she exclaimed.

“Stay calm, everyone,” the director said. “The lights will be turned back on in any minute.” Cristian and Sage ran out the side door that they came in and headed for the kitchen. “Cristian!” his mother yelled behind him. He turned around and his parents gasped, staring at his glowing eyes.

“Let us help you,” she said.

“What are you doing here, Mother?” he said. “I couldn’t stay away, because I knew she would bring you trouble,” Jillian replied.

Anna came out the door looking at them sternly. “Anna, get Sage out of here,” Cristian said. “I have something I have to do.”

Cristian stared at Sage as she and Anna ran around the corner.

Rafael bit a patron’s arm that was holding him down. They screamed, releasing him; he got up and ran out the door, trying to see in the darkness, while he was shoved back and forth from the fleeing hotel guests. John continued to beat on the door, yelling, when suddenly the door was torn off its hinges. Lisa peered inside. “John,” she said. “It’s Rafael,” he said. “He’s here.” “I know, I’m trying to find the others so we can get out of here.” “Let’s go,” John said.

In the darkness, she could see Cody looking through the crowd. “Cody,” Lisa yelled. They embraced. “I’m glad to see you.” “Have you seen the others?” “No we were separated during all the chaos,” he said. “We need to find Queen V and get out of here,” she said. “You’re telling me!” Cody replied.

She threw her head back and saw Billy on the ceiling looking

down at them grinning and waving. “Why don’t you join me?” he said. Cody looked up and chuckled. “I should’ve figured you’d find a way around the crowd,” he said.

“Where’s Samuel and Daniel?” John asked. “I don’t know yet,” Billy said. “The roof,” Lisa said. “Let’s check there.” Billy climbed down, while Lisa grabbed John, and they ran into the stairwell and flew up the steps to the roof. “

What took you so long?” Daniel said. Samuel was standing beside him. “This was the best place to come after the blackout,” he said. “Anna?” Daniel asked. “I saw her headed toward the side door where Cristian and Queen V went,” Cody said.

“Rafael is here,” John said. “I had a run-in with him.” “We need to go find them before he does—” he continued, “he had murder in his eyes.” “Maybe we should split up in groups,” Daniel said. “Lisa you, Cody, and John will look for Queen V and Anna; and me, Billy, and Samuel, we’ll look for Pearson.”

“Sounds good to me,” Lisa said. “Then we’ll meet up here afterwards” he said. “That’s agreeable,” John said. “As long as we work together as a team, nothing can go wrong,” Daniel said.

“I don’t have time for arguments, Mother,” Cristian said barely, concealing his irritation. “You need to go home.” “I can’t do that, Son,” she said. The generators kicked in, causing the lights to flicker on, and Cristian’s eyes squinted with the sudden change.

He looked at his parents. “I made my choice, Mother and Father,” Cristian said. “I chose Sage, and my life is with her. You gave me no choice when you refused to accept her in my life. I love her, and that will never change.”

“Don’t be so sure, Son,” his mother said, pursing her lips. “What is that supposed to mean?” “Nothing in life is certain,” Jillian said. “That’s what I mean.”

“Good-bye, Mother,” Cristian said, turning his back and walking

away. Christopher placed his arm around Jillian as she fought back the tears.

Cristian walked around the corner and was about to take the stairwell when he was grabbed forcefully from behind and shoved into an empty dining area. He attempted to turn around but was thrown across a row of tables as they broke and splintered underneath him.

Disoriented, he looked up and saw a masked man dressed like Zorro standing over him. “Pedro,” he mumbled, surprised. Pedro lifted off his mask and stared at him triumphantly. “Yes, the one and only,” he snarled. “You thought I was gone for good when you staked me, didn’t you!”

Cristian started to stand up, but Pedro stepped on his chest, holding him down.” “Sage told me you would regenerate—I just thought it wouldn’t be this soon.”

“I had a score to settle,” Pedro said, smirking. “You staked me, and I couldn’t let you get away with it. I had to consume blood from wherever I could find it. From rats, skunks, rabbits, dogs, cats, the drunkard on the streets, leeches, and let me tell, you it wasn’t pleasant. But I was determined to get back to my physical form.” Having heard enough, Cristian grabbed Pedro’s leg and flipped him to the floor with a boom. “I see she turned you,” Pedro sneered. “Yes,” Cristian grinned smugly. “I’m just as powerful as she is.”

“Prove it,” Pedro said, kicking him with all his strength, slamming him against the wall.

Anna and Sage went down a flight of steps. “Anna, I think we should go to the roof,” Sage said. “That way, we can fly away.” “You’re right,” Anna said. They began to turn around to go back when they ran into Rafael. He stopped at the foot of the steps and looked at the two women, grinning like a child on Christmas morning opening his gifts. “Finally,” he said. His bow and arrow

broken from being tackled to the floor, he only had his wooden stakes, his hunting knife, and the holy water in his arsenal to use. He took out his silver hunting knife. "I've waited for this day," he said, inching forward. "I'm going to enjoy this thoroughly."

Anna stepped in front of Sage, shielding her.

"Anna," Sage said. Anna stared at Rafael, her eyes blacker than coal. "You have to come through me," she warned. "A challenge—" he glowered, "my favorite." "Just so you know, I never lose." Anna smirked. He swung the hunting knife, and Anna kicked him in the groin, sending him hurling against the wall. "We have no choice, but to keep going downward," Anna said as she and Sage ran down the steps.

Suddenly, glass shattered around them as Rafael threw an extra bottle of holy water at them, some of it splashing on the women and causing them to flinch. Anna stretched out her hand, and the shattered bottle was restored to its original state, empty of its contents. "I learned that from an old teacher," Anna said to a stunned Sage.

Pedro pressed Cristian into the indentation in the wall, punching him. Cristian shoved him backwards as he climbed out of the hole. Pedro swung again, missing, while Cristian countered with a punch in the gut. Growing angrier, Pedro grabbed Cristian by the neck, while Cristian grabbed him by the neck, both locked in a chokehold. They continued to squeeze each other's neck tighter when suddenly Samuel and Daniel, struggling to tear them apart while their hands were still gripped tightly around the other's neck, grabbed them.

"Both of you, stop this!" Samuel said angrily, his eyes crimson. "The last thing Sage needs is you two still fighting over her when her life is in danger." Both men released their grips from the other's throat sorrowfully. Daniel, Billy, and Samuel stared at Pedro as he took a breath.

“We have to cut this reunion short in order to find the others,” Samuel said. Cristian nodded his head silently as they left the battered room.

Rafael slid down the railing, jumping in front of the women, and in one swift move, swung the hunting knife, striking Anna underneath her spiked dog collar before she could react. Blood spurted like a geyser everywhere as Sage screamed in horror. Anna wordlessly grabbed her throat trying to suppress the bleeding. She looked at a paralyzed Sage as she began to lose consciousness collapsing to the floor. Sage screamed Anna’s name as her eyes stilled.

Consumed with wrath like a sudden tempest, she looked at Rafael who was watching Anna lying on the floor.

He saw from the corner of his eye her advancing toward him, her eyes ablaze. He swung the hunting knife while she ducked her head to block it, and with a strong force of her hand, hewed it with the broken tip, embedding itself into his forehead. He screamed in agony, staggering and gripping his head as it began to seep with blood while he tried to pull the tip out. She hastily grabbed his neck about to snap it when someone appeared holding a crucifix, repelling her.

Reluctantly, she released her strong grip, stumbling back while Rafael grabbed his neck, wheezing and thanking the unseen person for their help.

“The stairs,” John said as they walked down a hallway. “I heard noises.” Lisa grabbed John as they flew down the stairwell, stopping abruptly at the horrifying sight before them. Anna was lying on the floor with a puddle of blood oozing underneath her. “Anna!” Lisa screamed.

Her eyes were still with no movement. “No!” Cody yelled. They heard the thunderous sounds of footsteps clomping down the stairs

as Samuel, Daniel, Billy, Cristian, and Pedro found them huddled around a motionless Anna.

Samuel noticed some of the sapphire beads from Sage's hair scattered on the stairs. He imagined them being strewn about during a struggle.

"Where's Sage?" Cristian asked with a growing knot in his stomach. "She's not here," John said. "Rafael must've found them."

"And Anna put her life on the line trying to protect her," Daniel said tearing up. Pedro raced down the steps past a rigid Lisa and Cody for any signs of Rafael or Sage.

"This is my fault," Cristian said, grimacing. "I should've never brought her here." He noticed something shiny on the floor beside Anna. It was a necklace with a crucifix. He realized he'd seen his mother wear the necklace. He also knew she never went anywhere without it.

"What is my mother's necklace doing beside Anna?" he wondered, falling to his knees. "Could Pearson have not only taken Sage but my parents too?" he thought, his eyes smarting. A visibly shaken Samuel tore up the steps flying to the roof, looking out toward the city in anguish knowing that Sage was in trouble. "Sage!" he yelled. "Sage!"

Cristian, reeling with guilt could only imagine the emotions coursing through Sage's mind of her worst nightmare come true.

Part Three

The Fate of Cristian and Sage

Chapter Forty~one

John stared in awe at the elegantly dressed throng gathered in the large golden chamber for the formal ceremony. Along the walls were symbols written in hieroglyphs of every name of each royal and jars decorated with gazelles. Staring up at the ceiling, he noticed a large painting of a woman. She had dark hair and dark eyes with a gold headdress on her head. Her smile was captivating. He wondered if she was Queen Amerie that Rafael had once mentioned to him. The crowd hushed as Sage made her appearance and walked solemnly toward the center of the room. Behind her were two golden thrones. One was bejeweled with emeralds and the other decorated with diamonds. She walked up the ivory steps and faced the crowd. She was dressed in black and gold with a long train bundled at her feet. In her hand, she held a golden scepter, and on her head, she wore a gold and sapphire crown with her long hair pulled back into a twist with loose curls. Her eyes were luminous and her lips glistening. The coven stood to her right.

Lisa and Anna wore black strapless evening gowns, while the men wore tuxedos. Cody still wore his cowboy hat with his suit, while Billy wore his ruffled shirt under his jacket. Pedro wore a mariachi outfit with a white shirt, a black string tie, black pants, jacket, and a

red cummerbund with a sombrero on his head. Pedro's love, Maria, also wore a mariachi outfit with a white blouse, a full-length black skirt, jacket, bow tie, red sash, and a wide-brimmed hat.

John noticed to the left that there was a long hallway called the Halls of Nayah that held paintings along its grand walls of all the royals of the Nayah family. He told himself he would go and take a better look at it once the ceremony was over. Standing beside Sage was a vampire with jewels in his hair and painted eyes who Anna said held her as a baby. He presented a gold and emerald crown to her that she would soon place on her chosen mate.

The thick grand doors made of black onyx and gold opened as the king made his way down the passageway leading to the steps where he would kneel to be crowned. Sage smiled warmly as he approached. John could hear the sounds of a harp playing in the distance. He recalled how just a few months ago, he didn't think this day would happen and the likelihood seemed impossible with the events that took place. As he watched the king kneel before the queen, John recollected those events in his mind, starting with the night of Sage's disappearance.

Everyone stared at an unresponsive Anna while Daniel knelt at her side. "It was obviously a silver hunting knife," Billy said, "that's the only thing that can do damage to a vampire."

"She wasn't staked in heart; she just needs blood, doesn't she?" John asked. "Yes," Lisa replied solemnly. "She needs human blood," he said. "Yes," she answered. "Well then, it's a no-brainer," he said, extending his wrist. "What are you doing, John?" Lisa asked. "He's going to let Anna drink from him," Cody said.

"No," Lisa said anxiously.

"I have to do something instead of feeling helpless," John said. Billy nudged his shoulder. "There's something you need to know about a vampire's kiss." "It awakens," he paused, "you feel sensations

akin to lovemaking. It's very intimate." "It's a risk I'm willing to take," John said. "I'll need your help," he said holding out his arm. "I can't do this myself."

Billy sighed and with his sharp claws slit John's wrist as he leaned over Anna and held his hand over her partially opened mouth. "C'mon," John said as the blood dripped from his wrist like a slow-leaking faucet. Anna started to respond, extending her tongue and licking his wrist, tasting his blood. Her bloodlust awakened, she grabbed hold of his wrist tightly and began to drink. John could feel the sensation of the blood draining from his body as Anna continued to drink. "Anna," Lisa said fretfully. "You're taking too much."

Anna continued to drink harder as the others looked on intently.

Cristian remembered an injured Sage drinking from his wrist when she needed human blood as he watched.

"Anna!" Lisa yelled. John's skin turned pasty white as she released her grip and he collapsed to the floor. "John!" Lisa screamed. Anna twitched and turned as the wound in her neck healed. She sat up, adjusting her eyes. Lisa grabbed John who lay unconscious, a look of rapture on his face. "We need to get him to a hospital," she said.

"Sage," Anna said hoarsely looking around. "She's gone," Cristian said staring at her forlorn. "We have to find her," Anna said anxiously, getting up. "Pearson has her," Cody said.

While Anna got up, Cristian picked up the crucifix, grimacing as it burned his hand, leaving an imprint while he placed it quickly inside his pocket.

Anna wrung her fingers through her hair in irritation, remembering Rafael's ambush. "No," she said. "No."

Pedro ran back up the stairs. "There's no sign of Queen V

or Pearson,” he said. Anna’s eyes welled up. “I’ve failed her,” she said. “No,” Cristian said. “Don’t blame yourself. It is I who let her down.”

“She knew,” Anna said. “That’s why she sounded as though she was saying good-bye to us. She knew.” They heard the sounds of footsteps racing down the stairs. “We need to get going now,” Anna said.

“What about the blood?” Daniel said pointing to the puddle on the stairs. “We’ll have to leave it,” Anna said. “We have no choice.” “It may work in our favor since the police were looking for Pearson.” “He has Sage,” Cristian said, “he doesn’t care.”

They flew up to the roof where they saw Samuel still looking out toward the city. He turned to face them, his eyes tear-streaked. “We have to find her,” he said stricken. “I know,” Anna said softly.

“I’m taking John to the hospital,” Lisa said carrying him over her shoulder. “Not without me,” Cody said. “I’m going with you,” Billy said. In seconds, they were gone.

Anna closed her eyes in concentration, trying to speak to Sage telepathically. “Nothing,” she said. “I’ve tried too,” Samuel said. “He could’ve taken her anywhere,” Daniel said. “We have to do something,” Cristian said. “Time is against us.” “He’s going to torture her,” Samuel said. “He wants her to feel pain until she begs him to kill her.” Cristian stared at Samuel in distress.

“How do you know?” he asked. “Because I can feel it,” Samuel said clenching his teeth. “Damn him,” Anna said, her eyes brimming like a cup about to overflow. She stared at Pedro who was looking out toward the skyline downcast. “Don’t think that just because of this diversion that you don’t have to answer for your treachery,” she said, approaching him with veiled lips.

“When we find Queen V, you will answer to her.” “That’s right

Anna,” Pedro said firmly. “I only answer to her.” Anna snorted and walked away.

Lisa, cradling John, accompanied with Billy and Cody arrived at the emergency entrance to the hospital. “We need some help here,” she yelled as the nurses ran over and placed John on a gurney. One of the nurses turned out to be Randi who was on duty. “What happened?” she asked. “He was cut,” Lisa said. “It was an accident.” Randi looked at their costumes. “You came from the masquerade ball?” she asked. “Yes,” Cody said. “We’ve been getting a lot of patients from the hotel,” Randi said. “There was a blackout and some of the patients were trampled?” she asked questioningly.

Lisa, Cody, and Billy nodded their heads. “He lost a lot of blood,” Lisa said staring at John. “We’ll take care of him,” Randi said. “What’s his name?” “John,” Lisa replied. “John Fisher.” Randi furrowed her eyebrow remembering when Rafael told her about his assistant named John who went off with the vampires.

“John, you said?” she asked, staring at their colorless complexions. “Yes,” Lisa said staring at her. “Please help him.” “We will,” Randi said, looking at them guardedly before leaving as John was wheeled away.

“This night is a nightmare,” Lisa said. “We have to find Queen V, and John has to be okay.” “He will be,” Cody said, rubbing her shoulders. Billy continued to stare at Randi with curiosity. A few seconds later, Randi came out of the emergency room approaching them. “Your friend is going to need a blood transfusion,” she said. “After that, we’ll monitor his condition for any changes.”

“So he’ll be okay?” Lisa asked. “He should pull through,” Randi replied. “The wound was superficial.” “How did he get hurt?” she asked, fishing for information. “Don’t know,” Cody said. “When the blackout occurred there was mass chaos, so we don’t know how the injury happened,” he lied.

“I see,” Randi said. “We’ll wait,” Lisa said. Randi nodded her head and walked away to talk to the other nurses.

They walked up to his room, peeking through the curtains to watch the transfusion. The blood going from the IV into John’s arm transfixed the threesome. Billy, staring hungrily at the blood, began to sing a chorus from a song that popped into his mind to squelch his bloodlust. Cody noticed Randi watching them from the corner of his eye.

Anna, Cristian, Daniel, Samuel, and Pedro arrived at the loft in silence. All lost in their thoughts of the events that took place at the hotel and of the agony that Sage may be experiencing at Rafael’s hands. Daniel reached over to take Anna’s hand, but she brushed his hand away.

“I need to know if Pearson kidnapped my parents,” Cristian said, expressing his thoughts aloud. “We find my parents, we find Sage.”

“How do you know?” Samuel said.

“Didn’t John say that Pearson always has a backup plan?” “What if this is just another ploy to trick us.” “All I do know is that both Sage and my parents are missing,” Cristian snapped. “Well, arguing isn’t going to bring either back,” Anna said sternly. “We need extra hands.”

“We can’t go to the police and say ‘Can you help us find a kidnapped vampire?’” “We need help from Sage’s subjects,” she said. “We need to call a meeting and summon every vampire in New York, and beyond if need be.” “With Sage missing, each second lost is against us.” “We know he hasn’t killed her yet because we would feel it.” “But Pearson won’t wait long before he completes his task, which is all the more reason we need to find Sage, and soon.”

Chapter Forty~two

“**W**hy are you always barking orders like you’re in charge!” Cristian demanded. “I’ve noticed that you do this a lot.” “I’m not barking orders, as you put it,” Anna said haughtily. “I’m doing what Sage would do if she were in the same position.” “She’s in this position because of...,” he stopped. “Because of me—that’s what you were going to say isn’t it!” Anna said, her eyes stinging with angry tears. “Wait a minute,” Daniel said, jumping to her defense. “This isn’t Anna’s fault.” “You were the last person that was with her,” Cristian said accusingly.

“Stop it,” Daniel said, balling up his fist.

“We’re not doing Sage any good fighting with each other,” Samuel said with disgust.

“That’s another thing,” Cristian said, eyeing Samuel. “Since when did you address Sage by her name and not by her title?”

“Since she asked me to,” Samuel replied hotly.

“Everyone needs to calm down,” Pedro said, holding up his arms. “We’re all worried about Queen V, and tempers are flaring. Just chill,” he said.

Anna wiped the tears from her eyes hastily as Cristian drew a heavy breath.

“I need some air,” he said, leaving Anna, Samuel, Daniel, and Pedro alone in the grand living room.

“I just can’t sit around here doing nothing,” Samuel said. “I need to get out of here,” he said, leaving the room.

“Tension is high and we’re all worried,” Daniel said.

“I do feel guilty for not doing enough to stop Pearson from taking Sage,” Anna confessed tearfully.

Lisa, Cody, and Billy sat in the lobby waiting for news on John’s condition when Randi approached them. “Your friend will be alright,” she said to them as they rose to their feet. “The transfusion went well.” “Good,” Lisa said breathing a sigh of relief. “One less worry,” she thought. “We’re going to keep him overnight for observation, and he should be released in the morning.” “Can we see him?” Billy asked. “Sure, but he’s asleep,” Randi said. “No problem,” Billy said as Randi led them to his room. “Thanks,” Lisa said. “You’re welcome,” Randi said, staring at them with intrigue. “There’s something about that nurse that’s strange,” Billy said telepathically to Lisa and Cody who nodded in agreement as they watched Randi walk away.

They walked into John’s hospital room as he lay asleep. His countenance, which was pale, now had a flush of pink upon his cheeks. “I’m glad you’re going to be alright,” Lisa whispered. “We can’t stay long, but we’ll be back tomorrow,” Cody said. “I hope you can sleep well without any nightmares,” Billy said. “I don’t think any of us will be able to rest until we find our Queen.”

“What happened in the stairwell?” Daniel asked as Pedro took a seat in the antique chair. “Sage and I were running down the stairs when she suggested that we go to the roof to fly away,” Anna said. “That’s where we were,” Daniel said. “I figured everyone would meet on the roof and we’d all fly away.” Anna nodded. “But as we started to turn around, we ran into Pearson who was happy with

glee to see us,” she continued.

“He tried to attack us, but I fought back, and I told Sage that we would have to continue down the stairs as a result,”

She stopped, speaking for a minute, struggling to keep her composure as she thought of those last moments with Sage. Daniel took her hand as Pedro looked on. “Pearson jumped in front of us, and before I could react, he struck me with his hunting knife. I heard Sage scream. I collapsed to the floor, and I heard a scuffle.” Her eyes widened.

“Someone else was there. I heard Sage struggling with someone, and they overpowered her—and that’s all I remember.”

“Someone else helped Pearson,” Daniel said.

“I couldn’t see who it was,” Anna said. “Everything went black after that. It had to have been a violent struggle because the beads that were in the queen’s hair were strewn about on the stairwell,” Daniel said. “She fought hard—I know she did,” Anna said.

“We need to scour this entire city to find her,” Daniel said. “We need to find out who helped Pearson too,” Anna replied. “Rafael usually works with at least two people,” Pedro said. “He has an assistant obviously, but also a secret partner.”

“Robert was secretly helping Rafael.”

“Was he?” Anna said.

“Yes,” Pedro answered. “He played a big part in exposing Sage to the world.” “You helped him too,” Daniel said. “No, I didn’t,” Pedro said defensively. “I was trying to expose Cristian for the fraud that he is.”

“You told Pearson where to find Sage,” Anna said. “I was trying to show that Cristian couldn’t be trusted,” Pedro said. “I realized my mistake when Pearson tried to kill Sage.”

“You can’t trust a vampire hunter,” Anna said, incredulous. “You set Sage up whether you meant to or not.”

“Because of your ridiculous obsession over her, you played a part in what happened tonight.”

“What do you mean?” Pedro asked. “You stole the painting, which caused a domino effect.”

“The painting is missing, causing a scandal; Cristian returns the painting thinking that will resolve everything; but instead, it brought further exposure to Sage culminating in this fiasco tonight.”

“I will make it up to her somehow,” Pedro said.

“How—” Anna stammered, “she’s gone.”

Samuel walked along the Bow Bridge staring at the lake and remembering his last conversation with Sage. “You imbecile,” he thought. “I should’ve stayed and listened to what she had to say.”

“But instead I try to do the right and noble thing by urging her to work things out with Cristian.” He gazed up into the night sky, remembering the night things changed between them. “How are you?” he asked nervously as she lay with her eyes closed, beads of perspiration peppered on her forehead. Sage opened her eyes dreamily. “Fine,” she smiled. He took her hand and kissed it, pausing at her wrist.

He looked into her eyes questioningly. She nodded her head. Kissing her wrist delicately, he nibbled on it teasingly, then sank his fangs into her flesh tasting her blood. “You and I shared much more than a physical connection that night,” he thought. “It was a bond we both felt, but I thought at that time that anything further would be impossible.” “Now, if Pearson succeeds in...,” he sighed throwing his head back. “No, don’t think like that,” he admonished himself. “We will finish our conversation and I will finally stop fighting my feelings and admit my love for you, no matter the consequences.”

Cristian opened the elevator cage to his loft and plopped into the chair. Feeling restless, he jumped up and walked into his

bedroom staring at the bed where he and Sage first made love. He remembered the fire in her kisses, the passion in her eyes, the heat of her flesh, the need and hunger for joining. "I need you Sage," he said wistfully. "I can't sleep in this bed without you."

He remembered that, although things were still strained between them, he was confident that they could work out their problems. Remembering the crucifix in his pocket, he picked up the phone and dialed his parents' number. The phone rang with no answer. "Something happened to Mom and Dad," he thought. "Why did they come tonight to the ball after she made it abundantly clear that she would never accept my relationship?" He hung up the phone after the fifth ring.

"What if they are home and just aren't answering the phone?" he reasoned. "There's only one way to find out," he said. He opened the latch to the window and flew out at lightning speed.

Billy, Cody, and Lisa rushed into the living room, meeting Anna, Daniel, and Pedro. "Where's Cristian and Samuel?" Billy asked.

"They needed some air," Anna replied. "It was beginning to get tense around here," remarked Daniel, "so they both left to regroup."

"That's understandable," Cody said.

Billy arched his eyebrow deliberating the strange behavior he's witnessed from his best friend. "How's John?" Anna asked. "He needed a blood transfusion, but he'll be fine," Lisa said. "Good," Anna replied. "So what do we do about Queen V?" Cody asked. "We need to summon all the vampires in the area to help find her." "Good idea," Billy said. He looked at Pedro. "You have some explaining to do," he said. "I know," Pedro sighed wearily, "but once Queen V is back safe and sound, then I'll answer all your questions. Until then Queen V is my only priority." Billy thought to say some smart-alecky quip in response but held his tongue. "Sage

is all of our priority,” Anna chided. “And until she is back, we will do whatever it takes to find her.” “Agreed?” she asked. Everyone nodded their head.

Randi stood in the doorway watching John sleeping soundly. “I wonder if you’re the same John that Rafael spoke of. Something went wrong tonight,” she thought. “Rafael hasn’t called me, and I didn’t have a chance to tell him that I had to leave.” She walked into the room standing at the foot of the bed. “If you’re the same John, then those three people who brought you here had to be vampires.” She bit her lower lip. “I think I know how to find out if my suspicions are true,” she smiled. “This would be my way of helping Rafael achieve the second part of the plan.”

Chapter Forty~three

“So was your intention revenge?” Lisa asked staring at Pedro.
“Yes, I wanted revenge,” he admitted. “But it wasn’t directed at Queen V.”

“Please,” Billy said in disbelief.

“It’s the truth,” Pedro said.

“Tell us what happened after Cristian staked you,” Anna said.

“There was nothing,” Pedro said taking a breath. “There was a void of darkness, then I felt excruciating pain,” he said as he remembered his body undergoing a metamorphosis when the dust of his remains began to regenerate. “I fed mostly on rodents and animals. Occasionally, I fed on a human to speed up the process. Once I became aware of my senses, I returned to the loft and found it empty. I felt abandoned.”

“Sage felt bad for leaving you,” Anna said. “She told me that she thought you would begin to regenerate.”

“She did?” Pedro asked, surprised. “Yes,” Anna said.

“I saw the shroud covering the door and realized that you all mourned me.”

“We did,” Lisa said. “I felt the moment you were staked in the heart. I thought you were gone for good.” Pedro stared at her,

touched. “I covered myself with the shroud, since I still hadn’t completely returned to my physical form. I was just a shadow. I remembered that Pearson was supposed to meet Robert at the cemetery, so I wanted to give him the scare of his life. He wanted Sage to meet him there,” Anna said, “so he could kill her.” “I showed up instead,” Pedro said.

