

H.U.B. Volume 2: Blowback

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Chapter 1

Moscow, Russia

The three beefy bodyguards, two in the front and one in the rear, escorted Tina Macintosh through the bustling restaurant. The four of them walked in silence, entering the kitchen area, on through a set of double doors, down a flight of stairs into a long hallway that was dimly lit with bulbs that flickered on and off seemingly at random.

There were small rooms along each side of the hallway, a total of about sixteen in all, and each one of them with a posted guard posted up by their doors. Tina glanced into one of the rooms to see an elderly gentleman in his late fifties lying naked on top of an equally naked young girl who looked to be no older than thirteen, giving her the unholy business. The girl happened to look up and lock tear-filled eyes on Tina as she passed through. Tina, heartbroken but refusing to show it, broke eye contact and kept moving, her face one of stone as usual.

They came to the end of the hallway which dead-ended into a large set of French doors that two gargantuan sized men, assault rifles at the ready, stood guard over. The two Russian behemoths tensed up at the sight of Tina even with three of their own men leading her to them.

“Out of the way, the boss has a guest,” spoke one of the two guards in the front.

“I must check for any weapons,” shot back the sentry on the left as he eyed Tina with lustful eyes. “She may wish to harm the boss.”

“We’ve already searched her,” replied her escort.

“I’ll search her anyway.”

He passed his weapon over to his pal and then stepped towards Tina. “Briefcase down and hands up.” Tina placed her black metal briefcase on the floor and then raised her hands.

“Good girl.” He began patting her down, checking all the usual areas but then running his hand across the crotch of her pants suit and then fondling both of her breasts for good measure. His partner laughed like a school boy while Tina looked him in the eye as he continued to feel her up. “I need you to open the briefcase.”

“The contents of that briefcase are none of your concern,” she answered back sharply as she lowered her hands.

“Maybe I’ll open it for myself and see.”

“You can try but all the brawn in the world won’t get it to open and you don’t look like the type that has a lot of brain power so I’m not betting on you succeeding.”

The four men laughed at him, pissing him off even more. He got nose to nose with her, close enough for her to taste the vodka on his breath. “I’ve done a lot of bad things to women just like you.”

“You’ve never met a woman like me. Are we done here? I don’t think Mr. Horrobin will appreciate you wasting his time.”

He backed up, knowing that she was right. He stepped over to the door and opened it.

Tina picked up her briefcase and followed her escorts into the room which was like a casino with card tables, slot machines, and an assortment of well dressed Russian gentleman enjoying the festivities. Cigar smoke was thick in here and the sounds of the

slot machines and their constant jingling assaulted the ears. They made a right and walked through the gaming area to where an office was located.

The two men stopped in front of the door, the one on the left pulling out a walkie-talkie. "Ms. Macintosh is here. We're right outside your office."

"Send her in," replied the person on the other end, his thick Russian accent spilling out through the small speaker on the radio..

He opened the door and Tina entered the office, her eyes immediately landing upon the boss named Horrobin Bezuvin as he sat at his desk, which had a plate of cocaine sitting upon it as well as a burning stogie. Horrobin had his shirt unbuttoned, exposing his heavily tattooed barrel of a chest, and his pants were unzipped as two topless women sat on their knees pleasuring him with their mouths and hands.

As Tina entered, Horrobin lifted his head and smiled at her. "Ms. Macintosh, I've been dying to meet you." He looked down at the two women that were sucking him off. "Leave me."

They got off their knees and quickly exited the room. Tina looked at their hollow eyes and drugged up faces, feeling sorry for them. "Afternoon, Mr. Bezuvin," she greeted him, "have I caught you at a bad time?"

"Of course not," he answered as he stood up and stuffed himself back in his pants, "that is my way of relieving stress." He looked over at the three escorts and shooed them away with a wave of his left hand. They exited the room and shut the door, leaving the two of them alone. "Please have a seat."