“I think he probably mistook you for Sage, since she was wearing a black cloak, and you wore the shroud,” Anna said. “He did,” Pedro smirked. “Then Sage knew,” Anna grinned. “She said that she believed that Pearson may get more than he bargained for that night.” “She always seems to have an intuition for those things.” She sighed, shaking her head and thinking of her best friend and what kind of state she was in.

“He called out to me, thinking I was her,” Pedro continued. “I saw the fear in his eyes when he realized he was wrong.” “I chased him through the cemetery and watched him run like a scared kitten, the stench of his fear reeking like garbage on a sweltering day.” Billy chuckled. “I had him cornered with nowhere to run.”

Then he began to pray ceaselessly and fervently, and it was so painful to my ears I had to flee. To my surprise, he showed up here. I heard his loud, raspy breathing along with his hammering footsteps as he approached the door. I watched him peer into the room, and I seized the opportunity to strike, and I tried to give back to him the pain he inflicted on Queen V when he staked her—to right my mistake.”

Daniel listened, folding his arms. “He didn’t know what hit him,” he grinned, thinking of the memento he kept of Rafael that he knew the hunter cherished, the silver stake used to kill Sage’s parents. He recalled picking it up from the floor in the grand living room and placing it in his drawer for safekeeping. “You may have scared him off for a time, but he came back and now he has Sage,”

Anna said sadly. “I know,” Pedro said softly.

Cristian arrived at his parents’ door and rang the doorbell. There was no reply. Listening for footsteps, he peered into the window. “No one’s home,” he thought. The door opened. “Hello,” the housekeeper said. She stared out into the darkness, listening to the rustling of the wind. “Hello,” she repeated. Cristian came behind her and walked inside as she turned to close the door. He watched as she went toward the back where her room was situated.

He could hear the sounds of the television blaring from the room. Looking around, he stared at the pictures of him and his parents. “I wish you would accept Sage and she could be part of our family,” he said mournfully. “I would love that.”

He went upstairs and stopped at his bedroom. Over his bed covered with a Spiderman quilt hung a replica of the space shuttle in midair on a thread. “At one time I wanted to be an astronaut,” he thought. “I wanted to go up into space and look back at the beauty of this planet and the universe.”

“Now I can fly and soar faster than an eagle.” He looked at his comic books, chuckling to himself. “This is when I realized that I wanted to draw pictures.” “I’d found my love of bringing images of beauty to life.” He remembered how fervently he worked on the masterpiece of Sage and how he couldn’t get her image out of his mind, recollecting, just earlier in the evening, how beautiful she looked as if she had stepped down from the masterpiece itself. “Nothing I paint will ever compare to that portrait,” he thought.

“Where are you, Sage?” He didn’t want to imagine the torment she may be experiencing at Pearson’s hand.

He looked back once more before leaving his bedroom and stopped at his parent’s room. The door was closed. He turned the knob, opening the door slightly, and walked inside noiselessly. The room smelled of crisp linen that was washed and dried on a clothes line.

Cream-colored curtains made of Chantilly lace hung from the wide windows. A teal-colored quilt covered the king-sized bed. He walked over to the polished mahogany dresser and saw his mother's framed photo. She had a beaming smile.

"I always looked up to you and Dad," he mused. "I wanted to have a long-lasting relationship, like you have, and find a wife that loved life as you do. I find her, and you reject her," he thought, thinking of how Jillian angrily lashed out at Sage. "You made me choose, and I chose her." He noticed a card tucked underneath the picture frame. "What's this?" he wondered. He pulled the card out. "Rafael Pearson," he mouthed. "What the...!" "Why do you have Pearson's business card?"

"So where did you go?" Pedro asked.

"Prague," Anna replied. He nodded his head quietly. "The holiday was shortened once Sage and Cristian saw the news about the missing portrait." "Saw the news?" Pedro asked, confused. "He had the portrait." "I know," Anna said flustered. "He had the portrait, but the media broke the story of it being stolen, and it spread like wildfire. He wanted to return to try to fix the situation, and we know how that turned out," she said disgustedly. "That we do," Cody said.

"I saw her that night," Pedro said abruptly. "What night?" Samuel asked entering the room. "The night she was in torment," Pedro replied. "She was suffering. Her hunger couldn't be abated and she was in agony."

"I felt it," Samuel thought.

"I saw her throw the bottle against the wall in frustration." Anna realized that Sage didn't want them to know just how much she was suffering.

She looked at Samuel and saw the realization in his eyes as he thought the same thing. "It was painful watching her like that,"

Pedro said staring afar. “She was tormented.” Anna closed her eyes, imagining the agony Sage felt. “Then she said something that I didn’t understand,” Pedro said.

“What did she say?” Anna asked. “She talked about something she couldn’t give and she seemed even more upset over it,” he said. “She couldn’t give what?” Billy said. “Me a child,” Cristian said, walking into the room solemnly. “I had talked to her about having children.” Samuel grimaced, while Anna winced. “She told me that she couldn’t have children.” “From all my years of knowing Sage, she had spoken a few times of wanting to have a family, but her father the king took that away from her when he turned her against her will. She always had resentment toward him for that.”

“I didn’t know, and I just thought...,” Cristian started.

“Just like you thought returning the painting would fix the problems,” Anna said angrily. “Don’t you ever think things through before you blurt them out?” she asked.

“I’m not going to stand here and argue with you,” Cristian said, reaching his limit with Anna. “From the moment we met, you didn’t like me and you have made that very clear. And I don’t care,” he yelled. “Sage chose me, and I’m a part of her life whether you like it or not.” “Deal with it,” he snapped, storming out the room.

Anna glared at him, mumbling under her breath, “He doesn’t know her as well as he thinks he does.”

“Look at this,” one of nurses said handing Randi an early morning edition of the newspaper. It headlined the masquerade ball, the blackout, and ensuing chaos that occurred. Also featured was the sketched picture of Rafael along with a surveillance camera still photo of him roaming the hallways of the hotel. He was named as a person the police were looking for in connection to the Robert Scott murder case and also whether he was linked to a series of “vampire-like slayings” that had been occurring in the city, mentioning

incidentally that one of the victims at the hotel claimed he bit them. There was also a mention of a suspicious puddle of blood found in a stairwell.

“Oh no,” Randi said. “Rafael is in deep trouble. I told him he should’ve taken care of this before it got out of hand.” She saw another article mentioning the disappearance of the “Beauty Mysterium” mystery woman when the blackout occurred.

“I need to know what happened at the hotel,” she thought. “Your patient John Fisher is waking up,” one of the nurses said. “Good,” Randi thought. She hurried to the room, stopping to catch her breath before opening the door. “Good morning,” she said, smiling sweetly. “Hi,” John said, staring at her nonchalantly. “Your name is John?” she asked. “Yes,” he said, looking around. She wondered if he was looking for someone, perhaps the three people who brought him to the hospital.

“John, I’m Randi,” she said. He smiled. “I get that reaction a lot” she grinned. “I wonder if you can answer some questions for me?” He nodded his head.

She walked over to the side of his bed and leaned down against his ear. “I need to know if you know someone named Rafael.” John twitched his ear. “Rafael Pearson,” she continued.

Chapter Forty~four

“Someone’s testy,” Billy said, wrinkling his brow. “He’s frustrated, as we all are,” Lisa said. “But that’s no reason to lash out at Anna,” Daniel said. “He blames himself,” Samuel said, “because he feels responsible for what happened.” “As he should,” Anna said firmly. “If he hadn’t brought Sage to the ball, let alone painted her portrait, none of this would’ve happened.” “I don’t need anyone to remind me of the role I played in this,” Pedro acknowledged. “I know I share some responsibility too.” “At least you admitted it,” Cody said. “I wanted Queen V so badly I didn’t want anyone else to have her,” Pedro admitted. Anna glanced over at Samuel. “But I realized some things about myself,” he sighed, “I want to look her in the eyes and apologize. Having her pardon is important to me.”

“You mentioned that there are things that are unknown about Queen V,” Lisa said. Anna chuckled, reminding herself not to mumble under her breath around vampires with super-sharp hearing. “You’ve known her longer than most of us,” Lisa said. “What do you know about her family?” “Her parents?” Anna asked. “No, how did the vampire custom start?” “It’s a story that goes back to the biblical days,” Anna said. Cristian, who was outside the door listening in the

hallway, walked into the room, quietly interrupting her. “Sorry,” he said. “I had no right to lash out at you,” he said softly. Anna nodded her head, realizing that he’d overheard their conversation. “I’d like to hear the story of Sage’s family,” he continued.

“I’ve always wanted to know how the vampire lineage began.” He took a seat as everyone gathered around Anna. “Well, the very first vampire was Queen Priscilla,” she began. “She and the king had come into Egypt from Ethiopia and she was due to give birth any day. She went into labor and gave birth to a baby boy. Because of the difficult labor, she was extremely weak and frail and she asked for water.

The king sent his servant to fetch water for her, not knowing that just at that moment the water had turned to blood.”

“Moses had petitioned the Pharaoh to release the slaves and he refused so Moses was commanded to stretch his rod over the river, smite it, and it would turn to blood,” Cristian said intrigued. “Yes,” Anna said. “Anything that held water being a pool, a pond, a well—it all turned to blood, and any marine life in the water died. The servant didn’t know this when he fetched the water for the king, and he brought it in and poured it into a chalice for the queen to drink. The king found out too late about the water, and before he could stop the queen from ingesting it, she had already drunk it. Needless to say, she became very ill and began to have seizures and vomit. Within minutes, she was dead. The king was beside himself.”

Everyone listened spellbound by the tale as she continued. “The king held a funeral for the queen and had her entombed in what is now called the House of Nayah where all the ancient royals sleep. Overcome with grief, he refused to eat and didn’t want to be disturbed by the servants. Sometime during the night, he was awakened by someone tugging at his feet.”

“Was it?” Billy asked. She nodded her head. “It was Queen Priscilla standing at the foot of their bed. She was undead.” Cristian’s mouth dropped as the others looked on in stunned silence. “The king thought he was dreaming at first,” Anna said. “But the queen told him it was no dream.”

“Once he overcame his shock, he asked her to turn him as well, and he became a vampire.” “How did they explain the queen suddenly being alive again?” Billy asked. “They said that they were mistaken and that the queen was like unto death,” Anna replied. “They didn’t tell their son what truly happened until much later when he was older. Instead, they left Egypt for a time during the plagues and lived elsewhere before returning centuries later. Around this time Theodore Pearson was in Egypt looking for the tomb, claiming to be an archaeologist, but he was really a hunter looking for the vampire king and queen.”

“Sounds familiar,” Billy snorted. “He had found them sleeping in their tomb and destroyed them, but their son and his family had long since vanished, and he continued the vampire tradition.”

“How did you find out this fascinating story?” Daniel asked. “It was told to me from Ammon, a faithful servant who’s seen every coronation of royals since the vampire lineage began. In fact, he held Sage when she was a baby and he was there during her own coronation.”

“You were at Sage’s coronation?” Cristian asked. “Yes,” Anna replied, “I was there.” “So Queen V truly is the last vampire of the Nayah family...,” Daniel said. “She is,” Anna said.

“I’m speechless,” Samuel said. “This is incredible,” Lisa agreed. “Who would’ve thunk it!” Cody said. Billy and Pedro both were too astounded to speak.

“Rafael Pearson,” John said, “The name doesn’t ring a bell.” “Why did you ask me if I knew him?” he asked. “Because he was

a patient here and he said he had a brother named John,” Randi replied, thinking quickly. “Well, I’m not that John,” he said, biting his lip slightly. “He’s lying,” she thought, noticing the hitch in his voice. “I just wanted to know that’s all,” “I’ll let you rest,” she said with a wily smile. “So that’s who you had helping you, Rafael,” John thought. “She made herself so obvious.” “So you want to play games,” Randi thought. “We’ll see about that.”

Cristian sat in the antique chair deep in thought, while everyone went to change from their costumes. “I didn’t truly realize the rich history of Sage’s family,” he thought. “She’s the last of the Nayahs.” “The thought alone saddens me.” “I can’t let Pearson destroy you,” he thought. “I have to find you and also my parents.” He thought of Pedro’s coincidental return. “Just because Pedro is back doesn’t mean that he’s gotten off scot-free,” he thought. “He hasn’t changed, and he’s trying to use this unfortunate circumstance for his benefit to ease your wrath.”

Thinking of confronting him, Cristian got up from the chair and walked down the narrow hallway. He heard the sounds of whispering as he walked past the door to Samuel’s room. “Okay, spill,” Billy said. “Spill what?” Samuel said innocently. “You know exactly what I mean,” Billy said. “What’s with you and Queen V?” he asked. Cristian’s ears perked up at the mention of her name. “I know there’s something between you,” Billy said. “You admitted that you were smitten with her when you first met.” “That’s true,” Samuel said.

“What!” Cristian thought astonished. “So c’mon, man,” Billy said. “I want to know.” “Know what?” Samuel said. “Did you...,”

“You know,” Billy stammered. “Cristian leaned closer to the door waiting for Samuel’s answer.

Sage opened her eyes weakly trying to see in front of her. There was darkness and a sliver of light from the moon reflecting on a

painting on a wall. She focused her eyes trying to look at it. It was a painting of a man clothed in a white robe with sandals on his feet standing at a door with a lantern sitting nearby. He had his hand extended as though he was knocking.

While staring at the painting, she remembered a bible verse from deep, within the crevices of her mind. It was revelations, the third chapter, and the twentieth verse.

“Behold, I stand at the door, and knock: if any man hear my voice, and open the door, I will come in to him, and will sup with him, and he with me.” She cried out as she felt a pain sear through her body as if she was torn in half.

She tried to move, but she was weak and hungry. She could smell the strong scent of garlic attacking her senses. Moving her hand slowly, she felt a necklace made of garlic wrapped around her neck. Lifting her eyes toward a gaping hole in the ceiling of the brick building, she gazed out toward the stars. “If I can just send a message to the coven,” she thought squeezing her eyes shut and focusing.

Cristian waited impatiently for Samuel’s reply when he heard Anna exclaim, “Look!” He jumped from against the door and left hastily as the door opened and Samuel and Billy exited the room. “I’m on the roof,” Anna said as everyone came out the door staring at her with suspense. “Look,” she said pointing toward the sky. There was a series of bright, luminous lights flashing in the sky that looked like an aurora. The color was blood red. “What is it?” Lisa asked. “It’s called Northern Lights,” Cody said. “I’ve never seen them before.” Everyone watched, amazed.

“Randi, check this out,” the nurses yelled as she came outside to see what they were staring at. “Oh, my God,” she said, covering her mouth.

John peered out the window of his room watching the lights

in the sky in awe. “Look closer,” Anna said. To the human eye, the lights appeared to be flashing sequences of electrical activity, but to vampire eyes, the lights appeared to be two pupils staring at them. “Queen V,” Billy said. “Sage, where are you?” Anna asked. “A building,” they heard Sage say faintly. “Where?” Cristian yelled. “In a desolate place,” she said.

The eyes began to fade as Sage’s strength gave out. “Sage!” Samuel yelled. Cristian stared at him with growing wariness and interest in what had happened between him and Sage.

Chapter Forty~five

Everyone continued to look up toward the sky. “That was Sage trying to contact us,” Anna said. “Maybe she’ll try again,” Cody said. “At least she’s still alive,” Daniel said. They heard a loud knock at the door. “That’s them,” Anna said. “We didn’t have to summon them after all.” “Sage did.” Everyone left from the roof as Cristian continued to stare at Samuel with a growing unease, wondering what secret he’s keeping. They all stood at the entrance as Anna opened the door.

Vampires of all ages and ethnicities were arriving as she ushered them in.

Cristian stared in astonishment at the diverse vampires. Some were dressed in business suits, others casual, some in professional uniforms, and the rest in gothic clothing. Once they were inside, Anna brought them to an empty room large enough to hold two hundred people. They waited in silence as she and the rest of the coven headed toward the end of the room to face the crowd.

“Thank you for coming,” Anna said. “We saw the lights in the sky and we knew that the queen was in trouble,” one of the vampires said. “Hey, isn’t that the vampire the queen was with the night we arrived in town...,” Billy whispered to Cody. “It is,” Pedro said

with irritation, remembering that night. Cristian looked into the crowd to see who they were talking about and his eyes came upon a bald man with a strong build. He bristled realizing that Sage and this vampire had had a physical encounter. He began to wonder if Samuel was among the ones she'd had an encounter with. "Yes, the queen is in great danger," Anna replied. "Earlier tonight, she was taken by the hunter Pearson." The crowd began to murmur and whisper amongst themselves.

Anna held up her hand to silence them. "We need your help to find her," she said. "We can't do this alone. Anything you may see or hear will be beneficial in bringing her back unharmed. The queen will be forever indebted to you for your service. Remember this hunter will not take her to a known location. He probably took her somewhere where there is isolation, so look for things out of the ordinary. The sun will be rising soon, so we will probably have to put the search on hold until sundown."

"We will do all we can to find the queen," the bald vampire said. Cristian chewed his lip, fighting against his jealousy.

Sage mustered her strength to remove the garlic necklace from her neck and flung it against the wall. Sitting up slowly, she looked around at her surroundings. She saw rows of pews covered with dust and cobwebs. She also noticed stained-glass windows. Some were shattered, but one window was still intact with a depiction of hands in prayer. She realized she was in a church that had long since been abandoned. As she turned her head, a large rusting cross immediately repelled her. "Still alive?" a voice asked as footsteps creaked across the wooden floors. Pearson appeared in the moonlight with a piece of the kilt torn off and wrapped around his head with dried blood crusted on it. "It is stated that whatsoever eateth any manner of blood, even that soul shall be cut off," he said like an executioner reading a death edict to the condemned.

“Leviticus the seventh chapter and the twenty-seventh verse, although you didn’t exactly quote it right,” Sage replied. “You know the bible?” he asked, surprised. “Of course,” Sage said, “I wasn’t always a vampire.” She recalled when she was fifteen living in Egypt, she had insisted on visiting the tombs of the ancients alone without the servants, even though her father persisted. She wanted to go alone, and she was tired of having her every move monitored. So she left with her knapsack and a parasol to protect her from the scorching sun, and went on her way.

As she was headed toward the tombs, a woman with twinkling eyes and a smile as bright as sunshine approached her. She was wearing a straw hat to protect her fair complexion and a sky blue dress. She told Sage that she had good news and placed a black book in her hands. “What is it?” Sage asked. “This tells the story of the good news,” the woman smiled. “Have a wonderful day,” she said, waving good-bye and walking away. “But,” Sage said. She looked around for the woman and she had vanished.

Staring at the mysterious book, Sage quickly tucked it inside her knapsack as she continued on her way.

Once she was home, Sage sat on her bed, large enough to fit five people, and took out the black book from her knapsack. She opened it and discovered that it was a bible. Not just any bible but the holy bible. She began to read it with enthusiasm. She found that she had an insatiable appetite for this fascinating book and couldn’t put it down. She read and reread the entire book, intrigued by the stories of valor such as David and Goliath, the stories of sacrifice and love such as Abraham and Isaac. The wisdom of King Solomon and the life of Jesus Christ, starting with his immaculate conception, the miracles he performed, his horrifying death, and glorious resurrection. She had a thirst for this book like dry land that thirsts for rain. Whenever she was away, she would hide the

book under her feather pillows so that her father wouldn't discover it. One afternoon, she jumped on her bed and reached under her pillow to read the book again only to discover it was gone. Horrified, she searched her room over and over trying to find her book. "It's gone," her father said standing at the door. "I had it burned," he said. "Why?" she asked. "Why would you read that book of fairytales?" he said.

"There is no God," he sneered. "If he does exist and he is a God of love, then why is there suffering?" he asked, not expecting an answer. "Why is there hatred for people of other races and cultures if we are all made in his image?" Sage opened her mouth to respond, but was unable to give an answer to his question. "Just as I thought," Jacob said with a smirk on his face as though he had obtained some unspoken victory. "You don't know."

"I shouldn't be surprised that you would know scriptures," Rafael said, bringing Sage back to the present. "Then you know why I have to destroy you," he said. "Nothing personal, but this is my duty." Sage began to chuckle. "What's so funny, vampire?" he asked. "I've seen this happen time and time again," she said.

"What?" he snapped. "The hunter becomes the hunted," she said. "I don't care that the police are looking for me," Rafael retorted. "I'll be long gone after I destroy you." "That's not what I meant," Sage said. "You are becoming the embodiment of the very thing you want to destroy." "Come again?" Rafael asked. "You get a rush from the kill just as a vampire gets a rush from hunting their prey," she said. "You have a bloodlust."

"Shut up!" he yelled throwing holy water on her. She recoiled in pain as the water burned her skin like acid. "Vampires—all of them are evil," he snarled. "You say vampires are evil," Sage said, grimacing in pain. "I've seen humans commit acts of evil against each other that would make even the vilest vampire tame in

comparison. You see, humans have an affinity for building things up only to destroy them. It's as though it's in your nature—" she said, "you can't help yourself. Now this planet that we both call home is in peril due to humans' lust for power and control. Neither one of our species will be around if this planet dies because we'll all be extinct." Rafael started to laugh. Sage glared at him. "I don't believe it," he said, "a vampire with a bleeding heart." He roared with laughter, enjoying the pun.

"John will be released from the hospital within hours," Lisa said checking the time. "I'll go pick him up," Billy volunteered. "I'll go get a change of clothes for him from his room," she said. She entered his room and opened the drawer to take out a pair of blue jeans and a t-shirt along with a denim jacket. She saw his laptop halfway closed as she was headed toward the door. Curious, she lifted it up to sneak a look at his mysterious writing. "What's this!" she said crinkling her eyebrow. "Why is he writing about vampires?" "What's wrong?" Cody asked as Lisa returned frowning. "Nothing," she said. Cody and Billy exchanged looks as Billy took the clothes. "I'll be back," he said. "Okay, Lisa what's bothering you?" Cody asked. "I wasn't being nosy," Lisa said quickly. "But I saw something on John's laptop that I think you should see." They both headed toward John's room.

Anna and Pedro were still talking to the vampires who lingered, when Samuel excused himself to retire to his room. Cristian, seizing the opportunity to confront him, yelled for him to wait. "Yes, Cristian?" Samuel asked curiously. "We need to talk," Cristian said. "We can speak on the roof if you'd like," Samuel said. "Fine," Cristian replied. Once on the roof, Samuel waited for Cristian to speak, watching him pace the floor back and forth. "You and Sage are close," he began. "Yes," Samuel replied. "We've known each other for a long time—you know that." "That I do," Cristian

snapped. Samuel was taken aback by Cristian's haughty attitude.

Deciding to cut to the chase, Cristian asked, "Do you know each other in the biblical sense?" Samuel opened and closed his mouth swallowing hard. "I'm waiting," Cristian said as he felt his anger growing faster than a sandstorm in a desert. "This was before you were even born," Samuel finally replied.

"So I'm guessing that the answer to my question is yes," Cristian said, his eyes turning red as scarlet. Samuel remained silent. "Sage told me that she was intimate with vampires, but that was only for physical enjoyment." "But I've watched you both when you've been in each other's company and the way you look at her." "This was more than just a physical connection," he said, "There was an emotional connection as well." "What I'm asking you, is do you love her?" he said, his lip trembling.

Not wanting to lie to Cristian, Samuel uttered softly, "Yes." Cristian took a sharp breath. "I only realized my feelings for Sage when we were in Prague," Samuel replied. "I never wanted to do anything that would hinder your relationship. I encouraged Sage to try to work things out with you."

"Oh, so you can conveniently relieve your guilty conscience?" Cristian said.

"No," Samuel said. "I don't feel guilty for something that happened long before you came into this world," he said. Cristian chuckled.

He stared at Samuel with his slender build, long hair, and effeminate features. "I look at you and you seem so delicate," he said tauntingly. "I'm hardly delicate," Samuel said angrily with a stare that could wither a bed of flowers.

"I'm only going to say this once, so listen well," Cristian said. "Sage chose me and I'm a part of her life for now and for always." "Got it."

“Loud and clear,” Samuel said. Cristian turned and walked out the door.

Billy arrived in John’s room giving him the change of clothes. “Lisa,” John asked. Billy nodded his head smiling. “I saw the lights last night,” John said. “It was Queen V,” Billy said, “I’ll tell you more about it later.”

Randi came into the room unexpectedly. She stared at Billy now in his usual black attire and at John. “I was just checking on you,” she said. “I’m fine,” John said. “The doctor will soon sign the release papers so you can go,” she said. “I’ll come back later.” “Okay,” he shrugged. She felt unnerved, sensing Billy’s eyes following her every move. “Okay,” she said leaving the room. “She’s hiding something,” Billy said. “You’re right,” John replied. “She’s helping Rafael.”

“Is she now...,” Billy said. “She asked me if I knew him, which was a dead giveaway.” Billy nodded his head. “I need some confirmation first,” he said.

Once John signed the release papers, Billy walked beside him as he was wheeled out into the lobby. “How are we...,” he started. “I’m driving,” Billy said. He whispered against John’s ear, “I couldn’t risk flying, because then there’ll be tales of men flying around New York City.” John laughed. They walked over to a midnight blue Mercedes. “How did you...,” John asked. “I borrowed it, don’t worry,” Billy said.

As Billy adjusted the rearview mirror, he saw Randi exit the hospital looking in their direction. “This should be fun,” he said popping a CD into the CD player. “We have company,” Billy motioned to John as he looked in the mirror and saw Randi pulling out from the driveway. “This song is perfect for this occasion,” Billy said as the song began to blare from the speakers. He turned up the volume while they drove down the street. “I know you’re all things eighties,” John yelled.

Unable to hear himself think, he turned down the volume. “I’m surprised that you have CDs,” he said. “Of course, I have CDs,” Billy quipped. “I just thought you would be into cassettes.”

Billy howled with laughter. “Cassettes,” he said. “You think because I’m a vampire I don’t know about CDs, iPods, or MP3s?” he asked. John chuckled. They stopped at a stoplight and Randi pulled up behind them. “Fasten your seatbelt,” Billy said. “I’m almost scared to ask what you’re about to do,” John said. Billy pressed the accelerator and the tires screeched as he ran the red light. Randi ran the red light, nearly causing an accident following them. “She’s still behind us,” John said looking out the rear window. Billy turned sharply around the corner. “Doggone it,” Randi said as she lost them. Minutes later, she saw the Mercedes driving in the opposite direction as she drove down an alley and turned the car around to follow it. After following the car for a few blocks, the car pulled over to the side of the road and the irate driver exited the car. “Why are you following me?” the man with gray hair and a suit said. “I’m sorry, I thought you were someone I knew,” she said apologetically.

Billy and John, laughing at their cleverness, entered the loft.

Chapter Forty~six

Billy and John walked into the room greeted by Anna, Cody, and Lisa who were staring at them strangely. “We know who’s helping Pearson,” Billy said before Anna could speak. “It’s that nurse, isn’t it,” Cody said. “Yep,” Billy said. “She followed us,” John interjected. “Not only that, she asked me outright if I knew Rafael.” “Where is she?” Anna asked. “Don’t worry, you’ll be getting a phone call soon,” Billy said. “Phone call?” Anna asked bewildered.

In less than a second, her cell phone began to ring. “Aren’t you going to answer it?” Billy grinned. Anna shook her head and answered her phone. Samuel walked into the room fuming, his eyes a deep sapphire. “Delicate my...,” “I know that look,” Billy said. “What happened?” “Cristian wanted to have a discussion with me,” Samuel said. “About Queen V?” Billy asked telepathically.