Tina sat down, placing the briefcase down between her feet. "Thank you for agreeing to meet with me."

“The pleasure is all mine,” he said as he took his seat. “It’s not everyday that I get to meet with someone of your caliber. I must admit, I’m surprised that you wanted to meet me. A woman of your stature, especially from America, usually doesn’t come here to my office in person.”

“I’m a very hands on type of person, Mr. Bezuvin, and, from what I’ve learned from my research, so are you.”

He smiled, smitten by her. “I like you. I can tell that you are going to be a LOT of fun.” He nodded over to the plate of coke. “Would you like some? Purest you will ever find in Russia.”

“No thank you.”

“Suit yourself. Your assistant was very brief and cryptic on the phone so I really don’t know what it is that you could possibly want or need from me. Would you care to explain?”

“I apologize for the shortness of the call, but you have to understand that it could lead to a whole lot of unnecessary and uncomfortable questions being asked if the wrong people were to ever find out that I was meeting with the leader of the Solntseiskaya Bratva. Many in my country and around the world consider your group to be one of the most powerful organized crime associations in the world.”

“And what do you think?”

“It really doesn’t matter what I think but, if you must know, and if we are being completely honest with each other, I can’t say that I approve of all of your alleged activities: money laundering, pornography, prostitution, tax evasion, wire fraud, drug trafficking, arson, art theft, and the list goes on and on. I could sit here and judge you but

that's not why I'm here. There are enough people in the world that look at me the same way considering that the weapons my company creates have been used to kill millions of people all over the world."

"I appreciate your honesty, Ms. Macintosh. Shall we get down to business?"

"Of course. I was informed that you share the same disdain of vampires that I do. I also know that it was your people that were responsible for the March 29, 2010 bombing that ripped through this city's metro system. It was portrayed in the media as a simple act of terrorism blamed on radical Islamists but I know that that's not the case. It was done because you got wind of a large group of vampires were going to be on those routes so you decided to take them out."

"Filthy creatures they are," he said, his face full of disgust. "I remember seeing your news conference a few years ago – you think that they killed your daughter."

"I don't think, I know. Vampires are like locusts, consuming everything in their path and they must be destroyed or else the entire human population will be wiped out."

"How do you propose to do that?"

"I deal in the business of weapons and war so I can feel when one is brewing. I'm putting together a team to take them out."

He let out a hearty laugh. "A team you say? How are you going to wipe out a whole race of vampires with only a 'team'?"

"The team I'm putting together is going to lead the army that is going to fight the vampires."

"An army? Are you referring to the United States military?"

“That’s precisely who I’m referring to. I’m pretty sure you’ve been following the presidential debates, correct?”

“Of course.”

“Then you know that General Freedman pretty much has it in the bag. Who do you think has been secretly financing his campaign?”

“You?”

“Yes, to the extent of \$60,000,000.”

“And what’s in it for you if he wins?”

“Revenge.”

He smiled. “What part do I play in this?”

“I’m glad that you asked.” She picked the briefcase up and set it on the desk. She typed in a code on the panel and then stuck her finger on the biometric display, after which the briefcase opened. She pulled out a picture of a bald headed Russian with ice blue eyes. “This is your man, correct?”

He took the picture and looked it over. “Yes, his name is...”

“Valera Abramov,” she answered for him, “and he’s known as the ‘phantom’; he’s your top enforcer, responsible for what some have pegged as up to three hundred contract killings. I want to lease him from you.”

He set the picture down. “How much?”

“I know that you have everything that you could ever want so I’m not going to insult you by offering you money. So, here’s what I can offer you.” She pulled two pictures out of the briefcase and sat them down face up on the desk. The first was of an older woman

that was lying in a hospital bed with an oxygen mask strapped to her face. The second was a photo of a skinny kid with shaggy hair and scared eyes.

“Where did you get these pictures? How do you know about my family?”