“Yes,” Samuel replied. “Then he insulted me.” Billy gave him a cheerful look when Anna hung up her phone. “Good work, Billy and John,” she said. “One of our comrades tailed this nurse back to her flat and he just gave me her address.” “Then what are we waiting for...,” Daniel said entering the room. “Let’s go.”

Cristian went to his loft briefly to change from his costume, leaving the crucifix and business card in his pocket. Filled with

anger over the disastrous ball, he decided to let the director know his displeasure by arriving at the art gallery without stopping to speak to the security guard who stared at him with empathy. He stared disgustedly at the director, who hadn't changed from his costume, talking on the phone with his attorneys. "Cristian, wait!" he said, holding up his finger. He approached the painting enclosed in its glass case, staring at Sage's eyes.

While he stared at her chocolate eyes, he felt a torrent of emotions through his body ranging from bewilderment to betrayal. Not only had she kept another secret from him, what troubled Cristian the most was not the fact that it was something that took place before he was born, it was the knowledge that it was with someone she obviously cared for deeply. "Why Sage?" he asked. He knew he couldn't get his questions answered with her missing, and finding her first was of the utmost importance.

"Cristian, I'm...", the director started.

"Save it," Cristian snapped. "I told you that this was exactly the reason why I didn't want to expose her to the public." "I didn't know that things were going to happen like they did," the director retorted. "I didn't know that guy would show up and cause that commotion. Now I have to worry about the gallery being sued." "That's all you're concerned about?" Cristian asked in disbelief. "No, that's not all I'm concerned about," the director said defensively. "I'm not a coldhearted person." "Can you please tell her that I'm sorry for what happened tonight," he said. "Yeah sure," Cristian said with irritation. "If I ever see her again," he thought.

Deciding to wait before confronting John about his writing, Lisa, Cody, Anna along with Daniel, Billy, and Samuel all flew to the address that their fellow vampire gave Anna. John opted to stay behind at the loft. "Where's Pedro?" Lisa asked as they landed. "I last saw him speaking to one of the vampires that came to the

meeting earlier tonight,” Anna said. The gray haired vampire in a suit got out his Mercedes to meet them. “She’s inside,” he said. “Thanks,” Billy said. “Anything to help bring our queen back,” the vampire said. “Let me know if there’s anything else you need me to do,” he asked. “You’ve done more than we could ever ask for,” Anna said. “The queen will be pleased.” He shook Billy’s hand, got in his car, and drove off.

“Someone’s coming,” Cody said. They took cover as the front door opened and a young man in a jacket, jeans, and a book bag hanging on his arm exited the building. Daniel swiftly held his foot in the door to keep it from closing while everyone entered the building and checked the mailboxes. “What did you say her name is?” Anna asked. “Randi,” Billy said. Anna chuckled at the name. “Randi Benson—she’s right down the hall,” she said.

Randi sat at her kitchen table thinking of all that transpired since she met Rafael and the wild ride she had following John and his strange friend that she was sure was a vampire. She then thought of how she had to convince the irate man that she wasn’t stalking him, and after he gave her a few choice words and a warning, he let her leave with a bit of her dignity still intact. “I need to try to reach Rafael,” she said picking up her phone and dialing his number.

Still enjoying his laugh, Rafael’s cell phone began to ring. He picked it up and walked away into the corner of the church while Sage, gathering her strength, tried to get up from the floor. To her horror, she saw that Rafael had placed layers of garlic around her in a circular motion, leaving her trapped between them and the rusted cross. Using her ears, she tried to listen to his secretive conversation. “I’m fine,” he said. “You are in so much trouble—” Randi said, “the police are looking for you and think that you’re tied into the vampire slayings.” “Really,” Rafael quipped. “That’s laughable—vampire hunter accused of being a vampire.” “So did

you get what you're after?' she asked. He glanced at Sage smiling. "Yes," he answered. "Are you sure you can pull off the second part of plan?" he asked. "Yes," she replied. "I think I can handle it."

"I miss you," she said softly. "I miss you, and when this is all over we can go somewhere together and get more acquainted." "I'd like that," she said. "Now I have things I have to do," he said. "Be careful," she said. "I can handle the vampire queen," he said. "She's powerless against me." "Whatever you say," Randi said. "A lot is riding on this working," he said. "It will work," she said. "I'll try to call you again when I can," he said. "Okay," she said.

"Good-bye," he said. She held the phone up, reluctant to hang up. "Good-bye," she finally said and hung up the receiver. "Until I see you again," she whispered.

Cristian heard the sound of his phone ringing as he entered his loft. Answering the phone quickly he said, "Sage?" "Cristian," his mother said anxiously. "Mother!" he exclaimed. "Where are you and Dad?" "We need your help son," she said. "We're in danger." "Where are you?" he asked. "I don't know, Cristian," Jillian said. "We're in some kind of building. I don't know where" she said, "please help us—he says he's going to kill us." "Who?" Cristian yelled. "His name is Rafael," Jillian said. "He wants you to come, because he says he has something that's precious to you." "Sage," Cristian thought. "Can you describe where you are?" he asked. The line went dead. "Mother," he yelled.

After showering and changing clothes, Randi looked at the address of the art gallery. She took a deep breath. "Talking to Cristian West is going to be the hardest part of the plan," she thought. "You can do this Randi," she thought, giving herself a pep talk. "Rafael is relying on you." She opened the door and started down the hallway. "Excuse me, are you Randi?" Anna asked, stepping in front of her. "Yes," she said with shivers going down her spine. "Good," Anna

said as the coven surrounded her and Billy put a blindfold over Randi's eyes and Cody covered her mouth so she couldn't scream. "You have some questions to answer," Anna said.

Sage, knowing that she didn't have much time, attempted to stand and screamed in agony. Gazing at her arms, she realized that Rafael had poured holy water on her arms and legs making her skin raw so that each time she moved, the pulling and tearing would further inflame the injuries. "You didn't think I would give you ample time to try to break my neck again, did you?" he said.

He took out the wooden stake from inside his cloak. "Now, I'm going to do what I've been planning on since I became a hunter." He leaned over her and lifted the stake high above his head. As he began to bring the stake down, she dug her claws deeply into his legs, jerking him to the ground and causing him to drop the stake in the process. He screamed as she attempted to grab the stake as it rolled across the ground. Angrily, he flounced over her, grabbed the stake, and in a crushing blow drove it into her. "No!" Cristian yelled as he dropped to the floor in his loft flinching in pain. John was sitting at his desk typing when suddenly he heard screams coming from the grand living room. Tearing out of his room, he saw the coven lying on the floor writhing while a frightened, blindfolded Randi stood frozen.

Chapter Forty~seven

Sage, livid, grabbed Rafael by his hair, yanking his head back, and pressed her fingers into the gash causing it to bleed anew. She felt him jerking against her trying to break free from her grip and flung him backward as he fell into the pews. He lay still. Instead of hitting his intended target, he staked her in the shoulder. With her waning strength, she gripped the wooden stake and pulled it out, falling back from the pain. “Never again,” she said crushing it into pieces.

Cristian clutched his chest as the pain subsided. John, stiff as a board, stared at the coven as they began to recover from their convulsive state. “She’s still alive,” Samuel panted. “Yes,” Lisa gasped. Billy breathed a sigh of relief. “She’s a fighter,” Anna said wiping her brow. “But we know she can’t hold out for long, and we have to find her.” She got up and took the blindfold from Randi’s face. “We know you know Pearson, so there’s no use lying about it.” So you’re going to tell us where he is and you’re going to tell us now,” she glared. Randi swallowed hard, staring at the Lisa, Cody, and Billy and the other vampires staring at her with fury in their eyes.

“Where is Rafael?” John said. “I knew you were lying,” Randi said.

He shrugged. "Where's Rafael and where did he take Queen Sage?" he asked. "I don't know where he is," she said innocently. "You're lying," Anna said. "I can smell it." She grabbed Randi by the throat dragging her claws dangerously across her jugular. "He hurts our queen, you will die," she said firmly. "Now, where is he?" "Answer the question," Cristian said, appearing in the room still clutching his chest. "Cristian West," Randi thought. "Rafael didn't tell me he was a vampire."

"Where did he take her and my parents?" he asked. "I received a phone call from my mother begging me for help," he said. "You know where they are," he said, stepping closer to Randi and peering into her eyes. "Tell me." "He told me that they were in a building," she said.

"He didn't say where. I swear." "She's lying," Lisa said. "I'm telling the truth," she stammered. "I don't know where he took them, honest." "You're covering for him because you're in love with him," Anna said. Randi felt her face flush as her mouth dropped in astonishment. "I can always tell when someone's in love," she said. "I hear it in their quickened heartbeat and the catch in their voice, and see it in the dreamy look in their eyes." "It's always the same." Daniel stared at her curiously. "Since you won't tell us the truth, I have no choice but to..."

"Wait," Cristian said. "Don't kill her," he said staring in her eyes. "Thank you," she said softly. "The only thing he said was that he'd take her to a place that no one would ever suspect," she said. "Now you're telling the truth," Anna said. "Sorry I'm unable to be of more help," Randi offered. "Save it for someone who cares," Anna said. "Get her out of here," she said to Billy. "I'll take her," Cristian said. He escorted her out of the room as everyone began to discuss locations where Rafael could've taken Sage. "A warehouse maybe," Lisa said. "An abandoned building," Anna said. "We'll

need to search every abandoned building in the city.” “What about a church?” John asked. “Highly unlikely,” Anna replied. “Vampires can’t step foot inside a church, let alone even open the door.” “Why?” he asked. “Because churches represent light and things sacred, whereas vampires are of darkness and things unholy,” she said plainly.

“If you truly know where Sage is, this is your chance to speak up,” Cristian said at the door. “She’s very important to me.” Randi glanced down at the floor unable to stare into his eyes, feeling a tinge of guilt. “My parents said they were being held at a building,” he said. “Do you have any idea where Rafael could’ve taken them?” “He mentioned once about an abandoned building in New Jersey,” she said. “But I don’t know if he took them there.”

Pedro opened the door staring at Randi and at Cristian before he vanished in the dark hallway.

“Where do you live?” he asked as they walked out the door. She tried to look back toward the darkened hallway, but he closed the door. She gave him her address. “Why?” she asked. “Just keep your eyes on me,” he said. Before she could speak, they were outside her apartment building. “Wow,” she said, impressed. Cristian gave her his phone number. “Call me when you think of anything helpful,” he said. “Okay,” she said. She turned around to say something, but he had vanished.

“I felt a sudden pain in my chest,” Pedro said, staring at everyone. “That’s what you felt when I was staked.” “Yes,” Lisa said. “Part of the downside of being so closely knit,” Billy said.

“We can feel when one of the members is staked or harmed.” “Why is that?” John asked.

“Because we’re all connected by blood,” Anna replied. “Meaning you’ve shared each other’s blood?” he asked. “Yes,” Billy answered. John’s face went pale at the thought. “That woman knows where

Sage is, and she's hiding something," Anna said. "We need to follow her." "Maybe that's what she wants," Samuel said. "Maybe she wants us to follow her to lead us into a trap."

"Why does everything have to be a conspiracy with you?" Cristian said, standing at the doorway. "Everything isn't a conspiracy," Samuel said irritated. "I just know that sometimes things aren't how they appear." "Oh, like your friendship with Sage," Cristian retorted. Pedro stared at the both of them, confused. "I'm not going to argue with you," Samuel said. "Instead of arguing over whose is bigger, can we focus on Queen V for once?" Daniel said exasperated.

"The constant bickering is nerve-wracking." "I'm going out for some air," Samuel said. Anna approached Cristian who snickered as Samuel walked past him briskly. "You keep pushing him, and he will push back," she warned.

"What's that supposed to mean?" he snapped.

"Ever since Sage turned you, you've been walking around here putting on airs because you're her mate."

"Sage never wanted you to be a vampire, did you know that?"

"Yes," he snapped. "I know."

"And what makes you think you're her equal?" Anna said. "You're not the king." "She made me a king," he snapped. "I have the same powers she has."

"Not so," Pedro interrupted. "You don't have the same powers as Queen V." Daniel and Billy sat down on the antique chair along with Lisa, Cody, and John waiting for the impending explosion.

"What do you mean?" Cristian said angrily. "Queen V has the ability to change her form into mist, vapor, an animal, and even an insect."

"I haven't seen you do this yet." "Well, I hate to state the obvious," Cristian replied, "But you were just dust after I staked you." Pedro

wincing. “How would you know what I’m capable of doing?”

“And Sage has never been arrogant about her power or belittled anyone in her family,” Anna said angrily. “Queen V has the power of suggestion, and she can command the elements,” Pedro said. “Have you done this?” Cristian didn’t respond. “I didn’t think so,” Pedro snapped.

“He has power of illusion,” Anna said, “None of the others.”

“Sage didn’t teach him.”

“Because she saw the same thing I’m seeing.” “You have become cocky, and this is what she feared.”

“You’re nothing more than an average vampire with superhuman strength.” Pedro sneered. “You’re not Queen V’s equal.”

“You think I’m going to believe the word of someone so obsessed with Sage that you tried to kill me!” Cristian said. He stared at Anna, “Or the word from her control-freak best friend!”

“Sage made me her mate because she loves me, and I don’t have to justify our love to any of you,” he said. “Lastly, what happens between Sage and me is just that.” “It’s our business and none of yours.” He stomped out the room and down the hallway.

“He’s bloody unbearable at times,” Anna said. “I’ll be glad when Sage is back, because she and I need to have a talk about him.”

John got up shaking his head.

“We don’t normally have fighting like this,” Lisa said. “When tensions are high people, lose their tempers quickly,” Cody said. “I’ll be glad when things are tranquil again,” she said. John started for the door. “John, there’s something we need to ask you,” Lisa said. “It’s about what’s on your laptop.” He stopped in his tracks as if he hit an invisible boundary. “You read my writing?” he stated angrily. “I didn’t do it on purpose,” Lisa said. “But to answer your question, yes, and why are you writing about vampires?”

Cristian walked into Sage’s bedroom. “I don’t have the same

powers as you,” he huffed.

“The nerve.” He sat down on their bed and lay down on the silken sheets. “You wouldn’t have made me your mate and told me about the coronation if you didn’t want me to have the same powers as you,” he thought.

He began to think of instances when he saw Sage and Samuel talking and of how at ease they were with each other. “Now I’m becoming jealous like Pedro,” he said. “I need to give you the benefit of the doubt,” he thought, remembering his own indiscretion at the nightclub. “I just don’t like the thought of him touching you. When you return, we’ll need to talk about our future and where the coven fits into it. I think it’s best if we all went our separate ways.”

Chapter Forty~eight

“**Y**ou had no right to look at my writings,” John yelled. “I wasn’t prying!” Lisa exclaimed. “But when I saw that you wrote about vampires, I wanted to know why.”

“It’s a fictional story,” he said defensively. “I wanted to write a story from a vampire’s point of view, since in my opinion, vampires are misunderstood. I didn’t mention at all about you or Queen Sage.”

“Most vampires don’t openly discuss vampirism, because we’re a secret society,” Anna said. “We really don’t like to be in the limelight. But since my childhood, vampire stories have been part of our folklore for quite awhile,” she sighed. “I don’t see that changing anytime soon.”

“I’m sorry for invading your privacy,” Lisa said. “I was just curious.”

“Let’s make a deal; when I’m done, I’ll let you read the manuscript. How about that?” John said. “Okay,” Lisa grinned sheepishly.

“One conflict that was resolved quickly,” Daniel grinned, “A nice change.” Everyone chuckled.

“That reminds me,” John said. “Rafael wanted to cleanse the family name from a scandal that happened years before he

was born. “It was referred to as the fate of Amerie and Lance.” “Amerie,” Anna said. “She was Sage’s great grandmother, I think.” “Yeah,” John said. “The story is that when the vampire hunter tried to kill the queen, he was unable to because he was smitten by her beauty.” “Instead, they fell in love and ran away together. They were eventually discovered in Vienna, and Lance was forced to watch Amerie’s destruction; he was driven from the family in shame. Rafael didn’t want to fall into that same trap, which is another reason he is so obsessed with killing Queen Sage. Rafael’s and Sage’s fates are intertwined with the fate of Amerie and Lance.”

“We can’t wait until nightfall,” Anna said. “We have to search for them now.”

Cristian took out Sage’s cell phone to check his voicemail at his loft. “One new message,” it said. “Cristian, hi this is Randi,” the voice said. “I wasn’t truthful earlier about where Rafael is,” she continued. “I will tell you where he is so that you can find your girlfriend.” He memorized the address, jumped up from the bed, and rushed out the room.

Samuel came back into the living room looking pensive. “I was on the roof thinking,” he said.

“Remember when John asked if Pearson took Sage to a church, and we didn’t think it was likely?” he asked. “Yes,” Anna replied. “What if he did take her to a church?” “I don’t see how,” Anna said.

“Sage was spiritual once,” Samuel said. “Maybe a church doesn’t affect her the same way it affects us.” “I don’t know Samuel,” Anna replied. “What if it’s a church that lost its light?” John asked. Lisa remembered the abandoned church she saw on the bus when they were headed into town. “That church,” Lisa said, tapping Cody’s shoulder. “There’s an abandoned church that we saw when we were coming back from Kansas,” she said. “That’s right.” “It looked

menacing in the darkness,” Cody said. “I know where she is,” Cristian said entering the room excitedly. “Randi told me.” “Okay, this is what we’ll do,” Anna said, “Daniel and Billy you go with Cristian.” “Maybe Samuel and Pedro should go too.” Cristian stared at her with irritation. “Lisa and Cody, you’re coming with me, while we check the warehouses.

“I hope that when we return, we will be reunited with Sage,” she said. As Anna, Lisa, and Cody went out the door, Cristian stopped Samuel, gripping his arm. “You’re not coming anywhere with me,” he said. “I’m going to find Sage.” Samuel sighed heavily as Billy, who gave Samuel a sorrowful look, and Daniel left after Cristian. Samuel stood with his arms folded as Pedro took him aside. “I think we need to check that abandoned church Lisa spoke of,” he said. Samuel nodded his head.

Once they were outside the door, Cristian said, “Guys, can you meet me at Central Park? I need to stop by the gallery first.” “How about we come with you?” Daniel offered. “That’s not necessary,” Cristian replied. “I won’t be long.” Billy and Daniel stared at each other doubtfully as Cristian went around the corner. He jumped into a taxi. “Can you take me to New Jersey?” he asked.

“John, did you by chance see this church that Lisa spoke of?” Samuel asked.

“Yes, I could never forget it,” John shivered. “It was scary looking.”

“Can you tell us where it is?” Pedro asked.

Anna, Lisa, and Cody arrived at the warehouse pleasantly surprised to find that the other vampires had already begun their search. “This is great,” Anna said. “Sage would be so proud to see how much she means to her subjects.” “At this rate, the search shouldn’t take very long.” “Maybe we can go check that church I spoke about,” Lisa said. “Perhaps,” Anna said.

Rafael began to stir as Sage stood to her feet only to collapse back to the floor. “I can’t die like this,” she thought. “I have to fight.” She stared at the rusted cross in the darkness, and it seemed to radiate, getting brighter and brighter like the sun. Rafael took off his shoes, searching for the matches he hid. “There it is,” he said picking them up from the floor. Sage felt pain within her body like a tug of war between her vampire nature and her human nature as she stared at the cross, watching as the rust faded and the gold gleamed from within.

She began to crawl toward it slowly, her limbs feeling as though they were pulled from their sockets as the power of the emblem beckoned her. She continued crawling toward it reciting the Lord’s Prayer, “Our Father which art in heaven, Hallowed be thy name. Thy kingdom come, Thy will be done on earth as it is in heaven. Give us this day our daily bread, and forgive us our trespasses as we forgive those who trespass against us. And lead us not into temptation but deliver us from evil: for thine is the kingdom, and the power, and the glory forever.”

She reached out for the cross, her skin ripping and tearing as Rafael yelled, “What are you doing!” She grabbed hold of the cross screaming in agony, the sounds echoing in the air. He threw the match to the ground and the dry wood instantly went up in flames. Sage lay unconscious at the foot of the cross.

Cristian approached the door of the empty building smelling smoke from inside. “Sage,” he said. “I’m coming.” He kicked the door down and ran inside. “Sage!” he yelled. “Mom!” “Dad!” As he ran inside, two burly men dressed in white tackled him. “Hey!” he yelled. “Let me go.” He flung them off his arm and grabbed one of the men by the neck squeezing hard. Suddenly, a person flashed a crucifix in his face. “I repel you in the name of Christ,” the voice said shakily. Cristian stumbled backwards as the men handcuffed

him to a gurney. “No,” he yelled. “Sage!” he screamed. The person held the crucifix to his face. “I repel you,” they said.

A man with dark hair, wearing glasses and a lab coat, came in wearing gloves and a syringe in his hand. Cristian fought against the silver handcuffs, trying to break free, his eyes crimson. The person pressed the crucifix closer to his face. “Why?” he asked his voice choked with emotion. “Because I would do anything to save your soul,” Jillian replied holding the crucifix in her hands. “Both of us,” his father said standing next to her. “This was the only way to get you away from her and I’m not sorry,” Jillian said. The doctor jerked up the sleeve of Cristian’s shirt and put a tourniquet on his arm. “Will this work?” Jillian asked. “It worked on me,” the doctor said. He took the needle and jabbed it into Cristian’s arm. “Sage!” he screamed.

After waiting for a couple of hours for Cristian to return, Billy replied, “I think he ditched us.” “He didn’t want us to come with him.”

“We might as well look for Anna and the others,” Daniel said. “No use waiting around here.” Billy shook his head, disappointed. Pedro and Samuel stared at each other as they heard the echoes of Sage’s screams.

“Did you hear that?” Pedro said. “That was her.”

They flew speedily in the air as the sun was setting, looking for the abandoned church. Rafael stood over Sage, as she lay unconscious. He bent down and caressed her face, struck by her beauty. “Time to send you to your eternal rest,” he said taking out another wooden stake. He lifted the stake up high in the air.

Just as he was bringing the stake down, a force flung him backwards. The stake flew out of his hands into the flames, engulfing the building. Looking around, he saw yellow eyes staring at him. “Who’s there?” he asked as Pedro grabbed him and shoved

him against the wall. Samuel looked around in the flames for Sage. He saw her lying unconscious next to the cross. Instantly repelled by the emblem, he tried to figure out how to get to her as the flames spread dangerously closer to her.

Rafael got up as Pedro grabbed him by his arm, breaking it anew. Rafael bit down on his tongue from the force as blood spurted out his mouth. “Now I’m going to finish what I started that night you paid me a visit at the loft,” Pedro said.

Rafael’s eyes grew wider. “That was you?” he asked. “It was me,” he said giving him a head butt as he fell to the ground. “Sage!” Samuel yelled covering his face as he crawled over to her. The smell of the burning garlic singed his nostrils as he gagged, coughed, and gasped for air. “Pedro!” he yelled as he saw the two men fighting as the flames grew higher around them. Samuel grabbed Sage into his arms and swiftly flew out the gaping hole of the building.

Pedro held Rafael by his neck. “You will pay for what you’ve done to the queen and you will hurt her no more,” he said taking out the silver stake from his back pocket. Rafael’s mouth hung open as he stared at it shimmering in the orange and red flames. “Any last words before I send you to your maker?” Pedro asked.

“See you in hell!” Rafael said defiantly. “You first,” Pedro said stabbing him with the stake, driving it deep into his heart. Rafael’s body convulsed as blood gurgled from his mouth. His eyes went still and he fell dead at Pedro’s feet. “Adios,” Pedro said smirking. He started to fly out the building when a lick of flames caught on his pants leg and spread quickly. As Anna, Lisa, and Cody were making their way toward the church, they saw a shrieking ball of flames fly into the Hudson River.

Chapter Forty~nine

“Did you see that?” Lisa exclaimed. “That was either Queen V or possibly Cristian,” Cody said. “No,” Anna said, refusing to believe it. They flew in the direction from where they saw the ball of flames fly into the river and saw a growing crowd. “I saw it hit the river,” a man said. “What was it?” a teenaged girl asked. “Was it a meteor?” “There’s no way of knowing who it was,” Anna said, “Especially with this crowd of curiosity seekers.” “We’ll have to wait until everyone arrives back at the loft to know if it was one of our own.” Daniel and Billy arrived. “What happened?” Billy asked. “We saw the ball of flames.” “We don’t know yet,” Anna said. “I’m scared to say if it was Sage or Cristian.” “He gave us the old brush off,” Billy said. “He told us to wait for him at Central Park while he went to the gallery, but he never returned.” “He wanted to find Sage on his own,” Anna said. “Without our help,” Daniel replied.

“Fool,” Anna said. “We need to check that abandoned church,” Lisa said worriedly. They took advantage of the crowd’s distraction and flew in the darkening night sky, coming upon the building ablaze.” “No,” Anna said, “Sage.” While Cody stared at the burning building, he had flashbacks of the farm ablaze with his dead father

inside. They landed in the grass and began to run toward the building. “Hey,” a police officer yelled. “I can’t let you go anywhere near the building,” he said. “It’s too dangerous.” “But,” Billy started. “You’ll need to step back,” the police officer said as the firefighters were trying to put out the fire with their fire hoses.

“Another officer walked up to him and whispered in his ear. The coven pricked their ears to listen. “We found a body,” he said. Anna looked at the others, stricken. “I believe it was a male,” the officer said. The officer turned back toward them. “I’m not going to say this again—” he said, “you’ll need to leave; there’s nothing for you to see.” He turned his head at the rumble of the steeple collapsing from the burning building and turned to say something else, but the coven was gone. He scratched his head in wonderment.

Jillian sat beside Cristian who was strapped down onto the gurney. The doctor opened his eyes to check his pupils. “How many more injections will he need?” she asked. “Maybe two more to rid him of all the vampire symptoms,” the doctor said. “It took me about six injections to cure me of the symptoms.” “But yours was different,” she said. “You didn’t really become a vampire.” “My son is a full-fledged vampire.” “He won’t be for long,” the doctor said. “I’ll make sure of that.” “Are you sure this will work—you said the drug is experimental,” she asked. “The drug isolates the tainted cells, the vampire cells, from healthy ones,” the doctor said. He left the room for a brief minute.

Jillian sighed, taking Cristian’s hand and squeezing it. “I love you,” she said softly. “This is why I’m doing this.” Christopher sat across from her staring at Cristian quietly. Cristian began to open his eyes and looked around. “Sage,” he said. Jillian closed her eyes throwing her head back. “Sage,” he said, trying to get up. “We’re here, Son,” Christopher said, taking his hand, his eyes filling with tears. “Where’s Sage?” Cristian said becoming angry.

“Where am I?” he asked, trying to break the straps. “Doctor,” Jillian yelled. “Doctor.” He looked at the straps on his arm and glared at his mother. “What have you done?” he said, jerking his arms and snapping the straps. “Doctor, please!” Jillian yelled with urgency. The doctor ran in and took out the syringe as the two burly men held him down. “I will never forgive you,” Cristian said forcefully as the doctor jabbed the needle into his arm. “I will never forgive you!” he hollered.

John sat in the grand living room waiting anxiously for word of the search when the door creaked open. Running out the room, he stood in the hallway waiting to see who was arriving. Slowly, Anna appeared, and behind her were Daniel, Billy, Lisa, and Cody. “Where’s Cristian, Samuel, and Pedro?” he asked. “We don’t know where Cristian is,” Anna replied. “Samuel and Pedro went to the church to look for Queen Sage,” John said. “They did?” Lisa said looking faint.

“What happened?” John asked, sensing something bad had happened. “The church was on fire when we arrived,” Cody said still envisioning the burning farm in Kansas. “That’s not all,” Billy said, “We saw possibly a vampire engulfed in flames fly into the river.” “We don’t know if it was Sage or Cristian, and now that you told us Samuel and Pedro went it, could’ve been one of them also,” Anna said.

“The police officer said they found a body of a male inside the church,” Daniel said. “Rafael,” John whispered. “We don’t know,” Lisa said, “all we can do now is wait and see who comes back tonight.” Lisa nudged Cody’s shoulders. “I know that was hard for you,” she said softly. “Seeing that burning building and the painful memories it brought back to you.” “It was hard,” he said, trying to keep his composure. “It reminded me of all the time my father lay in his bed helpless.” Lisa gave him a comforting hug while John

stared at them silently.

Randi sat restlessly on her couch looking at her phone. “Please call me soon, Rafael,” she said. “The not knowing what’s happening is driving me crazy. I just have this bad feeling in the pit of my stomach that something went wrong.” Clicking on her television, she saw the breaking news about the burning church, the mysterious ball of fire that went into the Hudson River, and the strange lights the night before. “Please,” Randi said nervously. “A body was also discovered in the abandoned church,” the newscaster announced. “Police are waiting until after an autopsy is performed before announcing the identity of the body that was a Caucasian male in his late twenties or early thirties.” A cold chill went down Randi’s spine at the news. “I need to know,” she said rushing out the door grabbing her car keys.

Samuel laid Sage on a pile of foliage at an empty cemetery. He stared at her as she lay unconscious, looking at the deep lesions on her arms and legs, and the blood caked on her shoulder. “I knew he would torture you, but you fought back valiantly,” he said. He unbuttoned his shirt and tossed his hair from off his shoulder. “There’s no time—you need blood now,” he said. He leaned down close to her lips and whispered in Arabic, “Open your eyes.” Stirring at his voice, her eyes flew open and she stared at him, unmoving. He moved his head so she could see his jugular. “I offer you my blood to restore you,” he said. “Drink from me.” She sat up staring into his amber eyes that spoke of unbridled desire. “I offer you my life blood,” he said.

She lifted her hand painfully and stroked his face, moved by his devotion. Shifting her eyes, she concentrated on his neck, ignoring her pain as she felt her fangs grow and pulling him closer to her.

She felt him tremble violently against her as she flicked her tongue against his neck before sinking her fangs into his vein and feeling the blood flow into her mouth like an overflowing river.

She took her fill before falling back against the leaves quivering. Samuel, taking deep breaths in gulps, lay beside her watching as her flesh and limbs began to heal. Kissing her gently on the cheek, he rained a trail of kisses on her face leading to her neck, his bloodlust aroused, and sinking his fangs inside her flesh to drink of her essence. Sage gripped his arms, squeezing tightly as he drank from her before falling back on the ground panting. Exhausted, he took her into his arms holding her close as they both fell into repose together.

Randi ran inside the morgue anxiously. “I need to see,” she yelled. “Let me see him.” “See what,” her friend asked her, concerned. “The body that was brought in from the burning church tonight,” Randi said, “I need to see it. Please,” she pleaded. “Let me work something out,” her friend said. “Just don’t make a scene, alright?” She left Randi in her office while she went to speak to one of the orderlies. “Okay,” she motioned for her to come inside a room that had a body bag on the slate. “I can get into a lot of trouble for doing this,” her friend said. “I just need to see,” Randi said, her voice cracking.

The body bag was unzipped and Randi gasped staring at the sight before her. Rafael was laying dead, his skin ashen and lips blue with a gash on his forehead. “How did he die?” she asked as a tear rolled down her cheek. “He was stabbed with a blunt object,” her friend said. “He also had a deep cut on his leg.

“He didn’t go down without a fight,” Randi thought. “Thank you,” she said solemnly, taking one last look before Rafael’s face was covered as the zipper of the body bag was sealed.

Chapter Fifty

John awakened staring at Lisa lying on Cody's chest as they rested together. Billy had retired to his room to listen to music. Anna stood at the window staring out while Daniel sat in the chair staring at the doorway. "Anything?" John asked stretching. "No," Anna said softly.

"It's nearly sunrise, and Samuel, Pedro, Sage, Cristian have not returned. She heard the sound of the newspaper being dropped at the door as the delivery truck drove off. "I'll get it," she said.

"Get what?" John asked, confused, "I didn't hear anything." Lisa and Cody stirred awake.

"Hey," he said grinning. "Hey," she said timidly as she lifted herself from off of him. "Look at this," Anna said bringing the newspaper into the room. "The hunter is dead. It hasn't been confirmed yet, but police suspect that the body that was found in the church was that of Rafael Pearson whom the police were looking for in connection with the missing portrait, the disappearance of Robert Scott, and the string of vampire like slayings that have been plaguing the city," she read aloud.

"Pearson is dead," Daniel said. "It seems he is," Anna smiled. John glanced down at the floor saddened by the news. "I hope

he rests in peace,” he mumbled. “He was the last hunter,” Lisa said. “Not really,” John said. “He was the last of the direct line of Pearsons, but he had cousins who may be hunters also. He never spoke of any other relatives except about Lance Pearson, but there were probably others.” “We know there will always be hunters pursuing us,” Anna said. “I would never be naïve enough to think that just because Pearson is gone another hunter won’t take his place.” “That would be foolish thinking.”

After waiting during the night for the coroner to complete the autopsy and hold a news conference, Randi approached him as he headed toward his office. “I’d like to claim the body of Rafael Pearson,” she said. “He didn’t have any family here and his immediate family is deceased, so I would like to claim his body so that he will have a proper burial.”

“And you are?” the coroner asked. “I’m his girlfriend,” she said. “He would want me to do this for him.”

“Okay, I’ll just need you to sign the release papers,” he said, leading her to his office. “I know what to do,” she thought. “I won’t let you down.” After signing the papers, she took out her cell phone and called a funeral home arranging for Rafael’s body to be picked up from the morgue. Instead of having a burial service, she opted for him to be cremated and she would scatter his ashes. Arriving home, she was greeted by police officers who got out of their cruisers. “Ms. Benson,” the officer said. “We would like for you to answer questions regarding Rafael Pearson and your relationship with him.” “Am I under arrest?” she asked. “No, we just need you to answer some questions,” the officer said.

Jillian and Christopher stood over Cristian while the doctor injected him once more with the experimental drug, trying to calm him down while he screamed Sage’s name.

“Please, Son,” Jillian said. “Please try to see it from our point

of view. We did this because we love you and we're trying to save your soul."

"By forcing me to be drugged!" Cristian exclaimed, "This is how much you love me. Neither one of you has any idea what love is. Didn't you teach me?" he said. "Love is patient, love is kind, love isn't jealous, it isn't boastful, it isn't arrogant or rude, it doesn't insist on its own way, it isn't irritable or resentful, it doesn't rejoice at wrong, but rejoices at what's right. Instead, you ridicule the woman I love, you speak against her with hate, you schemed to try to tear us apart, and now you're drugging me, thinking that this will make me love her any less. I thought I knew you, but I see now I didn't. Don't think for a second that I will forget what you've done. I will never forget it, and I will never forgive you. "Ever."

"One day, Son, you will come to understand that we did this for you, and you will thank us," Jillian said emotionally. "Highly unlikely, Mother," Cristian said firmly. "As long as there is breath in my body, I will never forget, and I will never stop loving Sage, no matter what you do." "We don't have a choice," Christopher whispered in Jillian's ear. "We have to go to plan B."

Samuel awakened, sitting up to glance at the headstones around him. Staring back at Sage, he gasped at her, transfixed. She was lying at the foot of a headstone that was carved into a cherub. Lilies and baby's breath grew around the base of the grave. Staring at the name on the headstone, Samuel realized the grave belonged to a baby girl who died a week after her birth forty years ago. The angel carved in stone hovered over Sage as though it was watching over her as she slept. She was resting with one hand at her side and the other hand resting on her stomach, her dress hugging her body snugly. Her hair sprawled around her with long waves of curls. The sight reminded Samuel of an altar, and he felt compelled to fall on his knees in worship. She was stunningly beautiful in her rested state.

Looking up toward the sky, Samuel saw the clouds swirling as the rays of the sunlight penetrated. Turning his gaze to the clouds, the clouds scudded, covering the sun like a blanket shielding his eyes, and the blue sky became overcast.

Sage opened her eyes, sitting up. “Samuel,” she said, caressing his face. “I wasn’t dreaming.”

“No,” he said smiling. “I found you. Or I should say we found you.”

“We?” she asked.

“Pedro and I,” Samuel said. Sage didn’t seem surprised to hear of Pedro’s return. “We should be getting back—I know the others are anxious,” she said.

“Cristian has been beside himself with worry,” Samuel said. “Tensions were high.” Sage nodded her head, feeling strangely that she couldn’t feel her blood connection to Cristian anymore or read his thoughts. “There’s much we need to discuss,”

Samuel said. He stared intently into her eyes. “I need to tell you something before we go back,” he said, serious. “I had promised myself that I would say it no matter the consequences.” He took a deep intake of breath. “Sage, I love you. I love you with all that I am.” “I know you love me,” she said softly. “Your eyes don’t lie.”

Samuel exhaled, realizing he was still holding his breath. “Sage, I know you and Cristian have unfinished affairs that need to be addressed and that he still lays claim to your heart, but I had to tell you my feelings,” he said, “I could no longer keep them hidden inside.” He clasped her hand.

“But I can’t be a consolation prize or the person you turn to because you and Cristian are having problems. I can’t allow myself to be put in that position.”

“I would never do that to you Samuel,” Sage whispered. “You should know me better than that.”

He realized that his words hurt her when he saw a flash of pain in her eyes. “We should get going,” she murmured, standing up and turning away from him.

Jillian opened the elevator cage to Cristian’s loft looking around. “Where would he keep it?” she said looking through the drawers. She looked at his answering machine and listened to the two messages. One message was from her and the other was from Randi. She swiftly erased both messages. “Don’t need him having any reminders when this is all over,” she thought. She walked into his bedroom.

“He has to have it here somewhere...,” she wondered. She saw an old program from the night he presented the painting. Turning it over, she exclaimed, “There it is!” He had written down the address to Sage’s loft on the other side of the program.

“If Rafael completed his task, this might not be a great idea. But, somehow, I think that that vampire is still around, because she still has a strong hold on Cristian,” She gripped the crucifix in her hand, remembering how Sage snapped her necklace from her neck on the stairwell of the hotel when she held the cross to her face, repelling her. “God help me for what I’m about to do,” she thought.

Chapter Fifty-one

“**M**aybe when the others get back, we’ll find out what happened with Pearson?” Lisa said. “We knew he would never stop pursuing Sage until he achieved his goal,” Anna said. “What’s that cliché...be careful what you wish for.” “He definitely got more than he bargained for,” Daniel said. They heard the door open and shut. “Could it be?” Cody said as Sage appeared in the doorway. Astonished, everyone ran to greet her, giving her a hug. “Sage,” Anna said tearfully, holding her tight. “I’m alright,” Sage said. Billy ran into the room and joined in on the happy reunion. Everyone stepped back so Sage could have breathing space. “I was so worried,” Anna said. “I was worried about you,” Sage replied. “How did you...,” she began. “John,” Anna stated.

“He let me drink his blood to recover.” “Thank you, John,” Sage said, smiling. “I didn’t do anything special,” he said. “No, you didn’t,” Anna said sarcastically. John chuckled, seeing the mirth in her eyes. “And you?” Anna asked. “Samuel,” Sage said as he came into the room, quietly staring at everyone, his shirt still half-opened. Anna grinned broadly. “He and Pedro found me,” Sage said. “Samuel can better tell you.” “Pedro and I arrived at the church and heard Sage’s screams,” Samuel started. Everyone stared at him thunderstruck by

the resonance of his voice.

Instead of the soft quiet voice they were accustomed to, his voice had taken on the same booming, thunderous sound as Sage's voice. Sage remained strangely silent. "We knew that we needed to act now," Samuel continued, ignoring the curious stares. "Pedro went after Pearson, while I found Sage unconscious at the foot of a cross. She had been tortured with her arms and legs nearly raw from holy water being doused on her, her limbs appeared to be disjointed, and she was staked in her shoulder." "She needed blood right away, so I did what I had to do." "Just as any one of us would've done under the same circumstances," Anna said pursing her lips. "Thank you, Samuel." "I don't know what happened to Pedro after we escaped from the fire," he said. "We have an idea," Billy said. "We saw a howling ball of flames fly into the river. It had to have been Pedro, because Cristian had ditched us to find you on his own," he said staring at Sage. "He was really becoming impossible, Sage," Anna said. "We'll talk about that later," she said telepathically. "There's other news," she said. "Apparently, Pearson is dead." "Then Pedro killed him," Samuel said. "They were still in battle when I last saw him. Pedro killed him, but then somehow the hunter was still able to strike him before succumbing to his injuries," Daniel said. "He wasn't going down without taking Pedro with him." "Pedro wanted to make up for his betrayal of you," Anna said. Sage nodded her head solemnly.

"There's much to tell you," Anna said. "We had a search for you, and all your subjects went above and beyond their duty to assist. She told Sage of the hunt at the warehouses and of the nurse at the hospital who was helping Rafael. "Where is she now?" Sage asked. "Cristian took her home and I believe that she set him up for a trap." "How so?" Sage asked.

"She was being evasive about where Pearson was, and I kept

having this nagging feeling that she was lying or withholding information. She seemed a little too interested in speaking to only Cristian and not the rest of us. Cristian told us that she told him where you were, and Anna had suggested that me, Daniel, Pedro, and Samuel accompany him,” Billy said. “But he didn’t want Samuel to come along,” he said, giving his friend a sympathetic look. “Why didn’t he want you to come with him?” Sage asked Samuel. “It’s a private matter,” he said softly.

“So Daniel and I were supposed to go with him and he ditched us,” Billy said. “How did he ditch you?” Sage asked.

“He told us to wait for him at Central Park while he stopped by the gallery, but he never returned, and we haven’t seen him since.”

“We thought maybe he was the ball of fire that flew into the river, but now we know that couldn’t have been him.” “So we don’t know where Cristian is.”

Sage took a deep breath staring down at the floor. “Something happened to him,” she said. “It was too coincidental,” she sighed, “And I don’t believe in coincidences. I disappear and then he disappears. Pearson’s goal was to destroy me, but Cristian’s disappearing is an entirely different matter.”

“It was intended for him to be isolated from you, because you were never the targets.” “He and I were.”

“What do you mean, Queen V?” Cody asked. “Someone other than just Pearson had much to gain by pulling this off,” Sage said, remembering her struggle with Jillian on the stairwell and the two burly men who wrestled her down to the ground pouring holy water on her, the violent scuffle causing the beads in her hair to be strewn upon the steps.

“You’re talking in riddles again, Sage,” Anna said. “I’m going to change out of these clothes,” Sage said, excusing herself, leaving everyone to ponder what she meant. “Okay, Samuel,” Billy said

tapping his shoulder. “What is going on with you and Queen V?” he asked.

Sage stepped into her bedroom, staring at her bed. She could see where Cristian had lain from the imprint on the sheets and her cell phone sitting on the bed. Patting her dress in a panic, she felt the crinkle of the paper she had tucked into her bosom. Pulling it out, relieved, she stared at the old newspaper clipping before placing it back in her drawer and grabbing a change of clothes after she finished bathing. Sitting in the marble bathtub adorned with lit candles, she thought of her ordeal and how she had crawled toward the cross and felt the pull of her limbs stretching from their sockets, and the unspeakable pain she felt. It was as though her body was ablaze inside.

She felt strange. Closing her eyes, she tried to feel her connection to Cristian, but she felt a void. She couldn’t see him or hear him in her mind, which disturbed her. She knew that somehow his mother played a role in whatever happened to him.

Then her thoughts drifted to Samuel’s words to her. She understood that he was just trying to protect himself, but his words still stung.

It reminded her of a conversation she and Anna had once. Anna had remarked that she wasn’t a woman that needed a man to define her. A bit offended by her statement, Sage stated that her desire to marry and have a family was not because she needed a man to define her but because it was a desire she had always had.

Anna told her soothingly that she wasn’t implying that there was anything wrong with wanting companionship, because that is something that most people desire.

“I think you’re one of those people who aren’t meant to live your life in solitude,” she told her. “Say what you will, I believe that there is a mate for everyone,” Sage argued. “Even for stubborn

people like yourself,” she teased. She understood Anna’s reluctance and resistance to falling in love, because to give your heart to another is to take the risk of having it broken, which is why she also understood Samuel’s need to protect his heart.

“Love is a gamble,” she thought stepping out of the bathtub.

After changing into a black, lacy blouse and a long skirt and letting her hair hang down her back, Sage rejoined the others in the grand living room while Billy continued to try to get information from Samuel who stared at him shaking his head, when the doorbell rang, startling everyone. “I’ve never heard the doorbell before,” John said. The doorbell rang again. “Who can that be?” Daniel said. Someone began pounding on the door, along with ringing the doorbell incessantly.

“Okay, this has got to stop,” Anna said, leaving to answer the door. Sage heard the door open and Anna yelp as the door slammed shut. “Anna,” she yelled. Anna flew into the living room covering her eyes, screaming. Suddenly, a crucifix appeared in the doorway, held by an extended, sleeved arm of the female.

“Who’s there?” Sage said angrily. Jillian West appeared in the doorway wearing jeans and a suede jacket, holding the crucifix in her hand advancing toward her slowly. The coven, angry, gathered around Sage in a circle leering at her. Jillian held the crucifix up high repelling them, stating, “I serve a higher power greater than the dark power of this world.”

Sage stood firmly, unaffected by the crucifix while the others recoiled except for John. Jillian’s eyes widened, remembering how in the stairwell, Sage couldn’t look at the crucifix without its causing her pain, wondering why it now had no effect on her. “What do you want and why have you barged into my home?” Sage asked in a commanding tone with a strong emphasis on the

words “my home.”

“I want to speak to you woman to woman, because this concerns my son.”

“What have you done to Cristian?” Sage asked. “Something any mother would do to save their child,” Jillian said. “I need you to do something for him if you love him,” she said. “I need you to set him free.” All eyes turned to Sage as her eyes began to glisten slightly.

Chapter Fifty~two

“**Y**ou know where Cristian is?” Sage asked. “He’s fine,” Jillian replied. “You see, my son, is no longer one of your kind.” “Our kind,” Anna sneered. “What did you do to Cristian?” Sage asked. “He was rehabbed,” Jillian stated. “He was cured of his vampirism.” “How?” Sage asked. “He was given a drug that can take away the vampire symptoms.” “I’ve never heard of a vampire being cured,” Anna said. “That was something I wanted and longed for,” Sage thought to herself wistfully. “I wanted to be cured of this curse and to live as a human again.”

“How do you know that he was cured?” she asked. “What if the symptoms are dormant?” “My son is no longer a vampire,” Jillian said firmly. “The symptoms won’t return.” “You sound so sure,” John said. “I was always under the impression that a vampire stays a vampire after being turned.” “You’re a human,” Jillian said astonished. “Why are you living with these ungodly creatures?”

Daniel shook his head in disgust. “Because these people have shown me more kindness than a human ever has,” John said defiantly. Billy smirked. “They took me in, never judged me, and made me feel welcomed and a part of the family. Sage smiled slightly at his impassioned speech. “I pray for your soul,” Jillian said, undaunted.

“You’ve been deceived.” Lisa frowned.

“No,” John said with indignation, “You’re the hypocrite. I get really tired of people like you with your holier-than-thou attitudes trying to constantly shove your beliefs down my throat, and if I disagree, then I’m going to hell. You’re so quick to label people who don’t believe the same as you as being immoral, or not like you.” Jillian sighed as though she was bored, rolling her eyes. John mumbled under his breath, while Lisa stared at him, amused.

“You forced Cristian to take a drug that you have no idea what the side effects will be by deceiving him,” Sage said.

“You were in the stairwell with Pearson.” “You helped him all along, didn’t you?” Anna glared at her, while the others looked on scornfully. “So what if I did,” Jillian said unapologetically.

“Cristian will understand why I had to deceive him, because he would’ve never left you willingly.” “I did what I had to do...,” she stopped. “He refuses to let you go,” she said with irritation. “I need for you to convince him that he will have a better life without you, but that can’t happen as long as he holds you in his heart. I need for you to help him to forget you.”

Anna turned to stare at Samuel. Azure eyes met with violet ones. “This is an opportunity that has presented itself to you,” she said telepathically. “Seize it.”

Samuel stared at her, then turned his eyes toward Sage. “Did you know that Cristian nearly died?” Cody asked. “If Queen V hadn’t turned him, he would be dead right now.”

“She saved his life.” “I would’ve preferred that I lost my son to death than for him to lose his soul,” Jillian said. “I liken it to a drug addiction.” John dropped his mouth in incredulity. “He needed to be cured of vampirism and your hold over him.” “You don’t even have the slightest idea what drug addiction is like, lady,” John said angrily, “to even try to compare the two is beyond ludicrous.”

“I’ve heard enough,” Sage said. “I’d like you to leave now.”

“I want you to think about it,” Jillian said. “If you were in my shoes, you would do the same thing if you were a mother trying to save her child. Do you have children?” she asked. “I can’t have children,” Sage said softly. “Well,” Jillian huffed, “Thank God for small mercies.” Sage’s eyes smarted.

“Get out,” Anna yelled. Jillian smiled, still holding the crucifix in her hand. “I’ll come back tomorrow to know your decision. I can find my own way out,” she snarled as Anna went to escort her out.

“The nerve of that woman,” Daniel said. “She’s a piece of work,” Billy said. “She barges into our home and demands that Queen V make Cristian forget her.” “The only reason I think any of us restrained ourselves was because she is Cristian’s mother,” Lisa said. “That explains what happened to Cristian,” Anna said coming back into the living room. “You were right, Sage.”

“This was an intentional setup to achieve two things.”

“First, destroy you, and second to separate you and Cristian.”

“From the first moment I met her and her severe reaction toward me, I knew she would never accept me in Cristian’s life,” Sage said. “Her dislike for me was instantaneous.”

“Cristian will never forgive her for what she’s done.”

“Sage, I don’t want to sound unsympathetic towards him,” Anna began, “But the bugger brought this on himself when he refused to let Billy, Daniel, or even Samuel go with him, because of his pride and his wanting to be your knight in shining armor.” Anna turned her eyes toward the others, speaking to them telepathically.

They glanced over at Samuel and at Sage nodding their heads and excused themselves so the two could speak privately. “Hey, John, how about a game on the Xbox?” Billy said, patting him on the back as they exited the room. “We’ll talk later,” Anna said, leaving

the room.

Samuel sighed and sat down on the antique chair while Sage took a breath. “Okay, Samuel,” she said.

“What happened while I was gone, and why didn’t Cristian want you to help him?” “He found out about the night we had together,” Samuel said. “How?” Sage asked.

“I don’t know how, but somehow he knew and he confronted me about it.”

“I didn’t confirm or deny his suspicions and he was very troubled by it. He was defensive about your relationship, telling me that you chose him and that I had to accept it.” He lowered his voice. “He asked me if I loved you, and I couldn’t deny it.”

Sage nodded her head, sucking in her bottom lip. “He told me that we shouldn’t keep secrets from each other, and I’m sure he wasn’t happy to know I had indeed kept another secret from him. It was something that happened before he was born and before you even knew he existed,” Samuel said. “Why should we feel guilt for something that happened before he entered your life?”

“He was hurt,” she said, closing her eyes imagining the sting Cristian felt at the discovery. “He said that it was more than just a physical connection between us,” Samuel said. “I can see now why he was so adamant in not wanting your help to find me, but his stubbornness ended up leading him right into the trap his mother and Pearson set up for him,” Sage replied. “You did have regret for turning him,” Samuel whispered gently.

“I did,” she acknowledged. “It was beginning to come between us, and now the choice has been taken out of my hands. Once again, I have another difficult decision to make,” she uttered the words so softly that, if not for his sensitive hearing, Samuel wouldn’t have heard her. He clasped her hands, remembering something from the other night.

“Sage, while you were resting at the cemetery, I scanned the gravestones and I saw one that I know will be of interest to you. It was the grave of Cristian Thomas,” he said. “Cristian’s grave,” Sage said, welling up. “I wanted to tell you when you awakened, but I... he stopped, seeing the tears in her eyes. “I’m sorry I didn’t tell you sooner,” he said. “Cristian’s grave,” she repeated. “Please show me where it is,” she asked.

After being repeatedly questioned by the police, Randi was cleared to go home where she swiftly undressed and showered. Wearing her bathrobe, she stared downcast at the couch where Rafael slept and saw his duffle bag sitting on the floor opened with his change of clothes inside. “I still can’t believe he’s gone,” she thought. “Just a few hours ago, I spoke to him on the phone, and now I’ll never hear his voice again.”

Noticing a message on her cell phone, she picked it up to retrieve it. It was the funeral home telling her that she would be able to pick up the urn containing Rafael’s ashes in the morning. Hanging up the phone, she remembered the kiss they shared and the strength of his hands while they were gripped around her waist. “I’d give anything to have that moment back,” she thought. “I will honor your memory,” she vowed, wiping her eyes. “I won’t let your death be in vain.”

“He’s still asking for her,” Christopher said plainly, as Jillian came through the door of the abandoned warehouse, rubbing her temples soothingly. “So what happened?” he asked. “I went by the vampires’ lair,” Jillian said. “Just as we suspected, she was still alive.”

“So Rafael failed in his attempt to destroy her,” he said. “It gets better,” she said. “He’s dead,” she handed him the afternoon newspaper. “Even a trained vampire hunter couldn’t destroy her.”

“Then she won’t agree to our request,” he said. “Yes, she will,” Jillian said, “For one reason.” “What reason?” Christopher asked. “Something she can never give Cristian that she wants more than anything.
A family.”

Chapter Fifty~three

“How do you know?” Christopher asked. “A woman’s intuition,” Jillian replied. “I just know. Cristian is at an age where he’s ready to settle down and have a family. She can’t give him that, and for that reason, she’ll release him so that he can have the family he’s always wanted.” “I don’t know,” Christopher said, doubtful. “Cristian is so drawn to her that he may forgo having a family. He would rather give that up than to give her up. You heard him,” he said. “He would never stop loving her.” “He will if he doesn’t remember her anymore,” Jillian reasoned. “I just cannot and will not accept his choosing to spend eternity being a vampire, and especially loving one. I won’t.”

Anna walked back into the living room to find both Samuel and Sage gone, when Daniel entered the room. “They’re not here,” she said. “Isn’t that what you wanted?” he asked, “For them to speak alone?” “Yes,” Anna replied. “Why are you so interested in Queen V and Samuel anyway?” “She’s in love with Cristian.” “Sometimes things aren’t how they appear,” Anna said. “Meaning?” he asked. “Meaning that sometimes we can love someone who isn’t right for us,” she said. “But why do you care, since you don’t believe in love conquering all?” he asked. “Maybe I want to believe in it,” Anna

said. “Maybe I want to see if two people who complement each other can really come together, or will they make the wrong choice and live eternally with regret?” “That’s not for us to decide,” Daniel said. “If there’s such a thing as destiny, then it will work itself out without interference.”