“I have a lot of money and, due to that, I have a lot of friends and I’m very thorough when I research the people I’m going to be dealing with. Your brother Dima is being held in a military prison that’s off the grid – I can get him released. Your mother in America is dying of cancer and doesn’t have long to live. You can’t go to see her because you’re considered a terrorist and can’t enter the country and, unfortunately for you, she is way too sick to make the trip here. Give me Valera and Dima is set free and I’ll see to it that, by placing one phone call, you will once again be able to set foot on American soil and see your ailing mother again. Do we have a deal?”

He rubbed his chin. “You make a very compelling offer. How do I know that I can trust you?”

“Do you really have to ask me that, Mr. Bezuvin?”

A smile crossed his face. “Of course not. I must see my mother first before we have a deal.”

“I can manage that. There is one other thing, though.”

“And what would that be?”

“I have it from a good source that you’ve been known to illegally trade nuclear materials; I’m going to need some.”

“Ms. Macintosh, you get me to America to see my mother and free my brother then you can have anything that you like.”

She stuck her hand out and shook his hand. “Excellent.”

Chapter 2

Two in the morning on a Tuesday night and the highway was deserted which was to be expected at this time of night on a weekday. With no traffic to slow it down the black limousine barreled down the road like a rocket shot straight from the bowels of Hell, it's silver headlights slicing through the charcoal darkness of the night.

Inside the car, surrounded by several layers of tinted bulletproof glass and reinforced steel, Malachi relaxed in style, his \$10,000 suit fitting him like butter on a hot biscuit. With closed eyes, the partition raised to separate himself from the prying eyes and ears of his driver, he quietly hummed a song to himself while he maneuvered a silver dollar across the knuckles of his right hand; the coin moved through his fingers as smoothly as an oiled snake on an air hockey table. His forked tongue slipped out of his mouth and over his lips as he continued to think.

His eyes opened and he flipped the coin into the air, catching it with his right hand and placing it over on the back of his left hand, his right hand concealing the coin so that he couldn't see what side it had landed on. "Heads," he called out to himself and then uncovered the coin – heads it was.

Reaching into the inside pocket of his suit jacket he deposited the dollar into it and pulled his iPhone out. He pressed an icon on the touch screen and a map of the world popped up with red pulsating dots on various cities around the world. He slid his finger to the right on the screen, the map moving over to mimic his finger. He tapped on the display and the country of Japan came into focus, its red dot flashing like a beacon.

He set the phone down beside him and then leaned forward, pushing one of the many buttons in the middle of the console.

“Yes sir, what can I get for you?” asked the driver.

“Change of plans; I have a taste for sushi.”

“Your usual spot?”

“Yes.”

“Red Room it is then.”

“Thank you.”

Malachi rested back against the fine leather seat and picked his phone back up, the claws on his hand punching in a few numbers.

“Yes, my love?” was the greeting he received after only one ring.

Her voice always brought a smile to his face. “My dearest, Angoria. It is time to implement the Orient Initiative that we had discussed. Brief Kanice and make sure that she understands what needs to happen. I want her on the next flight out so prepare all the necessary documents and cash that she will need. I will inform Price so that he will have a team assembled and ready to deploy.”

“Why send Kanice when Price has many capable members to lead the operation?”

“You know how I am; I don’t like anything to go down without either myself or one of our people taking the lead. Given Kanice’s background it is only natural for her to be the point man on this one.”

“I understand. When will you be arriving?”

“Soon. I have a stop to make first. I’ll bring you back something.”

“Thank you. I will see you later.”

The phone call ended and he immediately dialed another number. There was only silence on the other end when it was answered. “Kyoto is a go,” spoke Malachi. “Have

your team assembled. It's time to lay down a warning to the rest of the world. Kanice will be arriving within the next forty-eight hours; she'll know what to do."

He hung the phone up and then inhaled deeply through his nose, his chest puffing out and then deflating when he exhaled. It felt good to be the king.