“Sometimes we make our own destiny,” Anna said. “It comes down to choices, and whatever we chose, we live with the consequences.” “We chose to spend a night together in passion,” he said. “Do you regret it?” “No,” Anna answered.

“In England, I told you things about my life that I hadn’t told anyone.” “And it made you feel vulnerable?” he asked. “Yes,” she said softly. “The thought of letting someone into my heart frightens me yet...,” she looked into his eyes, “I can’t seem to help myself when I’m with you.” “I feel lost in your embrace, in your touch.” “Your passion burns me and I keep reaching for the flame wanting more.” “I...” He silenced her with a blistering kiss.

Lisa sat in the chair, shifting uncomfortably while Cody sat on his bed. “What cha thinking about?” he asked. “Love.” she replied. “From what I’ve heard about love, it is supposed to be beautiful and nourishing—it shouldn’t bring you pain or cause you to suffer.”

“When love is real and true it is beautiful,” he said softly. She nodded her head. “When I was six, I wanted to be a ballerina,” she said with a tiny smile. “I dreamed of it. My mother made me ballerina shoes and I would practice in my room,” she chuckled. “She would have to tell me to keep it down so as not to disturb my father. One afternoon,” she paused, blinking back the tears.

Cody rose from his bed and knelt at her side taking her hand. “One afternoon, my father came home from the mill early, and my mother had forgotten about the meal cooking, because she was watching me dance and the pot roast she was fixing burned.”

“My father was so angry with her...,” she said as tears spilled

down her cheeks. “He took my shoes and threw them into the fireplace to punish me and...,” she squeezed Cody’s hand, “he made us eat the burnt food.

“That’s not all,” she whispered. “He took a paddle he had made and beat my mother with it. All I could do was sit helpless in my room and listen to her screams.”

“Lisa, I’m sorry,” Cody said.

“My mother tried to shield me from it, but she couldn’t,” she said tearfully. “Then one day, I couldn’t take it anymore and I ran away. My leaving is what prompted my mother’s...,” Cody took her into his arms as she buried her face in his shoulders, sobbing. “I feel so guilty for leaving her,” she cried. Cody held her, caressing her hair as he cradled her in his arms.

Samuel and a cloaked Sage arrived at the cemetery as he silently led her toward the gravesite of her first love. “This is where I saw it,” he said, solemnly pointing toward a grave sitting next to an oak tree. Taking a breath, Sage walked slowly through the crunching leaves toward the grave, lowering her head with heaviness like a weight was hanging on her shoulders until she stood at the foot. Lifting up her head, she looked at the gravestone with the inscription: Cristian Lewis Thomas. He was twenty-seven years old at the time of his death. Memories flooded her mind like a gushing stream as she dropped to the ground tracing the engraved inscription with her fingers. “This is his grave,” she thought as the tears blinded her eyes.

Samuel stood in the distance watching her in silence and knowing she needed this time to grieve. Sage continued to trace the etching with her fingers, remembering vividly the day she first laid eyes on Cristian. She smiled slightly, remembering them walking along the riverside watching the sunrise and their gentle, first kiss.

She envisioned in her mind what would’ve happened the day

he suggested that they run away together if the outcome had been different. "Let's run away," Cristian said as they rode in the carriage. "What about your parents?" Sage asked. "I will not say they will be pleased by my decision, but this is what I want," he said. "This may be our only chance." "Okay," she said, knowing that she would have to tell Cristian the truth about her parents, and soon.

After boarding the ship, Sage kept her hands gloved and attempted to hide her face so that no one could see her. She and Cristian agreed to his vexation that if anyone questioned them, she would pretend to be his servant. As much as he didn't like the idea, he knew they didn't have a choice, because of the taboo nature of their relationship. Hiding in small quarters with only one cot, they sat their suitcases aside as Sage stood at the door listening. "What's wrong Sage?" he asked. "I was listening for my...."

"Your parents?" he asked, perplexed. "There's something you need to know about my father and my mother. They're not ordinary people," she said. "Don't worry about them," he said. "My parents aren't happy either, and frankly I don't care. They would've never given me their blessing to marry you, and that's something I want to do." "But who would marry us?" she asked. "Our relationship is thought of as sinful." "I refuse to believe that loving someone just because they're different is wrong," he said angrily. "If we were all supposed to be the same, then God would not have made us different."

She glanced down at the floor, sorrowful that because of society's views, a relationship like theirs had to be kept hidden like a shameful secret. At one time, Sage dreamed of a world where everyone lived together in harmony, but she realized that that would never happen. The world is too full of hate.

Cristian extended his hand. "Come," he said. She took his hand and he pulled her into a passionate kiss laying her on the cot. "We'll

have to keep each other warm,” he said as they snuggled together under the blanket, kicking it to generate warmth between them. Sage laughed, nuzzling into his arms. “Sage,” he said, lifting her chin, “I love you and I want to spend the rest of my days with you.” “I love you Cristian,” she said kissing his lips softly. He gazed at the opening of her day gown partially revealing her breast and felt the desires of his body awakening.

He swallowed, feeling himself becoming aroused and knowing that she would feel it with their bodies pressed close together. “Sage, I’m sorry,” he said flustered. “Maybe I should...,” she pressed her lips against his, silencing his words. The kiss deepened as he ran his fingers through her hair, shuffling to lie on top of her. She parted her lips allowing him to slip his tongue in her mouth as their tongues danced with each other.

Their bodies heated from arousal, he took off his shirt and underpants while she took off her day gown and petticoat. “You’re so beautiful,” he whispered, staring at her bare chest, kissing her neck and making his way to her lips as she moaned against him. She closed her eyes, running her fingers through his hair and caressing his back. He lifted himself up to look at her as she kept her eyes closed, swooning. “Open your eyes,” he panted.

She opened her eyes, staring up at him and beheld Samuel’s enraptured face as she ran her fingers through his hair and down his shoulders. Aghast, Sage opened her eyes as she fell back. Moving quickly, Samuel caught her before she hit the ground. “I’m here, Sage,” he said, concerned. She stared at him, bewildered, as she struggled with her conflicting emotions of love, grief, desire, and guilt.

Chapter Fifty~four

“It’s quiet,” John said while he and Billy played on the Xbox. Billy tilted his head to listen, “You’re right,” he said as they set aside the games and got up, walking out into the hallway and into the living room. It was empty. “Queen V and Samuel are gone,” Billy said. “Maybe we should ask Anna?” John said. “Maybe not,” Billy replied, “She may be preoccupied.” “Lisa then,” John said. They walked to her room and noticed her door left ajar. Opening it, they peered into the cream-colored room with a chestnut bed with a hand-sewn quilt of flowers covering it.

Along the wall were a hope chest with a ballerina music box, a dresser, and rows of porcelain dolls. “She isn’t here,” John said. “Well, that leaves one option,” Billy said. Walking to Cody’s room, Billy lightly rapped on the door. After no reply, he turned the knob, opening it. Both men stopped abruptly at the sight before them. Lisa was nuzzled against Cody on his bed, resting on his chest. He had his arms wrapped around her. Both were fully clothed and were asleep.

Embarrassed by the intimate scene, John suggested that they leave before awakening them. “I know you liked, Lisa,” Billy said, searching John’s eyes. “Does it bother you to see her becoming

close with Cody?”

“I will admit that it bothers me a little,” John confessed. “But I told her that we didn’t have a future, and once I did that, I had no say so on what she did with her life—including whom she spends her time with.”

“What makes you think it wouldn’t work between you?” Billy asked. “We come from different worlds,” John said, “and I don’t want to be a vampire, which is what I would’ve had to do if I wanted to be with Lisa.”

“After seeing what happened with Queen Sage and Cristian, it reinforced my convictions that it’s better this way.”

“So your decision to not have a relationship with a vampire doesn’t influence your friendship with one?” Billy asked. “No,” John replied. “Good, because with Samuel so occupied, it’s good to have other friends around, and I like you,” he said. “So you noticed Samuel and Queen Sage too?” John asked. “I thought I was the only one.”

“I always knew they had a close friendship like she and Anna do, but there was something else, and Samuel admitted to me that he was smitten with her once,” Billy said. “Maybe he still is and that’s why Cristian didn’t want him to help look for her, because he noticed it too,” John said, “Maybe Samuel was trying to avoid a messy situation that that would cause.” “Look what happened when Pedro was obsessed with her.” “Samuel is very considerate and respectful of Queen V.”

“He wouldn’t want to get in the middle of her and Cristian’s relationship,” Billy replied. “He’s not like that.”

“Sage, are you alright?” Samuel asked, still holding her. “I’m fine,” she replied still reeling from her bizarre fantasy and the feelings it stirred in her. She looked at the simple gravestone again and noticed that next to Cristian’s grave were two family plots, one containing

his mother's name, Carolyn Thomas, and the other containing the name of Jonathan Thomas. She saw that his mother died the same year as Cristian. "She must've died a few months after he did," she thought sadly. She recalled Jillian West and her desperation to save her son who, unbeknownst to her, has the same name and face as her lost love. "A mother would do anything to protect her child," she mumbled softly. "To lose a child is unbearable for any parent."

She understood Jillian's love for her son, and if she were in the same position, she wouldn't want her child to live their life as a vampire. "I understand you more than you realize," Sage thought. Samuel stared at her, pained, as she was lost in her thoughts. "Is this why I was to return to New York?" she wondered. "Was this that purpose? We find each other so that we can both have closure in our lives." The magnitude of what Jillian West was asking Sage to do was great within her like an old scar chafed raw as she leaned against Samuel and let the emotion wash over her in waves of grief as she wept on his lean shoulders. He affectionately stroked her hair as she buried her face in his neck, sobbing.

"Son," Christopher asked as Cristian stared at the wall. He watched in anguish as a tear streamed down his son's face.

"We're doing this because we love you," he said taking Cristian's hand. He looked away from his father and closed his eyes. "We'd remove the straps if you promise to not remove the IV from your arm." Cristian remained silent. The doctor had mentioned to his parents that because he hadn't eaten a solid meal for weeks, he would need to be fed intravenously until he was able to consume solid meals again. "I can understand Mother doing this," Cristian said, turning his face toward his father askance. "But why you?" "I did this because I feel it's the right thing to do, Son," Christopher said gently. "By keeping me away from the woman I love?" Cristian asked. "That's cruel, Dad." Christopher looked down at the floor,

his lips quivering. “Please try to understand,” he said softly. “Your mother and I are doing this because we love you.” Cristian shook his head and stared back at the wall.

“After tomorrow, you won’t remember any of this,” Christopher thought, “because seeing you in pain is killing me.”

John had a tray of food in his hand eating, while Billy drank a glass of blood when the door opened and shut with a clang. “Probably Samuel and Queen V returning,” Billy said. He heard haggard breathing and choppy footsteps as Pedro, badly burned, his clothes barely hanging onto him, limped into the room, and collapsed on the floor. “Pedro!” Billy yelled. John dropped his tray of food to the floor with a clatter. “Sangre!” Pedro said in a raspy voice repeatedly. Lisa and Cody ran into the room at Billy’s utterance, gasping in shock at Pedro’s appearance. “Get blood from the storage room,” Billy said to Lisa, not wanting to touch Pedro because his skin was blistered, bleeding, and sagging from his body like melted wax. “Hang in there, Pedro,” he said as Pedro continued to gasp for air. “Sangre,” he said straining. “Sangre.”

Chapter Fifty~five

Anna and Daniel ran into the room, both adjusting their clothes. Lisa and Cody stared at them unsurprised by their disheveled appearance and tousled hair. “What happened?” she asked. “We now know who the flying flame of fire was,” Billy said stepping aside to reveal Pedro on the floor gasping for air. Anna bent down staring into Pedro eyes as they rolled toward the back of his head. “Lisa is getting blood from the storage room,” Cody said. “That won’t be enough,” Anna said. “He needs blood from the queen.” “Why?” John asked. “When a vampire has been severely burned, only the blood of the queen can restore them.” “Wow!” John thought. “Sangre” Pedro wheezed. “Sangre.” Lisa ran into the room with the bottle of blood in her hands. “We can at least try to see if this will hold him over until Queen V returns,” Cody said.

Lisa opened the bottle and leaned over Pedro, tipping the bottle over toward his cracked lips. “Drink,” she said as she poured the blood into his mouth. He drank it in gulps before he began coughing and gagging, vomiting it back up. “I knew it,” Anna said. A strong wind blew into the room as Sage and Samuel appeared, both aware of what had occurred. Billy stepped aside as she removed the hood of her cloak and stared at Pedro as he convulsed on the floor.

“Pedro,” she said as he stilled at the sound of her voice. The others stepped back as she kneeled beside him and lifted her hand.

Raising a sharp claw, she cut the palm of her hand and balled her hand into a fist as the blood began to drip from the wound. The sight of blood whetted the others’ appetites as they stared hungrily at it rolling down her arm like a slow moving brook. Feeling queasy, John looked away from the scene. She raised her hand over Pedro’s lips as he flicked out his tongue to capture the crimson droplets as they trickled from her hand. After swallowing her blood, he closed his eyes and lay silently while the wound in Sage’s hand healed.

Suddenly, the burns on his body began to shrivel up and peel revealing new skin underneath. The scarred skin fell to the floor in a heap of dust as a light breeze blew them away.

John stood with his mouth gaped open, stunned. Sage stood up and looked at the others who stared at her in awe. “Wow!” Cody said. “Incredible!” Billy replied. Samuel looked at her enthralled as he bowed in deference to her with the others following suit. Pedro’s eyes flew open as he slowly focused on his surroundings before his eyes fell on Sage. Swiftly, he bowed before her stating mournfully, “Lo siento, por favor perdóname.” “Why did you do it?” she asked.

He lifted his head, gazing up at her as she stood before him waiting for his response. “I was jealous,” he said softly. “I wanted Cristian out of your life, because I thought I was the better match for you.” Both Billy and Anna cast a glance at Samuel. “I went to his loft after I took the painting, because I felt that painting is what caused all of our troubles. We fought and he staked me. Then I began to regenerate, and when I returned, everyone had left.” “I felt abandoned.” Sage nodded her head, staring down at the floor. “Where did you go while we were gone?” Lisa asked.

“Mexico,” he replied. “Mexico City, actually,” he said rising

to his feet. “I wanted to go back to the place that I had called home for years and retrace my past. Everyone stared at each other, remembering their own need to retrace their past. “I realized my error and wanted to make amends for it, but I didn’t know how to make up for it. You chose Cristian and there was no changing that.” Sage didn’t respond. “Going back home helped me find a new perspective on things. Not only that,” he said, “I met someone while I was there that I’d like you to meet one day. Her name is Maria.” “Does she know you’re a vampire?” Anna asked. “Yes, it was by accident,” he replied. “I was hungry and looking for something to eat, and she caught me feeding on one of her chickens, thinking me to be a chupacabra.”

“What’s a chupacabra?” John asked, having trouble with the pronunciation. “A chupacabra is an animal that drinks the blood of livestock and goats,” Pedro said. “It’s like a reptile with fangs and red eyes,” Lisa said, “It’s an urban legend in the Americas.” John shivered trying to visualize it in his mind. “She took me in, and seeing my desperation, she let me feed from her,” Pedro continued. “How was she able to see you if you were nothing more than a shadow?” Lisa asked. “I don’t know,” Pedro said. “But she was able to see me when no one else could.”

“Sometimes the natural eye can see the supernatural,” Daniel said. “I suppose that depends on if you believe in the supernatural in order to see it,” John said, “but what do I know,” he said scratching his head. “So you’re going to turn her eventually?” Sage asked. “I already have,” he said. “She was here helping with the search for you.”

Anna remembered seeing Pedro talking to a young petite woman with dark hair and dark brown eyes. “So you’ve turned her—” Anna said, “are you going to be bringing her into the family?” “If the queen should allow it,” he replied. “We shall see,” Sage said.

“Did you kill Pearson?” she asked. “Si,” he said matter-of-factly. “I staked him using the same silver stake he used on you.”

“Poetic justice,” Anna said smugly.

“He’ll trouble us no more,” Daniel stated jubilantly.

Instead of feeling triumphant over the death of the hunter, Sage felt bittersweet.

Christopher, distraught, walked over to Jillian as she was reading a book by the lamp. “I thought we could wait until tomorrow, but we have to do something now,” he said. “What’s wrong with Cristian?” she asked alarmed. “He’s been in a funk,” Christopher said. “I don’t like seeing him like this.” She got up from the chair and walked over to Cristian who was lying on the gurney with his eyes closed, tears flowing down his face. She took a finger and gently wiped a tear from his cheek. “We need to do this tonight to relieve him of his misery,” Christopher said, “The sooner he forgets her, the sooner we can go back to our lives.” “Sage,” Cristian whispered softly in his sleep. “You’re right,” she said tearing slightly.

Pedro went to his room to get a change of clothes, while Anna nudged Sage on her shoulders. “So what happened with you and...,” she glanced over at Samuel. “Nothing,” Sage replied plainly. She glanced down at Anna’s blouse with the telltale signs of having been buttoned in a hurry with the buttons out of sync. “You might want to readjust your blouse,” she teased with a tiny grin. Anna glanced down at her blouse and gasped, quickly readjusting it as Sage chuckled. Anna gazed at Daniel who was staring at her smiling. Sage looked around the room and her breath caught as her eyes fell on Samuel who was gazing at her, enchanted. Their eyes lingered on each other for a few fleeting minutes before both looked away, but not before being noticed by Lisa and Billy who stared at them curiously. Just as Sage decided to retreat to her room, the doorbell began to ring loudly in the hallway. “I’ll get it this time,” she said,

looking for an excuse to escape the inquisitive stares, when Anna shouted, “I’m coming with you.” Sage opened the door and was face-to-face with Jillian. “I’m sorry, this can’t wait until tomorrow,” she said. “I need you to help my son to forget you tonight for both our sakes.” Sage took a deep breath, while Anna glared at Jillian with revulsion.

Chapter Fifty~six

“I need for you to come alone,” Jillian said, still standing at the door. “No,” Anna said sternly, “she’s not going anywhere alone with you.” “I don’t want your guard dog coming to make things worse than they have to be,” Jillian retorted. Anna started toward her, but Sage held her back. “She’s not a guard dog,” she said angrily, “and she will be coming with me.” “Very well,” Jillian said with a heavy sigh. “I just need to grab my cloak,” she said, shutting the door leaving Jillian standing on the pavement. “She should be very glad that I didn’t kill her right then and there,” Anna spat. They walked into the grand living room where Pedro had rejoined the others. Lisa and Cody were helping John clean up the mess on the floor from where he’d dropped his tray while Billy talked with Daniel. “Anna and I have something we need to attend to,” Sage said. “We won’t be gone long.”

“Maybe we should come with you,” Daniel said. “Just so nothing else happens.” “No, we’ll be fine,” Anna said. “This is a personal matter,” she said to him telepathically. “Okay, I’ll wait for you,” he said. Samuel looked at Sage, noticing the sorrow in her eyes, perceiving that her sudden errand had to do with Cristian, and it was something she had to do without his aid. Sage put on her cloak,

and with a quick wave of good-bye, she and Anna went out the door as the others watched.

“You know you don’t have to be so rude,” Jillian huffed as they walked toward her car. “I could’ve stood in the hallway.” Anna muttered under her breath a few curse words. “Good thing she doesn’t have the sensitive hearing of a vampire,” Sage thought. “She’d be red just about now.” Sage sat on the passenger side while Anna sat in the backseat of the cherry red SUV with rosary beads hanging from the rearview mirror. Jillian turned on the radio programmed to a Christian station and turned up the volume. Sage was sure that Anna was covering her ears to block the music. She didn’t find the music to be very dreadful with its message of joy and love. She noticed Jillian occasionally glancing at her from the corner of her eye to see a reaction she suspected. The gesture reminded her of her first date with Cristian. He was so excited and nervous that his energy was contagious.

She chuckled softly remembering how the two mean-spirited girls got their comeuppance at the movie theater, while an unsuspecting Cristian was enjoying the movie previews. She recalled their tour of Times Square and the Manhattan skyline and the fun they had on the tour bus. “We had good times together,” she thought her eyes brimming. Sage looked out the window to pass the time, noticing a sign welcoming them to New Jersey as Jillian turned down a narrow street. “A part of me felt like he may be here,” Anna said to Sage telepathically. “This was all part of the plan, obviously, to trap Cristian,” she thought, “And it worked.”

After about a thirty- minute drive, Jillian pulled up to a warehouse and shut off the engine. Sage could hear Anna heave a big sigh of relief at not having to listen to that nail-scratching-on-a-chalkboard music. “Before we go in, I just want to make one thing clear,” Jillian said, “This is for Cristian. Not for you or anyone else.”

“You should also realize that if the day comes that he finds out what you’ve done, he will never forgive you for meddling in his life,” Sage replied calmly. “A mind may forget, but the heart always remembers.” “I’d rather that my son hates me for meddling than him being a vampire damned for eternity,” Jillian snapped. She turned and opened the door as Sage and Anna exited the car. “I’m this close,” Anna said glaring at her. “I hate when people disrespect you.” “I understand your rage,” Sage said, “I’m having trouble holding my tongue too.”

Jillian opened the door, and Sage halted upon seeing the two burly men who had held her down in the stairwell. “I knew it,” she said, incredulous. “Those two men were in the stairwell,” she whispered to Anna. The men started toward them, but Jillian told them that their assistance wouldn’t be needed. The men smirked at Sage and Anna as they walked past them. “Let’s leave them a parting gift,” Anna said to Sage. “Something they’ll never forget.” Sage smiled at Anna’s devious mind as Jillian led them into a small room. A man with dark hair, glasses, and a lab coat got up, staring at them with intrigue. “Oh my, God it’s you!” he said, staring with his mouth gaping. “Everyone acts like that when they see her,” Jillian retorted with disgust.

“The vampire queen,” the doctor said. “That painting doesn’t do you justice at all,” he said. Anna grinned. “That’s enough,” Jillian yelled. “Leave us.” He got up from the chair and walked out the room nearly walking into the door as he twisted his neck to stare at the women.

“This is why I want Cristian to forget you,” Jillian huffed. She paused at a steel door. “Just make him forget you, then leave and never return,” she said. “Let me make something clear,” Sage said, having had enough of Jillian’s attitude, “I’m not doing this for you either. This is for Cristian, and what I choose to do after I leave

here is my concern and mine alone.” “Whatever,” Jillian sneered. “Your attitude certainly isn’t reflective of your faith,” Sage chided. Jillian snorted and opened the door.

Sage gasped at the sight of Cristian. He was pale and sweaty with an IV in his arm and his hands and legs strapped onto the gurney. She walked inside hurriedly as Christopher jumped from his seat and stood next to Jillian who was standing at the door. Anna stood on the outside of the door watching them suspiciously. Sage stood over him grieved at his condition and filled with ire that his parents would do something like this to their own son. She understood her father’s rage when Jonathan Thomas killed his only son.

“You treated him like a guinea pig!” she exclaimed staring at Jillian and Christopher with eyes red as flames. Using her hands, she ripped the straps off his legs and hands. “No,” Jillian said taking out her crucifix. Sage flicked her hand and the crucifix flew out of Jillian’s hand and landed on the bed.

“You used this crucifix not as a symbol of faith but as a symbol of hatred and abuse.” Jillian started to speak. “Be silent,” Sage commanded. Jillian held on to Christopher, trembling. Anna peered into the room smiling with satisfaction at seeing Sage bring Jillian down from her haughty attitude.

Sage leaned over Cristian whose eyes were shut. “This is the third time—” she mused, “the third time I leaned over your body.” She remembered hovering over Cristian as he took his final breath in her home that was the beginning of her nightmarish day, then hovering over his body as he lay bleeding to death. Now once again, she was hovering over his body about to make the most difficult decision of her life. Wipe her memory from his mind as though it never happened and make him forget her. Not being able to shake the guilt she felt for turning him, thus cursing him, Sage felt she now had an opportunity to free him.

“Cristian,” she said softly.

“Sage,” he breathed, a smile forming in the corner of his mouth. “I knew you’d come.” Sage took a deep breath as she swallowed hard, fighting against the tears in her eyes.

“Cristian, there is something that you must know,” she said. “I love you and that will never change.” “I love you Sage,” he said as she caressed his cheek. “We found each other again so that I can set you free,” she said. “That is why our paths crossed again.”

“No!” he said opening his eyes and gazing into hers. “We found each other again to right the wrong of the past.” “Right,” she said, her voice quivering, “to right the past.” She gripped his face, staring down into his eyes and not seeing any traces of vampirism in them. “You will forget me,” she whispered. “You will go on with your life and have the family you’ve always wanted.” A tear fell slowly down her eyes, “The family I can’t give you.”

“No,” he said, gripping her hands, interlocking their fingers. “Don’t do this.”

“You will go back to your life as though we never met,” she said choking back a sob. “You are my family, Sage,” Cristian said, tears running down his puffy, bloodshot eyes. “You won’t remember this pain anymore,” Sage said. “You will know happiness again and meet someone new.”

“Never,” Cristian vowed. “I love you and only you.” With an intake of breath, Sage pulled him into a passionate embrace as he wrapped his arms around her. Jillian and Christopher stared at them, pained by the poignant display of affection.

After withdrawing from their embrace, Sage released her grip, laying him gently back on his pillow. Cristian had fallen into a trancelike sleep, the brown in his hair fading back to the blonde tresses he had from before the presentation.

Jillian covered her mouth in astonishment. Sage grabbed his

hands, kissing them before laying them at his side. She got up, wiping her eyes and turned toward Jillian and Christopher. “I’ve done what you’ve asked,” she said sniffing. “Cristian won’t remember me.”

“Thank you,” Christopher said with sincerity. She looked at Jillian and beheld for a few seconds a silent understanding in her eyes.

Anna, having returned from breaking the lock to the restroom door and leaving the two burly men trapped inside, stood in the doorway watching solemnly.

“Let’s go,” Sage said turning around once more and watching as Jillian and Christopher sat beside Cristian, taking his hand and expressing their love for him. “Good-bye Cristian,” Sage said, blowing him a kiss and closing the door behind her.

Chapter Fifty-seven

The others sat around in the living room waiting anxiously when the door opened and closed. Jumping up from his seat, Daniel stood at the door and listened. Anna walked into the room somberly wringing her fingers through her hair. “Sage...,” Samuel whispered. “She’s in her room and doesn’t want to be disturbed.” He nodded his head knowing that Sage needed to be alone to grieve the loss of Cristian. “What happened?” Billy asked. “She made Cristian forget,” Anna said plainly. “She erased his memory of her.”

“I know that was hard for her—” Lisa said sadly, “she loved him very much.” “She did the right thing,” Anna said. “It’s better this way for everyone.” “At one time, I would’ve welcomed the news with much glee,” Pedro replied, “but now all I feel is sadness.” “Not so much for Cristian,” he quickly corrected, “but for Queen V.” “She loved him from since I joined the coven.”

Samuel sighed heavily and excused himself from the room. Anna thought to go after him but changed her mind. “It’s almost like losing him again—” Billy said, “like a death of a relationship.”

“In a way, yes,” Anna replied. “Because it will be as though everything that happened didn’t.” “He won’t remember, but she will,” Daniel said, “That’s even worse.”

“We need to do something so that she doesn’t dwell on it and go back into seclusion,” Cody said. “Remember how we rarely saw her?” he asked, “I liked when she was more outgoing and we were all together.”

“I’ve got an idea,” Anna said.

Sage walked into her room, shut the door, and leaned against it staring at her bed. “I can’t sleep in this bed again,” she thought. “It has too many memories of me and Cristian.” She looked at the dimple in the sheets where he had lain while she was missing, imagining his anguish over her well-being. She stared down at the floor where he had collapsed and was bleeding heavily from the wound on his wrist. His life was slowly ebbing away and she had to decide to let him die or turn him into a vampire. With great reluctance, she had made the decision to turn him, and that was when their problems began. The portrait, although it played a small role in their problems, wasn’t the main cause of it. She felt guilt for turning him. It ate away at her conscience and began to become an obstacle between them. “Even if I took Cristian away from the warehouse and turned him once again, the guilt would’ve remained,” she thought. She sat down on the floor, pulling her knees to her chest. “I hope one day you can forgive me, Cristian,” she said softly. “I did this so that you can have a fulfilling life.”

Samuel approached the door, lifting his hand to knock, but instead he withdrew his hand, taking a breath, and with resolve walked back down the hallway.

After Sage left, Christopher and Jillian thanked the doctor for his services, giving him a hefty paycheck, and took Cristian back to his loft, but not before having to call a locksmith to help get the two burly men from being trapped in the restroom. Once Cristian was inside his apartment, Jillian laid him on his bed as he started to stir.

“The tickets are ready,” Christopher said hanging up his cell phone. “Good,” Jillian replied. She looked around his loft for any signs that could jog his memory of Sage, checking for newspapers or messages on his answering machine or anything else. “The portrait,” Christopher said. “He probably will only remember painting it,” Jillian said, “not any of the other things that occurred after.”

“We will need to inform him of Robert’s death,” he said. “That’s right,” she said frowning. She snapped her fingers. “Rafael killed him over his obsession over the painting,” she said. “For all we know, that is probably what happened,” she reasoned. “But will Cristian remember?” he asked.

“Possibly just as long as he doesn’t remember her,” she said. “Right,” Christopher replied. Cristian woke up, grabbing his head and groaning. “Son,” Christopher said. “Dad, what are you doing here?” he asked. “We wanted to tell you about a family trip we’re taking.”

“Family trip...,” Cristian said, rubbing his eyes. “Yes, it’s something your father and I have wanted to do with you, Son,” Jillian said. “I don’t have any plans,” Cristian said, “at least I don’t think so. I’ll need to call Robert,” he said. Christopher and Jillian shot each other an uneasy stare. “The flight will be leaving in a few hours, Son,” Christopher said, “There’s something you need to know about Robert.” Cristian got up weakly and walked toward the bathroom. “Let me shower first,” he said, “then you can tell me afterwards.” He shut the bathroom door. “It’s just like he was before,” Jillian whispered excitedly, “He doesn’t remember her.” They embraced ecstatically.

Randi woke up as her alarm clock went off, hitting the snooze button and lying back down on the couch where she’d spent the night, not wanting to sleep in her bed. “Rafael,” she called out,

sitting up then with sorrow, she remembered that he was gone. “I was hoping it was just a bad dream,” she moaned, grabbing one of his shirts and sniffing it. “The ashes,” she remembered getting up to take a shower and deciding where to release his spirit. She’d asked the hospital if she could take a leave in bereavement of a loved one, but that was partially the truth. She requested the leave so that she could avenge Rafael’s death after she scattered his ashes. “That vampire will pay for killing Rafael,” Randi vowed as she stepped inside the shower. “I will settle the score for you—and that’s a promise.”

Billy walked into the living room, surprised to see Anna and Daniel already up. “Couldn’t sleep either,” he said. “No,” Anna replied. “I couldn’t help but think of Sage.” “Has she come down yet?” he asked. “No,” Daniel said. “She hasn’t left her room since last night.” “Just like before when we hardly ever saw her,” Billy replied. “She’ll come out of it,” Anna said, “She can’t let the emotion rule her.” “Where’s Samuel?” Billy said. “He wasn’t in his room.” “So much has happened,” Anna said. “We all need a moment to digest it and ponder it.” “More happened in these short few months than anything I can remember in all our years together,” Daniel said. “Yes, revelations and things that were in the deep crevices of our minds that we never thought possible,” Anna said clasping her hand. “Okay,” Billy said, not sure what she was implying. Lisa and Cody entered the room next with John not too far behind.

“What an exciting twenty-four hours,” John said. “You almost want to hold your breath for what will happen next.” “I know,” Lisa said, “It’s been quite a few months of chaos.” “Something we’re not used to,” Cody said. “Where’s Pedro?” Billy asked. “He left during the night,” John said, “Maybe he was meeting his lady friend.” “Possibly,” Anna said. “That’s one piece of good news out of all

of this,” Daniel said, “Pedro found someone compatible for him, and he won’t interfere in anymore of Queen V’s relationships.”

“That’s the irony,” Anna said, “Cristian and Sage didn’t need Pedro’s interference to tear them apart.” “It was fate.” “How are you sure?” John said. “They found each other before...what if fate once again causes their paths to cross?” “I suppose the only ones who would know are those whose destinies were already predetermined,” Anna said. “I can’t say one way or the other.” “How do we know who’s fated for us?” Lisa asked. “The heart knows,” Cody said. “But how...?” Lisa stammered. “I can’t answer that,” Billy said confused. “All I know is my heart is telling me that it’s hungry.” Everyone broke into laughter.

Samuel stared out at the horizon from the roof when the door opened, and to his surprise, Sage joined him. “I didn’t think you’d come out your room,” he stated. “I was hoping that you didn’t become withdrawn to the point that we rarely saw you again.” She smiled faintly. “I did rarely come from out my room, didn’t I?” she said. “Yes,” Samuel replied, serious. “How do you feel?” he asked. “Numb,” she said, “Disbelief. Grief.” She gazed at him, “Guilt.”

“Why do you feel guilt?” he asked. “Because I’ve been trying to deny something deep within my heart, and I felt like I was being disloyal to Cristian.” “Tell me,” Samuel said. “Sage,” Anna gasped, coming through the door. “I didn’t expect to see you here.” She gave her a hug, giving Samuel an apologetic stare for disrupting their private conversation. “I’d better go,” he said, leaving the two women alone. “Sorry,” Anna said over Sage’s shoulder as he walked past her. “I really didn’t know you’d be here.”

“I guess I shouldn’t stay in my room so much,” Sage said. “I wanted to tell you of a party that the subjects want to throw in honor of your return,” Anna said, not mentioning that she concocted the plan a few hours ago. “It will be a vampire-only invitation.”

“Please say, yes,” she pleaded. “I want to see you happy again.” “Is that even possible?” Sage said. “I gave up Cristian so that he could be happy.” Anna grabbed her hand. “There’s something I’ve been meaning to tell you about Cristian that was troublesome while you were gone.” “What is it?” Sage asked. Anna took a breath and began to relate the things that transpired while Sage was gone.

Chapter Fifty~eight

Sage nodded her head listening quietly as Anna told her about the tension and arguing that followed her disappearance and how Cristian lashed out at her and Samuel in particular. “Samuel told me that Cristian found out about the night we had together, and he was understandably upset about it.” “But there was no reason for him to be upset—it happened long before he was ever born,” Anna said. “I know,” Sage replied, “but it was another secret I kept from him.” She sighed. “It really doesn’t matter anymore, since he doesn’t remember me.”

“You never gave him all of your powers,” Anna said, “Even Pedro noticed it.” “I wanted to see how he would do with some of the powers he knew I had, such as the power of illusion.” “He enjoyed wielding it,” Anna said. “I know and that bothered me,” Sage sighed. “I tried to tell him that the power could be addicting.” “He was very arrogant too—” Anna said, “always reminding us that you chose him, and that we had better get used to it. He belittled us and insulted Samuel.” Sage stared out into the gray sky sadly. “I know you may not want to hear this, Sage,” Anna said, “but I think making him forget you was probably the best thing that could’ve happened to all of us. I believe Cristian was planning on

excluding us from your life and having you all to himself.” “That would’ve never happened,” Sage said, “Wherever I go, you go if you so choose.”

“But as you said, maybe this is what fate had in store for us.”

Cristian sat on the airplane staring out the window having a faint sense of *déjà vu*. He could recall staring out a window and looking out at the ocean in a previous time. “Son, are you alright?” Christopher asked him. “Yeah,” he replied. “I just still can’t believe Robert is dead,” he said. “And why didn’t I know this before?” “His body was only recently discovered,” Jillian answered. “None of us knew he was dead.” “This Rafael Pearson guy was a suspect in his disappearance and death?” Cristian asked. “Yes,” Jillian replied, disquieted. He took a breath.

The name sounded slightly familiar to him, but he didn’t know why. It seemed to him like portions of events that he should easily recall were missing from his memory like chapters missing from a novel. An example was the fuzzy explanation his parents gave of the massive dent in the wall. They both seemed at a loss for how the indentation occurred, stating that it was an accident. “The painting was returned though?” he asked, facing them. “Yes, the portrait was returned without incident,” Jillian answered tensely. “Okay,” he said, turning and staring out the window while his parents shot each other nervous stares.

Randi pulled up to the funeral home and parked her car, resting her head on the steering wheel. “You can do this,” she said encouraging herself to get out the car. Taking a deep breath, she exited the car and walked toward the glass door, gripping the door handle. “May I help you?” the funeral director said as she entered the home.

“I’m Randi Benson,” she said nervously, “I’m here to pick up the ashes of Rafael Pearson.” “Yes,” he said, nodding his head. “I

spoke to you last night, or I left you a message on your voicemail.”

“Right,” she said. “Come this way,” he said, taking her into a room where there were flower arrangements and a bronze urn sitting on a mantel. “These are his ashes,” he said, gently placing them into her hands. Her fingers trembled slightly as she grasped the urn tightly against her person. “May his spirit find solace in his eternal rest,” the director said, holding the door as Randi thanked him and exited the building.

“Where can I set your spirit free?” she thought, still having not decided where she would scatter his ashes. “I know,” she said starting the car and cautiously placing the urn on the floor to keep it settled.

She drove toward the Hudson River and parked her car, getting out and walking along the pier. She looked down both sides for any spectators and opened the urn. “We didn’t spend a lot of time together,” she said, “but I feel like I’ve known you all my life. I will not leave your task uncompleted. I will fulfill what you died trying to accomplish. I will destroy the vampire queen.” She tipped the urn over and released the contents as the sun broke through the clouds, shining brightly in the sky and a gust of wind picked up, carrying the ashes away. “I know you will watch over me and guide me in this effort, and I won’t let you down,” she said.

“So this celebration,” Sage said, “when will it occur?” “In four weeks,” Anna said. “Will that be a problem?” “No, I just wanted to begin to make the arrangements of moving back to Egypt,” Sage said, “I have no reason to stay here anymore.” “What about the coronation?” Anna asked. “I suppose there won’t be one now,” Sage said, “I don’t have a mate.” Anna gently nudged her shoulder. “I can’t begin to claim that I can see into the future,” she said, “but I think everything will work itself out.”

“Meaning you believe in love,” Sage quipped. “I’m still a skeptic,” Anna said, “but I want to believe—let’s just put it that way,” she grinned. “Daniel is changing your perspective, isn’t he?” Sage said, “I’m happy for you.”

“I will admit that the thought of falling in love frightens me because of the risk of getting hurt,” Anna said. “You’re telling me,” Sage said sarcastically. “Sorry, I didn’t mean for it to sound...,” “It’s alright—I was just jesting,” Sage said, “I wasn’t being facetious.”

“So I’ll leave you to your thoughts,” Anna said, “but do come down and join us when you’re ready.” “I will,” Sage said, “Thank you for your friendship—this is what I need right now.” “I’ll always be here,” Anna said, “I’m not going anywhere.” They embraced, with Sage stifling a tear as Anna left her alone on the roof.

“Cristian,” she said softly, feeling the loss keenly.

Randi stopped by the hospital to pick up her paycheck not wanting to have a conversation with anyone. As she tucked the check inside her purse, she overheard a conversation between one of the orderlies who works at the morgue and a nurse at the nurses’ station. “It’s in four weeks,” he said, “it’s in celebration of the queen’s return and the hunter’s defeat.” “Sounds like it’s going to be a great party,” the nurse said. “Here’s the thing,” the orderly said, “It’s only for people our kind.” Randi pressed her ear closer to the edge of the wall to listen. “So it’s a party for the undead,” the nurse said. “Right, no humans allowed, besides they don’t know how to party as well as vampires,” the orderly joked. Randi let out an audible gasp trying to cover her mouth and realizing too late that vampires have sensitive hearing. “Did you hear that?” the orderly said as Randi hurried quickly to step inside the elevator. She felt a gust of wind close in as the elevator door closed swiftly. Panting, she waited as the elevator moved agonizingly slowly, toward the garage.

Once the door finally opened, she raced out of elevator, got inside her car, and sped out of the parking lot, leaving tire burns. “Please,” she said looking in her rearview mirror for any movement. “It’s still daylight,” she thought. “They wouldn’t risk flying in the open and being seen.”

Staring anxiously and not seeing anything out of the ordinary, she heaved a sigh of relief and continued on her route home. Arriving at her apartment, she looked around again for any signs of vampire activity. Hurriedly taking out her keys, she opened the door and ran to her apartment, swiftly shutting the door. “Oh my, God” she said covering her mouth, her heart beating fast as though it would jump out of her chest. “I never suspected that vampires worked at the hospital or the morgue,” she thought.

“No wonder Rafael never felt comfortable at the hospital and was anxious to leave.” Taking out her phone book, she began to look down the list of places to take archery lessons and to obtain a gun permit and for target practice. She even looked up names for martial arts classes. “I have to be prepared for battle,” she thought. Glancing at herself in the mirror, she ran her fingers through her hair, contemplating.

“First, I have to change my look,” she said opening up a drawer and taking out a pair of scissors.

Chapter Fifty~nine

Jillian sat on her beach chair while Christopher rubbed tanning lotion onto her shoulders. “So what do you think?” he asked. “Well, we’ve only been here a couple of weeks,” she replied, “and so far he seems to be back to his old self.” “It’s good to see our son serene again.” “We’re so blessed,” she said. “Where is he now?” Christopher asked. “He went for a walk along the beach—” Jillian said, “he wanted to watch the sunrise.” She ordered a virgin margarita and settled back into her chair. “He’s fine,” she said, noticing the scowl coloring Christopher’s countenance. “He doesn’t remember her.” “It’s over.” Cristian, taking in the salt air, walked along the shoreline watching the waves crash against the beach. He stared out into the horizon as the sun arose high in the air, bathing him in its rich orange and red hues. While he stared at the sunrise, he began to see an image in his mind like jumbled pieces to a puzzle of a sunset set in a different time. He was sure he was at Central Park at the Bow Bridge, because that is where he often went to reflect and watch the beauty around him. He heard himself say, “I come here for serenity,” to an unseen person. Focusing his eyes to get a clearer picture, he saw a silhouette of someone next to him. It looked to be a woman.

“Cristian!” his father yelled, jogging toward him. “Morning, Dad,” Cristian said. Christopher joined him in watching the sunrise. “It’s beautiful isn’t it,” he said huffing and puffing. “Yes, spectacular,” Cristian replied. He turned to face his father. “Why did you and mom want to take me on a Hawaiian vacation?” he asked. “We just wanted to do something together as a family, that’s all” Christopher replied giving Cristian a pat on the back.

It seemed to Cristian that his parents were trying too hard to please him for some unknown reason. It reminded him of when a person feels guilty over something and they overcompensate to make up for it. “Maybe it’s nothing at all,” Cristian thought, wanting to take his parents at their word. “Your mother and I want to attend Mass later, and we’d like it if you came with us.” “Okay,” Cristian shrugged. “Where’s Mom?” he asked. “Sunbathing,” Christopher replied.

They joined Jillian sitting on the chair sipping her drink, adjusting her straw hat. “Good morning, Son!” Jillian exclaimed happily. “You’re in a good mood,” Cristian grinned.

“It’s a beautiful day, we’re in a beautiful place—what isn’t there to like!” she said. She held a piece of paper in her hands. “What’s that?” Cristian asked. “Places I want to see while we’re here,” she said fumbling with the paper. “Ouch,” she cried out, getting a paper cut on her finger. Cristian stared at the blood oozing from her finger hypnotically. “Jillian,” Christopher said, alarmed, motioning for her to look at Cristian staring at her finger. “Cristian,” she said anxiously as she took a napkin and covered her bleeding finger with it. Cristian turned his eyes, staring at her calmly. “You really should get a Band-Aid for that,” he said taking a sip of orange juice.

He noticed the panicky exchange between his parents. “Okay, what’s going on?” he asked. “Why are you both so jumpy around

me.” “Not so much jumpy,” Jillian said unconvincingly. “It’s just that we haven’t had a family getaway for so long that we have to get used to each other again.” “Well, I’m heartened to know that you wanted to spend time together, but I really want to get back to New York and back to my paintings.” “Of course,” Christopher said. “We’re only going to be here a couple of more weeks and I look forward to your new paintings.” “I just don’t like having too much idle time,” Cristian said. “You know the saying about an idle mind,” he joked. “Right,” Jillian grinned uneasily. “But for now, let’s just enjoy our family vacation,” she said, staring at Christopher who nodded his head in agreement.

After Randi filled out an application for a gun permit, she was told the wait would be anywhere from two months up to six months. Deciding instead to take archery lessons, she was now in her second week of practice. Realizing the rigors of training she would endure along with the martial arts classes, she was glad that she gave herself a pixie haircut.

Driving up to Queens, she parked her car and took out her longbow that she used for practice. She chose the longbow because she liked the D-shaped design to it.

“Randi,” the instructor said, “you’re early.”

“I’m just eager to learn as much as I can about archery,” she said. “You’re hungry—” the instructor said, “nothing wrong with that.” He stared at the leather tab glove on her hand and said, “and you’re ready.” Randi grinned, “Not too presumptuous,” she said. No,” the instructor said, shaking his head. She took the bow from around her left side and positioned herself, training her eye on the target.

“I see you’ve found your stance,” the instructor said. Randi smiled, “I know what my target is,” she said. She loaded the bow,

holding the bowstring with three of her fingers and placing her index finger above the arrow. Placing the string in the second joint of her finger, she raised and drew the bow. Drawing the string toward her face and resting it lightly on her chin, she imagined her target in her mind. Picturing the vampire queen, she relaxed her finger, releasing the arrow and hitting her target in the bull's-eye.

“At this rate, you’re going to advance right away,” the instructor said, impressed. “Not bad for a beginner.” “I just have determination,” Randi said. “Tenacity will get you a long way in archery,” the instructor said. “Good job.” “This is for Rafael,” Randi thought, “he was the best archer and best hunter I’ve known. I’m doing this for him.”

“We haven’t seen her for the past couple of weeks,” Daniel said sadly. “I know,” Anna said. “I hope this celebration brings her out of her depression.” “Everyone has been keeping to themselves,” he said. “I’ve noticed,” Anna said. “Billy has been around John more, Samuel doesn’t say much, Lisa and Cody are nearly inseparable, and Pedro hasn’t been around either.” “Things have to change,” she said. “Hopefully, this party will do just that.”

“We’re fine though, aren’t we,” Daniel asked quietly. Anna grabbed his hand. “We’re fine,” she smiled. “I just want to see Sage happy again.” “Me too,” he said. “At least she doesn’t have to worry about Pearson breathing down her neck.” “Yeah,” Anna said, wrinkling her nose. “We still have to remain vigilant for others who may want to take his place, whoever they may be.”

Chapter Sixty

“It’s finished!” John exclaimed. “You’ve finished the book,” Billy said excitedly. “It’s finally done.” “Well, I can’t wait to scrutinize it,” Anna said. “I told Lisa she could read it first to squelch any reservations she had over it.” “That’s great,” Daniel said. John lowered his head shyly, “I know that you’re having the party for Queen Sage tonight, and...” “You’d like to come” Anna grinned. “I just want to see how vampires party,” he said. “I’m sure Sage wouldn’t mind,” Anna said. “Of course, you can come.” “That reminds me,” she whispered to Daniel. “I’m going to go talk to her while I’m bringing her lunch.” “I miss seeing her around,” he said.

“She’ll snap out of it,” she said. “Good to see you, Samuel,” Anna said as he came into the living room with a wine glass of animal blood in his hand. Samuel shot her a curious stare as she continued down the hallway.

Sage sat at the window staring at the yellow newspaper clipping when she heard a soft rap at the door. “It’s me,” Anna said. “Come in,” Sage replied as Anna walked in holding a bottle of animal blood in her hand. “We’re concerned about you,” she said, looking at the bed that lay bare, stripped of all its linens. “I can’t sleep in that

bed,” Sage said softly. “It contains too many memories, albeit brief, of my time with Cristian.” “I understand,” Anna said, handing her the bottle and a goblet. Sage chuckled when she noticed Anna watching closely to see if she would consume the blood while in her presence. She uncorked the bottle, poured the contents into the glass, and drank it.

“Satisfied?” she smiled. “Very,” Anna replied. “I’ve noticed that you don’t have the excruciating hunger for human blood anymore,” she said. “It was becoming unbearable for you.” Sage realized that Anna was right. She hadn’t experienced the all-consuming hunger for human blood anymore. It changed the night she placed her hands on the cross and after she tasted Samuel’s blood. “I supposed the craving is no longer strong, although I still have to consume blood in order to survive” she frowned.

“Have you begun making arrangements for the return to Egypt?” she asked. “Partly,” Sage replied.

“Nothing is definite yet. I have to decide about Pedro.”

“Pedro suffered his punishment when he was staked and burned,” Anna said. “He seems truly remorseful for what he’s done and he did kill Pearson,” she added. “If Pedro hadn’t interfered, you still would’ve had to decide if you wanted to turn Cristian or not,” she said. “He had injured himself before the painting went missing to save you.”

“I know,” Sage said, “I told him not to do it, but he was stubborn and he didn’t want to see me die and I didn’t want to see him die trying to save me.” She sighed. “Things would’ve probably still ended up as they did, because I couldn’t get past the guilt I felt for turning him, his parents would’ve never accepted our relationship, and I never wanted Cristian to have problems with his parents. I never wanted to be put in that position.”

“Mom, I really want to get back to New York,” Cristian said impatiently. “But we still have one more day left,” Jillian exclaimed. “I know, Mom,” Cristian replied, “But I’m ready to get back to New York.” He sighed, staring at his mother’s unhappy face. “I appreciate what you and Dad have done for me, but I really want to get back to my life,” he said. She reluctantly took out her cell phone and called her travel agent. “It’s Jillian,” she said, “Can you do a favor for me?”

“Thank you,” Cristian said.

Randi walked inside the gallery, staring at the crowd gathered around the portrait of Sage. She listened to them whispering and murmuring about the masquerade ball and the mysterious disappearance of the mystery woman. She focused her eyes upon the portrait, staring at the smile on the queen’s face. She frowned with growing contempt at the smile that seemed to be a smirk of triumph. “I’m going to wipe that smile off of your face,” she vowed, glaring at the portrait. “The last face you will see will be mine when I pierce your heart,” she said.

Anna returned to the living room when Daniel asked if Sage would join them, and to his pleasant surprise, Sage entered into the room behind her. “Queen V,” Billy grinned. “How we’ve missed you.” Sage smiled slightly. “Anna talked me into coming down,” she said. “I know you were worried about me, but this was something I had to deal with alone.”

“It’s good to see you again, Queen V,” Samuel said. She was taken aback by his formal greeting. “It’s good to see you too,” she said uncomfortably. Pedro entered the room smiling, bowing in deference to her and extended his hand to someone standing in the hallway. “My queen, there is someone I’d like you to meet,” he said.

A woman with dark hair, dark eyes, and fair skin took his hand as he brought her before Sage. “Está Maria,” he said. “Hola,” she said, meekly curtsying before Sage.

“It’s good to meet you,” Sage said to her in Spanish taking her hand. “So that’s where you’ve been,” Billy grinned. “I don’t blame you,” he said under his breath. Pedro flashed him a not-so-innocent grin. “Maria is really important to me,” Pedro said, “I’d like to spend all my eternity with her, and if you so please I’d like her to stay here with me as my mate—if it pleases the queen,” he said bowing his head.

Sage stared with hesitation at the young woman who stared lovingly at him. “I understand your reservations after what happened, and from what I’ve done in my past,” he said to her telepathically, “but I’ve learned from my mistakes, and this is who I want to spend my days and nights with.”

“Welcome,” Sage said extending her arm and welcoming Pedro’s love into the coven. Everyone followed suit in welcoming Maria into the fold. “This will make the party tonight even better,” Anna said. “This is truly a celebration!” she exclaimed as Sage glanced over at Samuel who didn’t give her any eye contact. “Party?” Pedro asked. “Yes, we might as well fill you in, since you were busy,” Anna joked to chuckles around the room.

Cristian sat on the airplane silently watching the clouds when he thought back to the strange mental image of him speaking to a mysterious woman. He turned his head toward his parents who had fallen asleep on each other’s shoulders and wondered why they were acting strangely. He noted when he went to Mass with them they kept watching him as though they were expecting a reaction from him upon entering the church. When he didn’t react in the way they were expecting, he noticed that both his mother and father exhaled

a sigh of relief. “What was that all about” he wondered, “It was as though they expected me to implode or something?”

He stared back out the window feeling anxious to be home and back in his loft and away from the suffocating presence of his parents constantly watching him like a hawk. He felt an intense need to return to New York, and to return that night.

Randi waited in the taxi, deciding not to bring attention to herself by driving her car and alerting the vampires of her whereabouts. “How long are we going to wait here, lady?” the taxi driver said impatiently.

“As long as it takes,” she snapped. She reached down into her pocket to make sure that the handmade stakes she had were secure and the bow and arrows tucked underneath her jacket. She saw the nurse and orderly whom she overheard talking about the party leave the hospital dressed up in evening attire.

“I want you to follow them but not too closely,” she said to the taxi driver. “Okay,” he said mumbling under his breath.

They followed them to a nightclub in SoHo with valets parking the car and a sign posted stating that it was a private party. Randi paid the taxi driver and jumped out the car. Running toward the back, she saw the backdoor opened while the bartender took a cigarette break. Using his distraction to her advantage, she ran inside the door while his back was turned and headed inside the building.

Knowing the vampires would be able to detect her scent, she hid in the back, as more vampires were arriving, waiting for the moment to strike. The music from the speakers began to blare, as the festivities were underway. “They’ll be here soon,” said one of the vampires dressed in black, “the coven seven.” “I can’t wait to see them,” another vampire said, “The queen and the coven seven.” “It’s going to be awesome,” said a vampire who looked too young

to be in a nightclub. “He doesn’t look old enough to be in a club,” Randi thought, “Then again, he may have been a vampire for a long time.” “This is so cool—a vampires-only party!” a vampire with twists in his hair exclaimed, “I love it!” “It is possible for vampires to get drunk?” Randi quipped, watching him stumbling, barely able to stand.