Chapter 3

Kyoto, Japan

It was the third straight day of heavy snowfall and the outside world was coated in it – every tree, light post, street, power line, rooftop, and car that had the unfortunate luck of being left outside was dusted in a thick layer of powder.

Dressed in fur-lined gloves, a thick black winter coat, and a tight fitting skullcap to keep his head and ears from the elements, nineteen year old Mikhoro liked, you could even say that he preferred, this type of weather. He carried a plastic sack of groceries in his left hand while holding an iPod in his right, the sounds of good ol' American music – Kanye West to be exact – filling up his ears. The cold temperature made it look like smoke was billowing out of his mouth as he rapped along word for word with the Chicago bred emcee. As he walked through the neighborhood, his eyes focused only on the sidewalk that stretched out before him and his ears absorbing only the tunes blasting from his mp3 player, he was both blind and deaf to everything that began to happen behind him.

Out of the sky flew four vampires, one crashing into a market and the others crashing into the rooftops of three nearby houses, sending snow, wood, and debris flying into the air.

The manager of the market, a wrinkled little man with blood spilling freely from his forehead, which he attempted to stop by placing his right hand over the wound, stumbled through what was left of the store's doorway. He collapsed to one knee and then righted himself, a big wet and bloody cough erupting from his chest as he took a step forward but was then pulled back inside the confines of the store by two lean but very strong arms.

A young woman, blood rushing from the mangled mess of what used to be her throat, ran from her home with what appeared to be a silent and unmoving baby wrapped in a blood soaked blanket, collapsing into the yard, her blood turning the virgin snow a deep burgundy. She continued to hold on to the mortally wounded baby, her blood dripping onto it and, with what little of the dwindling energy that she had left, turned and caught sight of Mikhoros as he nodded his head up and down to the music. She weakly raised her left arm, only able to lift it about half way up, and tried to signal Mikhoros but only gargled sounds came from her mouth.

As she continued to try and call out for help Kanice stepped out of the house and slowly walked towards the doomed woman, circling her like a vulture patiently waiting for its prey to perish. As she struggled to crawl away Kanice lifted her right leg up and brought it down with the weight of a hammer being swung by the mighty Thor, crushing the unfortunate woman's head like a grape.

Mikhoros stopped and paused the iPod, right between songs, and his ears picked up the sound of the woman's poor head being pulverized – the sickening squash stopping him in his tracks. He slowly turned around, his eyes first catching sight of the lady's blood and brain matter racing from her head almost as if in competition to see which one could escape first. His eyes moved further up to see Kanice and the alarming look on her face. Her mercury colored eyes caused him to drop both the bag and his iPod to the ground and take off running, his lungs feeling like they were on fire as he ran full speed the five blocks towards his house, refusing to look back.

Kanice smiled, her eyes following him as he ran. She casually walked after him, stalking him like Jason Voorhees does teenagers at Camp Crystal Lake. Meanwhile her three associates continued their rampage, fires now raging as they left their mark.

Mikhoru, heart hammering inside his chest, threw open the door to his house and then slammed it shut, making sure to secure all three of the locks though he wasn't sure what protection they would really provide. Perspiration streamed down his face as he turned around and screamed out "Dad!!!!" He ran down the hallway and into the kitchen where his father and sister were busy preparing the table for a meal.

"Why are you yelling like a madman?" He noticed the sweat and the wild eyed look on Mikhoru's face. "What's going on, son? What happened to the food that I sent you to get?"

"Silver eyes are coming!"

Both his father and sister dropped their plates to the floor, needing to hear nothing else from him to understand the gravity of the situation. Pops reached under the kitchen table and withdrew a large, shiny, and, most importantly, super sharp samurai sword which had been concealed underneath it. He tossed it over to Mikhoru who caught it by the handle and he then made his way over to the sink, opening the cabinet and retrieving a sawed-off shotgun from behind all of the cleaning products.

He held the gun in his right hand as he took hold of his daughter's hand with the other. "You know the drill; we're going to head down to the safe room in the basement." He looked down at his young daughter. "Hana, you stay in the middle between Mikhoru and me; do not let go of my hand, understand?"

She nodded her head up and down. "I'm scared."

“Don’t be,” countered dad, “we’re going to be fine. Let’s go.”

They took a few steps forward, Hana sandwiched between her father and brother as they made their way towards the safety of the basement. A deafening crash stopped their momentum as an explosion of dust and wood rained down upon them.

In the middle of the dust cloud stood Echo, a vampire that resembled Lucy Liu, blood dripping from the claws on her hand, as well as from the fangs in her mouth, as she stood blocking their path, staring at the three of them with a look of pure rage on her face.

Pops raised the shotgun and blasted her square in the chest with no hesitation, sending her flying backwards and landing beside the stairs that led down to the basement, blood oozing from her wounds. He turned and faced his children, addressing Mikhorō specifically. “Change of plans - take your sister to the attic and hide until I tell you its safe.”

“But dad...,” cried out Hana.

“But nothing,” he interrupted her. “Everything is going to be fine. Go with your brother now.”

“Dad, watch out!!” screamed Mikhorō, pointing at something behind his father.

Dad turned and was confronted by Echo who was back standing on her feet. She leapt on him, knocking him to the floor and lying on top of him as he tried to fight her off, raining a few brutal right hands to her face before grabbing her arms to try to keep her claws from reaching him. “GO!!!!”

As his strength began to fail him, she was able to get the upper hand, snapping both of his arms in half, bone poking from out from the jagged tears in his skin, and then dove in taking a lethal bite out of his neck.

Mikhoru scooped up the screaming Hana and headed towards the stairs. He came to an abrupt stop when he saw a large hole in the stairway that prevented them from crossing.

“Why are you stopping?” she asked, looking behind for signs of Echo.

“I can’t jump across with you and I don’t think that you’ll be able to make it on your own; I’m gonna have to throw you across.” He set her down and got down on his knees so that he was face to face with her. “As soon as you hit the ground you pull those stairs down and head up to the attic and bolt the door. Don’t open it unless I give you the secret knock. You remember the secret knock, right?”

“Yeah.”

“Okay.” He picked her up. “On three: one, two, three!” He tossed her into the air, watching as she flew towards the other side. His look turned into one of horror as he was helpless to do anything but look on as a hand reached up from the hole in the stairs and snatched Hana by her left leg, pulling her screaming body back down to the kitchen area.

“Hana!!!”

He looked into the hole, seeing his sister being swarmed over by Echo. He rose up and took four steps back before taking off and vaulting over the hole to the other side. He performed a roll as he landed and then dashed up the stairs to the attic, pulling the attic stairs up as he entered the room and using a dead bolt to lock the door. He quickly backed up, stumbled, then caught himself, and braced his body by standing with his back against the wall. He bent over and took a few deep breaths, the sword held tightly in his hand with a death grip.

He gazed out the window as the snow continued to fall upon the city that was quickly becoming a wasteland as thick black smoke rose towards the heavens from the mango orange fires that consumed the businesses and houses below. The floor shook beneath his feet, causing him to look back. Another blow landed, the force causing the wooden floor to splinter and crack. The shots started to come quicker and with more force, prompting him into action.

Briefly setting the sword down, but not too far from his reach, he forced the attic window open and stepped onto the narrow ledge that led to the roof. Reaching back inside for the sword he momentarily hesitated as Echo shot up through the floor and landed inside the attic. Her eyes instantly found him as he grabbed the sword and then disappeared around the edge of the wall.

Maneuvering gingerly across the snow covered ledge to the rooftop he observed Echo as she glided out of the window and came to a rest on the roof, standing directly across from him with a deranged look on her face. She looked much like a mental patient that has been holding a grudge against someone and now had the opportunity to retaliate.