The limo containing the coven and John arrived outside the entrance. “The place is nearly filled to capacity,” Billy said, “There’ll be vampires crawling on the ceiling soon.” Cody chuckled, while Sage silently stared out the window. “Some paparazzi might be hanging around trying to get photos,” Lisa said. “I don’t think we need any more attention brought to us,” Sage said wryly.

The valet opened the door and bowed before Sage as she exited the limo, making sure that none of them was visible to any lurking photographers. “I hope you don’t mind me staying close to you,” John said, “Some might look at me as a meal.” Sage began to laugh, covering her mouth with her hand as her shoulders shook. “You’re my guest,” she said, “You’ll be fine.”

“It was good to see you laugh again,” Anna said telepathically to her. The others had the same expression on their face upon hearing her mirth. Anna caressed her shoulder. “You look beautiful, Sage,” she said. She had let her hair down, cascading around her shoulders and had opted for a simple black evening dress with sparkles and black heeled shoes. “Everyone looks dashing,” Sage said, staring with admiration at the coven all dressed impeccably. She was amazed at how Billy always managed to match his pirate shirt with his attire. “I’m ready to party,” Billy said as they walked inside the club. The music thumped so loudly the vibrations could be felt on the dance floor. John watched as the vampires were singing along noisily to the seventies song and passing around what looked like bottles filled with blood.

“Okay, we need some eighties music up in here!” Billy exclaimed to cheers and laughter. “It’s the queen!” someone yelled as the music stopped, and the crowd hushed as Sage appeared. They parted as she made her way through the club with John following close behind as she took a seat in a chair. “Hail to the queen!” roared the crowd bowing to her. The music started again and the crowd began to dance while the coven mixed in talking to acquaintances.

“I smell a human,” one of the vampires teased coming up to greet Sage. “He’s with me,” she warned. “Thank you,” John said, his voice cracking. “They won’t harm you,” Sage said, “not unless they want to feel my wrath.” “That’s good to know,” he said. Billy, Pedro, Lisa, and Cody danced on the dance floor while Samuel stood off to the side watching the festivities. “He won’t even look at me,” Sage thought, troubled.

“Samuel!” a strawberry blonde petite woman exclaimed, grabbing him and giving him a warm hug. “It’s good to see you again,” she said holding him. He looked over and saw Sage watching them, a bit perturbed. “She can’t be,” he thought. He looked again and saw the scowl on her face. “She is,” he thought excitedly. From body language, Sage could always tell when two people have been intimate. The closeness is different than between platonic friends. People who have shared their bodies physically with each other have a different intimacy in gestures and mannerisms.

Watching Samuel with this woman, Sage could see the subtle signs of two people who had been intimate, and it bothered her. “This is what Cristian felt when he learned of my night with Samuel,” she thought. “He could tell because our body language gave it away.” “I’m sorry I hurt you, Cristian,” she thought regretfully. Randi peered from the dark corner where she hid watching Sage closely as she waited.

The music stopped and the gray-haired vampire that drove the

Mercedes grabbed a microphone. “Tonight we celebrate the return of our queen and the end of the vampire hunter.” The sounds of cheers were heard throughout the club. John looked up and saw vampires hanging from the ceiling. Gulping, he looked back over at the vampire speaking. “I’m pleased to announce that we have a special guest who requested to sing a serenade to you when she found out about our celebration,” he said. He walked off the semi-stage, and a young female singer approached the microphone. “I’m honored to be here tonight,” she said to gasps and applause from the audience. She was a world-famous singer that no one knew was also a vampire. “There are a lot of us,” she grinned to shouts of glee. She faced Sage. “To our queen, I’m very happy that you returned safe to us and that the hunter is gone and will never again kill another vampire.” Thunderous applause greeted her statement as she adjusted the microphone and began to sing a melody with words about cherishing each day that we have in a world where things can change in an instant and that the only consistency is love, for it is eternal.

Sage’s eyes welled up as she listened to the lyrics, looking into the crowd as Anna and Daniel cuddled together, Pedro and Maria danced together, oblivious to the people around them, and Lisa and Cody held each other close, gazing into the other’s eyes. She heard John take a deep breath watching them. Wanting to ask him why he didn’t pursue a relationship with her, Sage decided that it was none of her business. Turning her eyes, she watched as Samuel danced with the strawberry blonde girl, and her thoughts turned to the night they had together. “I need to stop thinking about that,” she said irritated at herself. When the song ended, everyone applauded as Sage thanked her for the beautiful song, and the special guest singer exited the stage.

Making sure her target was within range, Randi finally began

to make her move, advancing toward Sage still sitting in her chair. “You smell that?” one of the vampires said. “I smell the stench of a human.” “There’s a human sitting with the queen!” another vampire exclaimed. “No, I’ve already smelled their scent,” the vampire said, “This smells different.”

Randi stilled as the vampire continued sniffing the air. “I’m telling you there’s another human here,” he insisted. Randi, knowing she would soon be discovered, whipped out the bow and arrow and ran toward Sage. “Hey!” the vampire yelled, pointing at her. “She’s going after the queen,” he said. John jumped up as Sage turned around to see what the commotion was. “You have to pay!” Randi yelled, fixing the arrow on the bowstring and firing it. Sage extended her hand snapping the arrow into pieces.

Other vampires surrounded Randi, grabbing her as she took the stakes from her pocket and stabbed one, missing their heart by a few inches. “You’re gonna pay for that,” he said, about to strike her in the face. “Stop!” Sage commanded. “Release her.” “No,” Anna said. “I know what I’m doing,” Sage said. Sage stepped down from the seat and walked toward Randi.

“Who are you?” she asked. Randi flinched under the power of Sage’s voice. “I’m Randi,” she answered, “I’m Rafael’s girlfriend.” “She changed her look,” Anna replied. “You took part in the lie to entrap Cristian,” Sage said angrily. “Yes,” Randi replied defiantly. “I did it to help his parents.” “I see,” Sage replied. “Do you not realize that you are outnumbered—” she asked, “that you would never make it out of here alive?” “I don’t care,” Randi snarled. “Just like a Pearson clone,” Billy said. Sage stepped closer to her, staring directly into her eyes while the coven looked on. “You are out of your league,” she said, taking the stakes and crushing them with her hands, “You are no hunter, even if you learned how to fire a bow and arrow or make wooden stakes. You are not a hunter.” Randi

started toward her, but Sage grabbed her by the neck gazing into her eyes down into her soul. She took a small intake of breath and loosened her grip.

“Get her out of her unharmed,” she said. Randi dropped her mouth stunned. “What!” Anna exclaimed. “Do as I say!” Sage commanded. I’ll take her,” the orderly whom she spied on said. “She was listening to my private conversation and that’s how she knew about the party. My apologies,” he said bowing before Sage.

He gripped Randi’s arm tightly while she stared at Sage, confused. “Why did you let her go?” Anna asked. “I have my reasons,” Sage replied. “Okay, that was an annoying disruption,” one of the vampires yelled. “Let’s get back to partying.”

The crowd cheered again as Sage took her seat and John watched Randi taken out the back door.

“I know the queen said to leave you unharmed, but I have other ideas,” the orderly said, shoving Randi out the door. He stared at her, baring his fangs when Randi used a technique she learned in martial arts, gouging him in his eyes with both her hands and running out into the street. “Hey!” he yelled, running after her with blood streaming down his eyes. She ran out into traffic barely avoiding being hit by an oncoming car. The car screeched to a stop. “Get outta the street!” the driver yelled rolling down the window. “Help me!” Randi said reaching for the passenger door. “Please!” she said, jumping inside the car as he tried to drive off.

The vampire ran out just as the car took off down the street. “The coast is clear,” she breathed, when suddenly they heard a crash on the roof and glass shattered around them. It was the vampire on top of the car trying to break his way inside. “What kind of trouble are you in, lady?” the driver asked, frightened. “I don’t want to be in the middle of this. Get out my car!” he yelled, trying to pull over

to the curb. The roof tore open as the vampire grabbed the driver by the neck, ripping it open with his sharp claws. Randi screamed as the car careened through traffic and crashed into a utility pole. She lay bruised, bloody, and unconscious as motorists pulled along the side of the road to try to help and to call for an ambulance. The orderly took off running before he could check to see if Randi was still breathing.

As the party wended down, Sage thanked the organizers and began to make her exit, when Samuel excused himself from the woman he was with and approached her. “Can we speak privately?” he asked. She silently nodded her head, and they went out the back door. “Leave them,” Anna said as John went to go after her. “You’re safe with us,” she said. “Do you really think we’ll let any harm come to you?”

“What was that tonight—” he asked. “That girl Randi showing up here?”

“I had a feeling that she may try to seek revenge for Pearson’s death, because she was in love with him,” Anna said. “I’m just surprised that Sage didn’t kill her.” “Killing isn’t her thing,” Daniel said. “I know, but in this case it was warranted,” Anna replied. “She crashed our party, thinking that she was just going to kill Sage and waltz away.” “Sage could’ve made an exception in this case.” “She said she had her reasons,” Lisa said. “I love Sage, but in this case, I disagree with her,” Anna replied.

Sage and Samuel landed on the roof of her loft as he paced the floor nervously. “I’ve missed you,” he began. “I’ve missed you,” she said. “I knew you needed to grieve for Cristian and for the loss of that relationship and I didn’t want to come between that,” he said. “I never wanted to come between you and Cristian.” “I know that,” she replied. “I know you will always love him,” he said softly.

“Cristian has been a part of my life for a long time, Samuel,” she said.

“I can’t just turn off the emotion even though we’re not together anymore—which is why I needed time to sort through my feelings,” she said. “I felt like I was being disloyal to him, because I have feelings for you.” “Sage, I...” “Samuel, please,” she said silencing him. “I tried to deny my feelings for you for a long time when I realized that I had them.”

“When did you realize it?” he asked. “When we were in Prague,” she confessed. “I realized my feelings for you then too,” he said. “But, Sage, I can’t be the person you turn to because you can’t have Cristian.” He started for the door when she grabbed his arm. “Samuel, don’t,” she said. “Please stay and hear me out. I’ve come to a realization about things in my life and whom I want to share it with,” she said.

“As much as I loved Cristian, I couldn’t shake the guilt I carried for turning him,” she began. “It was driving us apart.” She gazed at him. “Anna told me how Cristian insulted you because of his jealous feelings about us.”

“I saw you tonight with that woman and I felt the same emotion,” she said. “I knew it,” he grinned slightly. “I don’t like being jealous, Samuel,” she said. “It’s a dangerous emotion.” He stared deeply into her eyes. “Sometimes we can’t see what’s right in front of us,” she said. “I’ve been stuck in the past and grieving over the loss of Cristian for so long, I couldn’t see love when it stared me in the face. I thought I’d never love again and yet you crept into my heart.” Samuel’s eyes brimmed at her words. “I need you not because you give me comfort or for a safety net,” she said. “I realized that you are who I need by my side.

You already know yourself that you have the same powers as I do.” “I felt it the night you drank from me.”

“The others already noticed the change in your voice.” “I can’t deny it,” he said, “I felt the change that night.” “I began to realize that my feelings for you were beyond friendship,” she said, taking a breath. “I love you Samuel, very much.”

Moved, he cupped her face in his hands and kissed her softly. Refraining from the embrace, they rested their foreheads together, their eyes still closed. “We will return to Egypt where you will take your place by my side as king,” she said. “It feels right,” he said. He kissed her forehead as they embraced, holding each other tightly.

“They left,” Billy said, incredulous. “I went out to check on them and they weren’t there.”

“They needed to discuss matters between them,” Anna grinned. “You devil you,” Billy said.

“You’re being Cupid’s helper, huh!” he said. “I’m just trying to advance things that have already been set in motion,” she replied. “You can’t fight destiny.” “What if you’re wrong,” Lisa said. “Queen V and Cristian have a deep love for each other.”

“I realize that Cristian will always hold a place in Sage’s heart,” Anna said, “But he’s not her future, and she knows it, which is why she made him forget her.”

“I just feel things will happen if they’re supposed to, without any meddling from us,” Daniel said. “I mean, his parents meddled in his life, which is what tore him and Queen V apart.”

“But we’re missing the main point of contention between them” Anna said, “She felt guilt for turning him, and eventually that would’ve driven them apart.” “They were headed in that direction.”

“Remember how cool they were toward each other when we returned from our holidays?” she said. “There was no meddling involved then.” “Even when Pedro meddled in their relationship, that isn’t what tore them apart in the end.” “I’ll never live this

down,” he said when Maria stared at him, confused. “It’s a piece of history I’d like to forget,” he said, regretfully, to her.

After a nearly fifteen-hour flight, the plane landed at the airport, and a weary Cristian went to grab his luggage. “Son, I hope that your father and I didn’t irritate you,” Jillian said. “We just wanted to make sure that you had an enjoyable vacation.” “I know, Mother,” Cristian said, giving her a kiss on the cheek. “I’ll talk with you tomorrow,” he said. He hailed a taxi rubbing his tired eyes. “It’s good to be home,” he said.

Sage told Samuel there was something she needed to do before they made their announcement. After he left her alone on the roof, she closed her eyes, envisioning Cristian’s loft. Opening her eyes, she saw herself standing in the middle of the room. She glanced at the bed where they’d made love for the first time and at the room where he kept her sketches before he destroyed them. “I have to somehow forget you, Cristian,” she said. Hearing the sound of the elevator approaching, she stared for a few lingering minutes at the cage as the elevator came to a rest. Opening the cage, Cristian walked out and stopped abruptly feeling a presence in the room. “Is anyone there?” he asked. He could smell a faint scent of jasmine in the air. “Why does that scent smell so familiar to me?” he wondered.

Chapter Sixty-one

Sage and Samuel lay cuddled together on the roof watching the stars in the sky. “The sun will be rising soon,” he said, kissing her on her forehead. “The others will be on their way also,” she said. “So did you see him?” he asked. Sage nudged her head to stare into his eyes. “Did you see Cristian?” he asked with a knowing glance. “No,” she said quietly. “I hope you understand I needed to see the loft one last time for closure.” He lowered his eyes, pondering. “I understand,” he said. “Thank you,” she said, nuzzling into his neck.

He tenderly stroked her hair when she stirred, sitting up. “The deliveryman just arrived to drop off the morning newspaper,” she said, “Perhaps I’ll meet him at the door.” She grinned mischievously. The truck stopped at the front of the door when the driver exited to drop the newspaper at the doorstep. As he turned to walk back toward the truck, the door creaked opened slowly. Turning around he stared into the darkness, trying to decipher if anyone was there. “Hello,” he said nervously. He watched as the newspaper seemingly floated into the air held by an invisible source. Frightened, he sprinted toward the truck, slammed the door shut, and screeched down the street. “I’m going to miss that,” Sage laughed, appearing

from the darkness and watching him drive off.

Holding the newspaper in her hand, she walked into the grand living room while Samuel poured two wineglasses of animal blood for them. “Thank you,” she said taking a glass from his hand. “You’re welcome,” he replied. After taking a few sips, she sat the glass down and took the newspaper from out of its protective plastic covering. She glanced at the front page, and in a fury, threw the newspaper onto the table.

“What’s wrong?” Samuel asked. “That vampire disobeyed me,” she said angrily. Samuel picked up the newspaper and read the headline about the accident at the utility pole, killing the driver instantly and injuring the passenger who was a nurse.

“I will not tolerate disobedience,” she said as Anna, Lisa, Billy, Daniel, Cody, Pedro, Maria, and John began to make their way into the living room. “What happened?” Anna said, alarmed seeing Sage’s and Samuel’s troubled faces. “Look at this,” he said, handing her the newspaper. The others gathered around her and read the morning headlines.

“Randi—” John said, “that had to be her.”

“And I wanted her to be released unharmed,” Sage said. “That vampire disobeyed me and he has to be dealt with.” “I’ll go get him,” Daniel volunteered. “I’ll go with you,” Billy said.

“Bring him to me,” Sage said angrily. Anna stared at Sage, stunned.

She’d seen her angry before, but never like this.

Cristian woke up with a start, staring up into the ceiling. He couldn’t shake the sensation that someone was there. Possibly someone he knew, but who? The only people who knew about his home were his parents. He had never brought a woman to his home before, yet he felt as though he had, or why would he smell

the scent of jasmine in the air? “Maybe my mind is playing tricks on me,” he thought. He sat up, getting out of bed and stretching. “What are my plans for today...,” he said aloud. “Well today, I’m going to go to the gallery and start a new painting.”

Walking toward the bathroom, he stopped at the room where he would sometimes store his sketches. Opening the door, he was stunned to see the room spotless. “I was sure that I kept sketches here—” he wondered, “unless I got rid of them.” He scratched his head. “Why do I keep feeling like a portion on my memory is missing?” he said worriedly. “It’s as though it’s locked away within my mind and I can’t access it.” Noticing the costume on the floor, he picked it up.

“What’s this?” he thought. He stared at the white and gold costume, confused. “Obviously, I wore this, but when?” He felt more confused by the minute. Feeling something within the pocket, he dug into it, pulling out the crucifix and a business card. “Rafael Pearson,” he mouthed astonished. He looked at the crucifix. “This belongs to my mother,” he said. “What’s it doing in my pocket?” Staring at his hand, he noticed a small scar. Taking a closer look, he noticed the scar was an imprint of a crucifix as though he was branded. “How’d that get there?”

As he held his mother’s crucifix in his hand, he noticed that it fit right into the scar. Feeling as though his head was spinning on overload, trying to process too much information, he sat down on the floor feeling dizzy.

Anna and the others waited while Sage stood at the window staring out. She looked to Samuel for an explanation, but he was at a loss as to why Sage was so furious.

“Please,” the orderly said as Daniel and Billy dragged him into the living room, shoving him to the floor. “I didn’t do anything,”

the orderly protested.

Sage turned from staring out the window and stood before him silently.

He looked up at her as she stared deep into his bruised eyes. “What did I do!” he yelled.

John swallowed hard, watching the scene. Aware of his presence, Sage turned toward him. “This is not for human eyes,” she said. He fell into a trancelike sleep, collapsing onto the chair. “Take him to his room and shut the door,” Sage said. Lisa nodded her head, picking John up and taking him out of the room.

Anna’s mouth dropped at the seriousness in Sage’s voice. She knew that the queen didn’t want John to witness her wrath for the disobedient vampire. Pedro swallowed hard as a bead of sweat appeared on his forehead. Daniel stood next to Anna watching solemnly. “It’s done,” Lisa said, entering the room and standing next to Cody.

Billy stood next to Samuel as Sage flicked her hand shutting the door and the windows. “I told you to take the girl from the party unharmed.”

“I did...,” he started.

“Don’t you dare lie to me!” she roared, the walls shaking from her thunderous voice. “You decided to use her as sport, bringing attention to yourself in the process,” she said. “Witnesses said that a person with blood streaming down their eyes fled the scene.”

“That’s what the newspaper reports.”

“Why did you disobey me?” she asked. “I thought she should pay for disrupting the party, and I thought you were being passive,” he retorted.

“Passive,” Sage said. Daniel grimaced. “I gave a direct order and you decided to do what you wanted. The punishment for disobedience is death,” she said.

Unrepentant, he started toward her, cursing and ranting when he stared into her eyes. All he could see reflected in them was flames. With a sickening crackle, his bones popped from their sockets as he fell to the floor in a crumpled heap, his body instantly incinerated.

Lisa buried her head into Cody's shoulders. Samuel remembered finding Sage lying unconscious at the foot of the cross at the abandoned church. He realized the screams he heard were from when she took hold of the cross. When she grabbed the cross with her hands, it burned her internally. The reason she didn't suffer the same fate as the insubordinate vampire was because she was a believer. It was her faith that spared her.

Shocked, Pedro realized how close he came to suffering the same fate. If he hadn't shown remorse for his actions, the queen was prepared to destroy him. Remembering how she stood over him with the same look in her eyes, he collapsed to the floor in a state of unconsciousness. "Pedro!" Maria screamed.

"He's in shock," Daniel said. "I think he realized how close he came to suffering the same punishment," Anna said.

"Don't mess with the queen," Billy said taking a breath. Sage stared at the ashes as they blew away.

Randi woke up in her hospital bed. "Good morning," the doctor said, standing over her. She started to get up. "Easy, easy," the doctor said. "You went through an ordeal and the police would like to ask you some questions." She grabbed her head, grimacing. "You suffered a contusion, but you'll be alright. You're going to have to take extra good care of yourself from here on," he cautioned. "It's not just your health that's involved. It's the health of your unborn child," he said. "What?" she said trying to process what he just said. "Didn't you know?" he asked. "Randi, you're pregnant." "Pregnant!" she exclaimed. "Yes, you're at least six weeks." "Six

weeks,” she repeated. She remembered the night in question. Rafael was in the shower and Randi, feeling overheated undressed and entered the bathroom as she watched him rubbing his body with the soap.

Opening the shower curtain, she stepped inside, surprising him. “Randi, I...,” she silenced him with her lips pressed against his. Grabbing the shower curtain with her hands, they fell to the bathroom floor, water splashing around them both too far gone to stop the passion between them. “We created a child that night,” she said rubbing her belly. “You’re legacy will carry on.” Suddenly, she saw the vampire nurse from the party standing close by pretending to read a bulletin, but actually spying on her. “I’ve got to get out of here,” she thought. “I’m going to start you on prenatal care,” the doctor said, while Randi was trying to keep her eye on the nurse. Once he left the room, she hurriedly climbed out of bed and dressed quickly. Opening the door and looking down the aisle, she hurried out the door.

“Hey!” the nurse said, running after her. Taking the steps, she ran until she arrived at the third floor and exited when she could hear the vampire gaining on her. Running out toward the nursery, she stopped at the sight of the newborn babies, watching their sleeping faces and their tiny hands and feet with admiration and love. Hearing the door open swiftly, bringing her back to the present danger she faced, she started running again, and saw a nun dressed in a habit headed toward the revolving doors.

“Please help me,” Randi said running toward her. “Sure,” the nun said seeing the panic in her eyes. “Come with me.” They headed out the door toward a van parked in the driveway. Randi turned around and saw the vampire standing at the door watching them with hostility. They got inside the van. “How can I help you?” the nun asked. “I need a place to stay so I can have my baby in

peace,” Randi pleaded. “We have a room at the rectory where you can stay,” the nun said. “You and your baby will be fine. You’ll be safe in the presence of God.” “Thank you,” Randi said, “That’s just what I need,” she thought to herself as the van pulled out of the driveway. She looked back once more and saw that the vampire had vanished.

Sage grabbed Samuel’s hand as the others gathered around. Pedro regained consciousness, and he and Maria sat together on the antique chair and snuggled together. John returned to the room yawning and holding a copy of the manuscript in his hand. “We have an announcement to make,” Sage said once she had everyone’s attention. “Samuel is going to be crowned king.” Anna grinned broadly, as the others jumped up to give Samuel congratulatory hugs. When Pedro congratulated him, Samuel saw no malice in his eyes. “Congratulations, Samuel,” Billy said. He waited until he held eye contact, “You said that you thought Queen V was unattainable,” he said telepathically. “It seems all you needed was patience.” “I’m happy for you man.” “Thank you,” Samuel grinned. “I’d like to go,” John said, “if you don’t mind.” “I’d love for you to be there,” Sage replied. “This is going to be the best coronation,” Anna said.

“We kind of knew when your voice changed,” Cody said. “There was just no way around it.” Everyone laughed. “Yes, after we exchanged blood was when the change occurred,” Samuel replied. “Why didn’t that happen with Cristian?” John asked as the room fell silent. “Because it wasn’t fate,” Anna said. “Things happened in the order they were supposed to,” Sage replied. “Exactly,” Anna said happily. “So when do we leave?” she asked. “We have much preparation to make,” she looked at John, “and you’ll get to meet Ammon.” “He is very faithful to the Nayah family,” Sage said. “To answer your question, we will depart tomorrow night—how’s that!”

“Great!” everyone exclaimed. John approached Lisa cautiously. “I wanted you to read this first to know your opinion,” he said, handing her the manuscript. “You’ve finished the book,” she smiled. “Yes, and knowing your opinion is important to me,” he said. She took the manuscript handling it carefully. “I’ll take it to my room and read it in between packing. “Cool,” he said. He watched her leave wistfully. “I know you care about her,” Cody said. “I do—” John replied, “enough to let her find happiness and love with someone who’s waited in the shadows.” He stared at Cody. “You,” he said. “Thank you,” Cody said. “How could you tell?” “I’ve always found that it’s far easier to observe when two people are in love when you’re a bystander.” “It was obvious,” he said. “She’s in good hands,” he said giving him a pat on the back.

“Are you happy, Samuel?” Anna asked as Sage spoke to Billy. “Of course,” he said, “All I’ve ever wanted was to see Sage happy.” He noticed her concerned stare. “I understand that Cristian will always hold a place in her heart, but she’s not settling.” “She would never do that.”

“If she wanted Cristian back, all she would have to do is reenter his life and turn him again,” Anna said.

“But she didn’t want that kind of life for him—she never did.” “Right,” Samuel said. “The whole purpose of her finding Cristian again was for her to put the past to rest and to move forward with her life.”

“She’s done that and he has to do the same.”

Cristian walked into the gallery greeted excitedly by the security guard who gave him a hug. “Good to see you again, Cristian” he said. He stared at his hair. “So you’ve decided to change your hair back,” he grinned. “Change my hair back?” Cristian quipped, “When did I change it before?” “You remember...,” the security guard said.

“Cristian,” the director said, interrupting the conversation, having spoken to Jillian and Christopher before Cristian arrived at the gallery.

“Welcome back, Cristian,” he said. “Good to be back,” he said. He saw the painting and began to walk toward it when the director took him in a different direction. “I was thinking that maybe your next painting would be of a landscape.” “I was thinking the same thing too,” Cristian replied. “I’m sorry to hear about Robert,” he said. “Yeah, that kooky guy Rafael Pearson murdered him,” the director said. Cristian thought back to the business card he found in the pocket of the costume. “Why would I have a card of a murderer in my pocket?” he thought.

Seeing Cristian’s questioning stare, the director said, “He showed up here asking you and Robert questions, but he apparently had an ulterior motive.” “Apparently,” Cristian replied. He walked inside his office with a strange feeling nagging his mind. “Something’s not right,” he said, “Too many people are acting strangely around me, like they have a secret, and I want to know what it is.” He took out a canvas and began mixing the paint together, setting it down abruptly.

“The painting,” he thought, “I have to see it.” He exited his office and walked out to the showroom, glancing at the portrait sitting in the middle of the room. Feeling drawn toward the painting, he approached the masterpiece, staring into the face of the mysterious beauty that stared back at him with a smile on her lips.

Drawing a breath, he stared at it, mesmerized. “What a beautiful woman,” he said, implanting her face into his memory. “Why do I feel like I know you?” he asked himself. “Whatever happened to her?” the security guard asked, snapping him out of his trancelike state. “What do you mean?” Cristian asked. “You know exactly what I mean,” the security guard said, incredulous. “You brought her to

the party.” “What!” Cristian exclaimed, his face getting hot. “You mean...she’s...,” he paused. “Yes, that’s what I mean,” the security guard answered, “She exists.”

“She’s real,” Cristian, said, “I brought her to a party.” He felt as if he was in a whirlwind, and everything was crumbling around him. Everything he thought he knew was a lie. “She exists,” he kept repeating. Like streaks of lightning, he saw flashes of images in his mind of Sage staring out a window, of them lying in bed kissing tenderly after making love, and of another memory of them making love passionately during a downpour. His cheeks turning increasingly rosy, Cristian exclaimed, “There’s something I need to do,” as he exited the building feeling sick to his stomach.