Kanice stood watching from street level, her eyes staring intently like a teacher checking out their young mentor on their first assignment. Mikhoru looked down at her and then back at Echo. He exhaled and then held his sword out in front of him, ready to dance.

“I’m going to enjoy this,” Echo taunted him as she circled around, moving in herky-jerky movements while her tongue flicked wildly out of her mouth.

Mikhoru navigated around the roof, keeping his distance between her as his feet crunched upon the snow. He remained calm, breathing normally, though his heart was

racing triple time. He glanced down at Kanice again. “I assume that you’re the one in charge,” he called down to her. “I want to make a deal.”

“What kind of deal?” she answered back. “There’s nothing that you can possibly give or do for us.”

“A simple one – if I kill her then you let me live.”

“What do you think about that proposition, Echo? I’ll let you make the call.”

She let out a wicked laugh, her hands on her belly. “I’m going to eat him alive. I accept the challenge.”

“So do we have a deal?” he asked Kanice.

“Yes, we have a deal. If you can kill Echo then I will spare your life.”

“Give me your word.”

“You have my word.”

“Okay,” he said softly to himself, “let’s do this.”

Echo lunged at him, claws swinging wildly and colliding with the steel of his sword, sending sparks flying into the air to mix with the falling snow. He swung his sword like Conan but Echo easily avoided it, using her superior speed to sidestep out of the way. Feeling like Neo must have felt the first time he fought the Agents in *The Matrix* he steadied himself and regrouped.

“You don’t stand a chance,” she taunted him again, a jackal’s sneer on her face.

He said nothing in return, only watching as he plotted his next move. Looking into her face he realized just how pretty she was and that deeply saddened him. So beautiful and elegant looking – the type he would have liked to have possibly dated if given the chance – but there was nothing more than a carnivorous monster lurking beneath that

pasty mask of hers, one that he would need to find a way to kill or end up being her next victim.

Trying to gain a bit of traction on the slippery ice and snow he dashed towards her, ready to impale his sword deep into her body. She continued to block his every strike with her claws, smoke and sparks flying like flint being struck by metal. No matter what he tried he couldn't find a clear opening.

Sensing an opening of her own Echo swung her right hand at Mikhoró's neck, attempting to sever his head from his body but she miscalculated, the momentum of her swing causing her to briefly lose her footing on the ice.

Mikoro ducked under her flailing arm and then rose up, driving the sword deep into the left side of her chest. Upon striking the place where her heart would be the sword shattered into dozens of pieces, leaving only half of the blade left in his hand. He stared in astonishment at what was left of his weapon and then at Echo as she rose to her feet, the vilest of smiles upon her face as her chest wound started to close up.

"I can bet that you weren't expecting that," she said as she reached down and pulled out the little bit of metal that remained lodged in her chest and then threw it aside. Quick as lightning she extended her left hand and sliced Mikhoró across the stomach, her rock hard claws sliding effortlessly through his stomach muscles and causing five stripes of blood to appear which quickly darkened his blue shirt and dripped onto the ground.

Mikhoró fell forward, clutching his burning wound with his left hand while using the sword in his other hand to keep himself righted. Wincing in pain and with forced breathing he stood up straight and held what left of the sword out in front of him again.

Echo licked his blood from her claws. “Your blood is delicious; I can’t wait to eat your heart. I’m going to enjoy making you suffer.”

He exhaled deeply and then closed his eyes for a second. He opened them and was ready to go at it again. “Let’s go.”

Echo rushed him at which point he threw the remains of his sword at her head, the metal gleaming in the air as it turned over and over before landing squarely in her right eye. Stunned and screaming in pain she stopped her advance, giving Mikhoro the opening he needed.