Christopher and Jillian sat down after enjoying breakfast and reading the newspaper when the phone rang. “Hello,” Jillian said, answering the phone. “When,” she asked, “how long ago did he leave?” “Okay, thank you,” she said hanging up the phone. “What’s wrong?” Christopher asked, seeing her ashen face.

“We didn’t cover all bases,” she said, “Cristian found out from a chatty security guard that that vampire exists.” “But he doesn’t remember that she is a vampire,” Christopher said.

Her eyes gleamed as a thought came to her head. “That’s right, he doesn’t remember, and we’ll use it to our advantage.” “I’ll be damned that she’ll take my son away from me. He left about an hour ago, so he’ll be here any minute,” she said when the doorbell began to ring incessantly. “Should we answer it?” Christopher asked. “And look guilty,” Jillian replied. “No, we’ll let the housekeeper answer it.” “Open the door!” Cristian yelled, beating on the door.

The housekeeper came from her room, glancing at Jillian and Christopher nervously as she answered the door. “Who is it?” she asked. “Cristian who else!” he snapped. She opened the door

sheepishly. "I know they're home," he said, marching inside the house. "Mom, Dad!" he yelled. "In here," Jillian said from the dining room.

He walked into the dining room pacing back and forth. "What's wrong, Son?" Christopher asked. "What did you do?" Cristian said, his eyes stinging with tears. "Do?" Jillian asked. "What did you do to Sage!" he yelled. She flinched, thinking she would never hear her named uttered from his lips again. "Sage," Jillian said, casting a glance at Christopher. "Yes, Sage," Cristian said, "The woman I love." She sighed heavily. "Did you run her out of my life because you didn't like her?"

"No," Jillian said. "Then why have you been acting so strangely around me as though you're hiding something?" he asked. "Because we were worried about how you would deal with the truth," Jillian said, mumbling under her breath, "You weren't supposed to remember."

"You meddled in my life," Cristian said, taking the crucifix from his pocket and showing it to her. "I found this in my pocket," he said, "This belongs to you." Jillian remembered when Sage ripped the necklace from her throat during a violent struggle. "I also found this," he said, showing them the business card. "Why would I have a card of a murderer in my pocket?" he said.

"Answer me!" he yelled. "Cristian, it's not what it looks like," Jillian said. "What did you do!" he screamed. "Don't yell at your mother!" Christopher hollered. "You're useless," he said starting for the door. "She's dead, Cristian," Jillian yelled. "What!" he said, his eyes brimming. "She died the night Rafael Pearson perished," she continued. "She died in the fire."

"You're lying," Cristian retorted. "Don't falsely accuse your mother," Christopher said. "We didn't want you to find out this way, Son," she said. "We were trying to spare you, which is why we

took the family trip together.” “But you tried to run her out of my life, Mother,” Cristian said. “I remember how you made it clear that you didn’t like her.” “You’re the reason she’s gone, and I will never forgive you for that. Ever.”

He started for the door when Jillian tearfully grabbed his arm. “Please listen to me, Cristian,” she begged, “I love you with all my heart.” “Please...” “Let go of my arm, Mother,” he said icily as she released her grip and watched him walk out the door.

Sage excused herself to depart to her room, thinking of all that had happened. From her first meeting with Cristian to all the trouble she faced with Pearson’s obsession to destroy her.

Opening her drawer, she stared at the old newspaper clipping sighing softly. “I have to let you go, Cristian,” she said sniffing. “It’s time I let you rest in peace.” She took out a pair of matches and set the clipping onto a glass tray. Lighting a match, she held it against the clipping as it started to burn. As the flames spread, she placed it into the tray and watched with tears rolling down her face as Cristian’s face vanished into ashes.

At that same moment, Cristian arrived back home at his loft feeling empty. He felt as though he was the walking dead. “How can this be?” he said, “How is she gone when I can still feel her presence?” “I can’t forget you, Sage,” he said. “I just can’t imagine living in this world without you in it.”

John recalled all that happened as he stared at the throng gathered for the coronation as Samuel approached Sage, dressed in identical black and gold. He kneeled before her as she took the crown and placed it carefully on his head. Ammon, the faithful servant, smiled as Samuel rose to his feet and stood by Sage’s side. “Hail to the king and queen,” the crowd exclaimed as the two made their way to the thrones and sat down amidst cheers and applause.

After the ceremony, while everyone greeted the monarchs, John noticed artists working enthusiastically to re-create the image of Sage placing the crown on Samuel's head. "Wow!" he said, staring at the massive paintings. He stopped at a painting depicting a woman drinking from a chalice who eerily bore a resemblance to Sage. "That is Queen Priscilla," Anna said, appearing by his side.

"She was the first vampire of the Nayah family, and it's her portrait that graces the ceiling of this magnificent palace." "She looks a lot like Queen Sage," John said. "Actually, Sage looks a lot like her," Anna corrected. He continued down the hall staring at the paintings, stopping at one of a queen with despair in her eyes as she placed the crown on a young man dressed in white and gold.

"That was Queen Amerie," Anna said. John sighed, remembering the sad story of the fate of Amerie and Lance. He stopped at another painting of a man with strong features. His eyes were blazing with power. He knew it was Sage's father. He stood proudly as he placed the crown on Arianna's head. "Today is a happy day," Anna whispered, "but we will always respect the memories of the dead." The scent of roasted fowl, fish, vegetables, dates, figs, and bread assaulted his senses, making his stomach grumble. "Come," Anna said seeing him lick his lips in anticipation.

They walked into a grand hall lined with huge pillars, with rows of tables adorned with golden cloths, golden silverware, and vases with red roses and lilies. "I'm almost afraid to eat from such exquisite silverware," John said, gulping. A fountain waterfall overflowing with red wine stood in the center of the room. Beside the waterfall, a table specially arranged for the king, queen, and coven sat with the nameplate of each person. Copper-toned tapestries hung from the wall with Sage's and Samuel's name embroidered into them in Arabic. Musicians played the flute, harps, cymbals, and tambourines while people danced and sang. Golden candlesticks and pottery

decorated with the names of the entire coven, including John as a special guest, graced the walls. "I'm surprised at the abundance of food," John quipped. "I thought there would be nothing but a bunch of blood drinking." "We have invited other humans to the ceremonies in the past," Ammon said, "The Nayahs have always had faithful humans to serve them."

"I'm delighted that the queen has found her mate," he said. He lifted up a glass, "To the queen and king!" he said. "To the king and queen," everyone toasted. John waited before drinking to make sure he wasn't consuming blood, sniffing it first. Lisa giggled while Billy nearly choked on his drink. "Still feeling out of sorts?" she asked him in reference to his jetlag. "I'm feeling better after being here for a couple of weeks," John answered. "So what did you think of my book?" he asked, taking a swig of the wine. "I loved it," she said. "I thought you portrayed the vampires' point of view excellently. "Thank you," he beamed.

"So are you going to stay with us here?" Billy asked. John set down his fork, taking another sip of his drink and swallowing hard. "No," he replied softly. "I plan on returning to New York." "That doesn't mean that we'll never be in touch," he said, "I just need to be on my own for awhile.

"I understand," Billy said sadly. "Don't look like that," John said. "You're making me sad." "Besides, by residing in New York, I can see about getting my book published and keep my eyes open for anything out of the ordinary," he said.

"You mean keeping Sage informed about Cristian," Anna thought. Daniel stared at her, reading her thoughts.

"I've come to love you as my family, and I want to stay in touch," he said, looking at the sad faces staring at him. "And we will," Sage said smiling. "I'm holding you to it."

"I also have an announcement," Pedro said, clasping Maria's

hand. "Maria and I will live in a casa close by and not in the palace," he said. "You don't have to explain," Sage grinned. She understood that they needed time alone. "Gracias, mi reina," Pedro said. "Thank you for the impressive room," John said. "I've never seen so much gold in my life." He was especially impressed with how well the servants and guards keep the palace protected and not easily accessible to humans. From the outside, the palace looked to be nothing more than stacks of humongous stones. However, inside, the architecture was a portrait of breathtaking beauty.

"As customary, once the queen and king exchange pleasantries with the guests, they will exit the festivities to spend time alone," Ammon mentioned to Anna. On cue, Sage and Samuel stood up, and after bidding a pleasant evening to the guests, departed from the grand hall. "This is almost like a wedding ceremony with the bride and groom leaving for their honeymoon," John said, still enjoying the roasted fish. "You can say that," Anna said. "The queen and king are mates for all eternity, so in a way this is like a marriage." "I hope they like the presents we left them," Billy grinned mischievously. "I think they will," Anna laughed.

Daniel stroked her hand. "Now that you've finished playing cupid with your best friend, when are we going to talk about us? What does the future hold for us?" he asked. "I like how things are now," she said, "I don't want to rush into anything." "I just don't want to be your boy toy that you throw away when you get tired of me," he said.

"Daniel, let's not spoil the celebration by talking about this," she said. "Okay," he huffed, turning away from her. Anna stared at him, trying to hide her sadness.

Sage and Samuel entered a great chamber containing an enormous bed with a lace canopy, the silk sheets sprinkled with

rose petals. A replica of a sphinx sat adjacent to the fireplace carved of marble with a fur rug. Samuel could also see a large bathroom with a huge golden tub within the black onyx floor from the corner of his eye. An entertainment system giving the room a touch of modern day technology was situated in the corner with a CD inside ready to play. Pressing the play button, a love song began filling the air with romance.

“Billy,” Samuel chuckled. Next to the bed was a chest filled with feathers, scented lotions, and aphrodisiacs. Staring at a glass containing cherries, chocolates, and strawberries, Sage chuckled, “Anna.” Samuel picked up a peacock feather. “I wonder what this is for?” he asked. Sage stared at him, stunned. “You’ve no idea what that is for?” she quipped. He stared at her, grinning wickedly. “This had to have been Billy,” he said. They both began to laugh until tears rolled down their eyes.

He stared at her. “Suddenly, I feel nervous,” he said. “There’s no reason to be,” Sage said, “It’s not as though we haven’t done it before.” “Yes, but that was a long time ago—” Samuel replied, “a long, long, long, time ago.” “You and I both have had other lovers since then.”

“Don’t be nervous, Samuel,” Sage said, taking his hand. He took a breath. “I have something to give you,” he said grabbing a small black box from underneath the feather pillows. “I asked the servant to place it there for after the coronation,” he said. “Open it,” he said, smiling. She opened the box and inside was two bands made of white gold. Turning it over, she saw their initials engraved. “I love it,” she said holding out her finger. He took the ring and slid it on her finger, kissing it gently. She took the other ring and placed it on his finger. “Thank you, Samuel” she said tearing up. “Thank you,” he said. “I know that things could’ve turned out differently. “We can’t live our lives wondering “what if,” Sage said. “We can

only live in the present.”

“Then let’s not hesitate,” he said, giving her a kiss and surprising them both with its sudden intensity.

Panting, Sage stepped back, removing her crown and letting down her hair. Following suit, Samuel also removed his crown and pulled his hair forward. She caressed his face, letting her fingers outline his lips. “Such soft lips,” she murmured, nibbling them gently. She smiled as she heard him moan softly. She stared into his eyes as they changed into the beautiful amber color that she admired. “Your eyes burn me,” she whispered. He cupped her face in his hands and pulled her into a passionate embrace, both not withdrawing until they had to catch their breath. She gasped when he kissed her again, slipping his tongue into her mouth. Tugging at his clothes, she began to unfasten his buttons.

Trailing kisses down her neck as she shuddered against him, he let his hands roam across her taut body. Tumbling on the bed, they rolled across the petals as they covered them both. Tantalizingly, she reached over, grabbing a cherry, and dangled it teasingly across his mouth. Placing the cherry between her lips, she watched as he extended his tongue to retrieve it as their lips touched.

She moved her hand further down his lithe body as their kiss deepened, feeling him jerk. “I love how you react when I touch you,” she grinned. “Your fault for having such an effect on me,” he said between sharp breaths. She leaned forward, removing the rest of her clothing while he stared at her naked flesh. “You’re beautiful,” he said as he leaned forward and began to remove what was left of his clothing. Once he was fully naked, she picked up a rose petal and rubbed it against his enflamed body. “You’re torturing me,” he panted, his eyes turning yellow. “Enough of this, I want you now,” he said, rolling on top of her as his hair tumbled over his shoulders, covering her like a silken curtain. “You have beautiful hair,” she said

running her fingers through it. Staring at her, he tossed his hair to the side to see her gazing at him, her eyes orange and red like fire.

“I’m ready,” she whispered. Leaning down, he kissed her as their bodies joined, both moaning at the sensation it caused. They moved together, the friction like a match as the flame ignited and overwhelmed them both. So caught up in their passion they were that neither noticed that they ended upside down on the ceiling. With an insatiable appetite, Samuel would slow his rhythm trying to prolong the passion, giving her kisses and caresses, then speed up again as he lost all control of thought and motion as she thrashed and writhed underneath him. Feeling his end approaching, Samuel bit down into her neck as Sage cried out, dragging her claws across his back. Climaxing, both shook violently as they underwent the tremors of coming down from such a pleasurable zenith of ardor. Exhausted, he lay to her side gasping for air. She lay quietly trying to gather coherent thoughts when she heard a chuckle.

“What is it?” she asked, her eyes still closed. “We’re on the ceiling,” Samuel said, glancing at her. She opened her eyes, staring at the bed facing them, and they both began to laugh. “I don’t know what to say,” she said. He leaned over caressing her face, kissing her deeply. “I still can’t believe this is real,” he said. “It’s real,” Sage replied stroking his hair. “Believe it.”

“When you’re ready, we can climb back down to the bed and try the other goodies,” she grinned. He flashed a smile.

Cristian walked inside the gallery staring forlornly at the portrait illuminated in the light like a shrine. “Sage,” he said. “A part of me doesn’t want to let you go.” Even though weeks went by since Jillian told him the news, he still couldn’t accept that Sage was dead. He felt an emptiness and longing in his soul for her. So much so, that he often went to Mass seeking solace for the pain, which was a

better alternative than drowning his sorrows in alcohol. Each time his mother called, he let the machine answer it, not wanting to speak with her, completely disgusted by her actions. “How can I ever forgive you?” he thought. He remembered more of his mother’s duplicity when he had a memory flash of finding the business card in their house on the dresser. “She did this because she didn’t like Sage, and she set her up to be kidnapped by that murderer,” he thought. He continued to stare at her portrait when he remembered a brick building in Tribeca.

“Tribeca that’s it,” he said. Running out the building and hailing a taxi, he asked the driver to take him to an address that crossed his mind. Once he was outside the door to Sage’s loft, he exited the taxi and stood at the door looking at the doorbell. “I need to know,” he said to himself.

Ringling the doorbell, he waited for a response. After waiting minutes with no response, he saw a deliveryman about to enter his truck. “Excuse me,” he said, “does anyone live here?” “Someone did live there,” the man said, “But I haven’t seen anyone lately. They would come and go.” “So it’s possible that they may return,” he said. “Possible, but I wouldn’t count on it. They’ve been gone for weeks. Rumor is she disappeared.” “She?” he asked. “Yeah, the mysterious woman that lived here. Strange folks they were.” “Thanks,” Cristian said feeling dejected. “I guess I have no choice but to accept that she’s gone,” he thought. Looking back at the door, he tucked his hands in his pockets, and walked away.

Epilogue

John sat in the bookstore watching as the line grew for his book signing. After five years of rejections and denials, he was finally able to get his book published to rave reviews. Word of mouth helped his book sell rapidly, becoming a bestseller with him slated to make appearances on popular talk shows to promote it.

A few days earlier, he returned to Indiana with a gift-wrapped copy of his book in his hand to give to his father. Stepping outside the limo, he walked up the crumbled steps and rang the doorbell. “What do you think of your son now, Dad?” he thought. Unsurprisingly, there was no reply. Leaving the box on the doorstep, he turned around to walk down the steps, glancing back, and saw the curtain slightly opened as though someone was watching him.

He promised himself that was the last time he would reach out to his father, tired of his rejection. “I really love your book,” the shy teenaged girl said. “Thank you,” John replied. “You make it sound as though you actually know vampires,” she said. He grinned. “I do,” he thought to himself.

After he parted from Sage and the coven, he kept in touch with them mostly by phone, since they hadn’t returned to New York since the coronation. He knew if they returned, it would be quietly.

He found out that Lisa and Cody had exchanged rings equivalent to getting married; Pedro and Maria were deeply in love; and Anna and Daniel seemed to have cooled down after the tiff that happened during the celebration of the queen and king. Speaking of the royals, he learned Sage and Samuel were still going strong and very happy. He found out that Sage did take Samuel up on his offer to visit his homeland to view the family portrait.

For the most part, the brooding vampire was a thing of the past. Billy was still a free spirit and still all things eighties. Interesting enough, he had no information about Randi Benson, the nurse who was Rafael's helper and girlfriend. All John found out was that she disappeared from the hospital before the police were able to question her. Because he wasn't a family member, he was unable to get any information about her condition at the time of her disappearance. "Maybe her disappearing is a good thing," he mused. Another person walked up, setting the book in front of him.

Without looking up, John asked, "Your name?" "Cristian," the person said, "Cristian West." John looked up, dropping his jaw slightly. Cristian wore his trademark black with a pair of sunglasses shading his eyes and his blonde hair pulled back into a ponytail. On his left wrist, he had a tattoo of Sage's name in ancient Egyptian symbols. He wore a smirk on his face. John wondered if Cristian recognized him. "Cristian West," John replied, "I know who you are."

"You've seen my work?" he asked. "Yes," John answered, "you're very good." "Then you've seen my masterpiece, Beauty Mysterium," he said. "Yes," John said feeling his face flush. "She's very beautiful."

"That she is," he said, staring into his eyes. John wondered if his eyes gave anything away, because the smile on Cristian's face broadened.

"People have always told me that I live like a vampire," he

grinned. "I'm sure they have," he thought. "Maybe it's the gothic look," John said nervously. He noticed his skin looked pale. "Could he be?" he wondered.

"Thank you," Cristian grinned, giving him a business card. "Maybe you can come by the gallery and see more of my work, and we can talk about things."

"Sure," John said, his voice cracking.

"Bye," Cristian flashed a grin and left. John kept watching him until he couldn't see him anymore. "I've got to call Queen Sage," he thought.

"He more than recognized me," Cristian thought as he exited the bookstore. Having recovered more remnants of his memory, he remembered speaking with John before, and he was curious about his knowledge about vampires and dhampiric figures. For some strange reason, vampirism intrigued Cristian. At times, he felt a surge of energy that he couldn't explain, accompanied with a ravenous hunger that only abated when he consumed meat cooked rare. The bloodier, the better. "I just need questions answered," he thought. After the night he went to Sage's loft to find that it was no longer occupied, he put his loft up for sale, but not before repairing the dent in the wall, and moved from Greenwich Village into an apartment in SoHo.

He was tired of his mother constantly coming around trying to explain to him what had happened. As far as he was concerned, her meddling is what drove Sage from his life, subsequently causing her death, and he couldn't forgive that. His relationship with his parents has been strained ever since.

He did eventually find a new love, but he couldn't give his heart completely to her, because Sage still owned his heart and soul. Even though she wasn't around physically, he still felt her presence like the night he could've sworn that he smelled her jasmine perfume

in his loft.

His cell phone rang. “Hello, yes I remember,” he said. “I’ll be there.”

After the book signing was over, John grabbed his cell phone and dialed a number. “Billy, is Queen Sage around?” “You are!” he exclaimed happily. “That’s great.” “I’ll meet you there.” He hung up the phone and dashed from out the bookstore. “Taxi!” he yelled as he ran out to the sidewalk. “Can you take me to Tribeca?” he asked, jumping inside.

Arriving at his destination, John jumped out the taxi, running to the door, and before he could ring the doorbell, it opened. “Billy!” he cried as they hugged. “I missed you, dude,” Billy said. John stared at him. Billy was unchanged. He still wore makeup, he still wore pirate shirts, and he could hear eighties music blasting from the hallway. “Just like old times,” he said. “Don’t be a stranger, come in,” Billy said, stepping aside. “How long are you back?” he asked. “For a couple of days,” Billy replied. John walked down the still-darkened hallway and entered into the grand living room. “John,” Lisa said running over to hug him. He and Cody shook hands awkwardly until Cody pulled him into a bear hug. “That’s more like it,” he said. Anna got up from the antique chair and embraced him. Daniel came in from behind and gave him a hug. “John,” Pedro said, giving him a hug. “Maria,” John said, giving her a hug. “It’s good to see you,” she said. “You said that in English,” he said to laughs. “Lisa has been teaching me!” she exclaimed. “Where’s Queen Sage and King Samuel?” John asked. “Right here,” she said as they entered into the room. Both were dressed stylishly in black and gold attire with beads woven into their hair. John ran over and hugged them both. “I’ve missed you so much,” he said.

“We’ve missed you too, which is why we decided to return for a visit and to congratulate you on the success of your book,”

Samuel said. "It's doing better than I ever imagined," he said. "I was worried, because it brings attention to vampires, and I know none of you need anymore attention—not after the whole thing with the portrait." Sage nodded her head silently. "Who can forget that?" Anna said sarcastically. Daniel chuckled. John wondered if they were beginning to patch things up between them.

"So what was the urgency when you called me?" Billy asked. John took a breath as everyone waited for what he had to say. "Okay, so I had the book signing today, right?" "Right" Billy said. "Guess who showed up to have their book signed?" Sage knew who it was, feeling a twinge in her chest. "Cristian," John said. "Cristian showed up?" Lisa said, staring at Sage. "Yeah," John said. "He acted as though he knew me." "Do you think he could be remembering?" Anna said. "If he does, he's being really sly about it," John said. "It was unnerving." "I'm sure it was," Sage replied. "Thank you," she said glancing down at the floor.

"So John, the movies are all set up," Billy said. "Movies?" John asked, confused. "You owe me an eighties marathon movie night," Billy said. "So c'mon, we're watching all the classics." "No use arguing with a determined vampire," Lisa said wryly. "He already solicited us to come along," Cody quipped, "no matter how many times we've already seen them." "Besides, I even brought popcorn," Billy said. "Alright," John grinned. "Let's go." "See you," they waved as they exited the room. "Maria and I are going to take in the town," Pedro said as they both put on their suede jackets. "We'll be careful," he said as they exited the living room. "What do you want to do?" Samuel asked Sage. "I need to see for myself," she said feeling a need to see if Cristian was indeed beginning to remember. He clasped her hand. "Then let's go," he said.

"We won't be long," she said to Anna who offered to accompany her, trying to avoid Daniel.

“You and Daniel need to work out the problems between you two,” Sage said telepathically.

“You can’t avoid him forever.” “Yes, I can!” Anna exclaimed. “You’re right,” Sage replied, “but think about the consequences first, or you’ll live with regret.” She took Samuel’s hand as they vanished from the room.

“Don’t worry, I’ll leave you to whatever,” Daniel said walking toward the door. “Daniel,” Anna said. “We haven’t really spoken to each other since that night.” “Things were going so well with us.” “Yeah, until I asked you about our future and you changed on me. Are you that afraid of love?” “Yes,” Anna admitted. “It frightens me.” “But there’s nothing to fear,” he said. “The risk you take is rejection,” he said, “But if the love is returned, it’s rewarding.” “All I’m asking for is a commitment, and that’s something you don’t want to give.” “I love you, Anna, and I thought you loved me.” “I do love you,” she whispered. “What did you say?” he asked, twitching his ears. “I said I love you,” she said, her eyes brimming. He took her into his arms. “I loved before, Daniel,” she cried, “and I lost him.” “You won’t lose me,” he said. “I want to believe it,” she said. “Then believe it, because it’s true. I’m here for all eternity, and even if this world came to an end, I will still love you regardless.” They kissed each other, falling onto the floor.

Randi stood outside on the playground watching her son Rafe swinging on the swing set. Since the day she left the hospital, she stayed at the rectory for a safe haven from the vampires she knew were still searching for her to kill her. The nun took her by her Brooklyn apartment to pack her belongings, and the rest of her furniture was stored in a storage facility. Watching her son play, she thought, “When you’re older, I will tell you about your father

and start you on your training. By the time you're ten years old, you will have mastered archery, martial arts, and learned how to make a stake and kill a vampire."

Cristian arrived at Central Park and sat on a bench looking out at the people walking, playing, and picnicking. He recalled standing at the Bow Bridge and watching the sunset. That for him was the best part of the day. The golden, orange, and lavender hues bathing the park gave it a nearly surreal appearance. It was better than any watercolor painting he could ever create. "I watched a sunset once with Sage, and that view was far more beautiful than anything I've ever seen," he mused. Sage and Samuel arrived at the park, both wearing sunglasses as they walked among the trees, shielding themselves from inquisitive eyes. "This is such a beautiful park," she said, "especially around this time of the year, just before summer ends and fall begins." "It's very romantic," Samuel said. Suddenly, she stopped abruptly and leaned against a tree, taking off her sunglasses. She saw Cristian sitting at a bench as though he was waiting for someone.

He stirred turning his head toward the trees as though he sensed her presence. "Cristian," a woman yelled as he stood to his feet, giving her a kiss on the cheek. She had dark hair with blonde highlights and wore glasses. "Did you bring her?" he asked. "She's on her way," the woman said softly. "Daddy," a little girl with blonde curly hair with ribbons, a butterfly long-sleeved shirt, and blue jeans yelled, running into his arms. Sage's throat caught as her eyes welled up, watching him scoop her up into his arms. She looked to be about two or three years old. "How's my girl?" he said. "Fine, Daddy" she said. "I brought you something," he said, handing her balloons from behind the bench. "Thank you," she said politely. "She ran excitedly with the balloons." "Don't run off too far," the woman

said. “So she’ll stay with you over the weekend, and then I’ll pick her up on Monday,” she asked. “Fine,” Cristian said, a bit irritated. “I want to spend more time with her and take her on trips.” “We’ll talk about that later,” the woman said. “Don’t punish her because we didn’t work out,” he said. “I’m not,” she snapped. Sage watched with alarm as the girl chased after the balloons that slipped from her fingers, wandering farther away from her parents’ view. “You shouldn’t stray too far from your parents’ eyes,” Sage said, handing the girl her balloons. “Thank you,” the girl said shyly.

“Wait a second,” Cristian said, averting his eyes, “Nayah!” he yelled. Sage froze at the utterance of her name. “Nayah, you’re getting too far away from my sight,” he said, seeing her standing next to a tree as he walked over to her to pick her up. “He named her after me,” she said softly, taking cover before he could see her. Samuel took her hand as she turned toward him, trying to keep her emotions in check. “I’m just as surprised as you are,” he said, swallowing. “He named her after you. He does remember.” “I don’t know,” Sage said. “It could be possible.”

He leaned against her ear as she turned back to watch Cristian playing with his daughter. “We should get going,” she said, watching Cristian cuddle with his daughter. Samuel nodded his head, kissing her affectionately as they held hands and began to walk away. “What were you doing over here?” Cristian asked his daughter. “I was talking to the pretty lady,” the little girl replied. “Lady?” he asked. “Yes, the lady from your drawing,” she said. Astonished, Cristian sharply turned his head toward the trees. “Sage?” he said.