As she went to pull the sword out Mikhoro used his last bit of energy and executed a roundhouse kick to her face, blood gushing out of it like water from a busted water balloon, coating the snow with a thick spray of blood. As she stumbled backwards he ran up and pulled the sword from her eye socket and, with one quick slice, drew the blade across her throat, decapitating her. Her head flew backwards and rolled on the ground while the rest of her body fell forward, landing on her knees and then collapsing flat in front of Mikhoro, her blood splashing onto his sneakers.

As her body fell over he caught a glimpse of Hana as she crawled onto the rooftop, blood soaking her clothes. “Hana!!!!” he called out, dropping the sword to the ground and limping towards her. His energy gave out half way to her and he fell to the ground, inching the rest of the way to her on his belly and leaving a widening trail of blood on the rooftop.

“Hana,” he said softly as he arrived at her body which was lying face down. Mustering his strength he got to his knees and rolled her over onto her back, wiping

clumps of red snowflakes from her delicate face. Her closed eyes brought a lump to his throat and brought his worst fears front and center.

Cradling her in his arms he looked down at her face and it was then that her eyes popped open, no longer were they caramel colored but were now fully silver, and she swiftly sat up and grabbed a hold of his hair, sinking her new fangs into his neck.

*

5 Weeks Later

Eastern Kyoto

Walking along the cherry tree lined Philosopher's Path, Ms. Kadukawa, an older woman with pursed lips, salt and pepper hair, and an air of unquestionable authority about herself, led her quiet and well behaved class of fifteen students as they walked in a straight line. All of the young children carried brown sack lunches in their hand and they all wore white stickers on the shirts of their matching uniforms that listed their first name on it and the initials KVE in big bold black letters below. A younger woman, Ms. Kadukawa's assistant by the name of Mrs. Saito, brought up the rear of the line to make sure that none of the children strayed away from the group, though the chances of that happening were very remote.

Ms. Kadukawa came to a stop and pointed over to some white flowers. "Easy question class: who can tell me what these are?"

"Cherry blossoms," answered the group in a high pitched collection of voices.

“That is correct. We are fortunate enough to live in the best place in the country to view these beautiful flowers. Let’s continue on.”

They walked through the garden of the Heian Shrine, which was not far from the Philosopher’s Path, and featured colorful pink blossoms that were a wonderful contrast to the white ones that they had just seen. Several vendors selling a variety of foods and souvenirs lined the streets including a man dressed as a clown that was making balloon animals for the kids that happened to pass by.

“Hello children,” he greeted the group as they approached, his delightful voice and painted face exciting the kids.

Ms. Kadukawa and the children stopped in front of him. “Say hello children,” she instructed them.

The children greeted him back.

“Are you on a field trip?”

“Yeah,” they all replied.

“I wish that I could go on a field trip. Would you guys and gals like a balloon?”

“Yeah!” they answered again, more enthusiastically this time.

“You’ll have to ask your teacher if it’s okay first.”

They looked up at Ms. Kadukawa, each of them with big puppy dog eyes. There was no way that she could say no. She nodded her head yes.

“Alright then. What would you like, darling?”

The shy little cutie in front of him blushed. “A puppy.”

“I can do that.” He pulled a purple balloon from the pile and started working his magic. “You guys like school?”

An assortment of answers was thrown back his way, all a different variation of yes.

“That’s good. I see the KVE on your stickers; that stands for Kyoto Vampire Elementary, right?”

“Yep,” answered a mischievous looking boy in the front row.

The clown handed the puppy shaped balloon to the little girl. “Thank you.”

“You’re welcome. I hear that KVE is an excellent school and it must be to have such nice kids like you in it. Because you’re so nice and well mannered I have a special magic trick that I want to show you. I don’t show this to everyone so you should consider yourself very lucky. Everybody move in closer – you, too, teachers – this is going to be a blast.”

Everyone closed in tighter around him.

“I want to tell you a secret first.” His smile turned into a sneer and his voice got deeper and deadlier. “I fucking hate vampires!”

With shocked faces the teachers and children looked on as the clown pulled a detonator from inside his vest and pressed the red button, enveloping himself and everyone in a five foot radius around in the searing heat of fire and ball bearings as the Claymore mine he had strapped to his chest exploded, and blowing them all to pieces.

Chapter 4

Malachi, exquisitely dressed as was his custom, sat quietly inside of his spacious office high on the twenty-fifth floor of the building, his eyes closed as he absorbed the soft meditative music that played from the Bose sound system that surrounded the room. Thick black curtains were drawn across the windows so that you couldn't tell whether it was night or day outside, leaving the room to be illuminated by five candles that were strategically placed around the room. Two incense sticks burned on his desk, filling the space with an earthy aroma that Malachi breathed in.

"Mr. Nadell, I hate to bother you but there's someone here to see you," came a young female's voice over the intercom system.

"What have I told you about interrupting me while I'm enjoying my reflection time?"

"I know," she answered, her voice trembling, "but this is important."

"It better be. Who is it?"

"Former Vice President McDonnell is here to see you."

His head lifted up and a smile not unlike that of the Joker's stretched across his face.

"You don't say? A visiting dignitary is always welcomed. Please send him in."

"Yes sir."

Staring straight ahead at the door, patiently waiting for his guest, he sat up in his chair and cracked the knuckles on both of his hands. The door to the office opened and in stepped McDonnell, his silver eyes appearing blue due to contacts, making a beeline towards Malachi's desk.

“Former Vice President McDonnell,” stated Malachi as he rose and greeted him, extending his hand out, “how nice to see you. It’s been a long time since I’ve been able to bask in your presence. For what do I owe this pleasure of you dropping by unannounced?”

McDonnell sat down without bothering to shake Malachi’s hand. “Let’s skip all the fake pleasantries and bullshit, shall we?”

Malachi was pissed at McDonnell’s shunning of his handshake. He slowly sat back down in his seat, disappointment and anger etched all over his face. “How do you come into my place of business and then disrespect me by not shaking my hand? Due to our long history together I’m going to give you a pass for that one but I will conveniently forget about that history of ours if you happen to make that same mistake again.”

“I’m too old to be scared by threats, Malachi.”

“And I’m too old to be make threats so, whatever you do, don’t ever mistake my words as such. Since we have stopped being pleasant with each other, why the fuck are you here?”

“I’m sure you’ve heard about the attacks in Kyoto?”

“Of course I’ve heard about them. Anyone not living in a cave or under a rock for the past month or so has knowledge of it; it’s been all over the papers and in the news. It’s a shame that someone would do such a thing like that; so many innocent victims were lost.”

McDonnell wasn’t buying Malachi’s cheap words. “I have a feeling that you have a lot more intimate knowledge of this event than you’re letting on.”

“If you’re accusing me of something then I would encourage you to come on out and say it.”

“I know very well how you feel about humans, Malachi. This attack has your fingerprints all over it and you know it. The other members of The Commission are not going to be happy about this; they already consider you a loose cannon as is.”

“I’m far from a loose cannon; I’m a businessman.”

“You can call yourself whatever you want but you and I know what’s really going on. Did you anticipate the blowback that your little stunt produced? Innocent children – vampire children, Malachi – were blown up as retaliation by the humans. Through your psychopathic actions you have done nothing but hinder everything that The Commission has built. How are we supposed to get humans to trust us when you and your group are doing things like this?”

“Are you finished?”

“Yes. I’ll let you speak.”

Malachi sat up in his seat and looked deeply into McDonnell’s eyes, his expression gravely serious. “Let me explain something to you, Mr. McDonnell, supposed leader of the Vampire Nation. You and your Commission are the biggest disgraces to every vampire that has ever walked on this earth. You had the nerve to parade yourself around on television when you were the vice president, talking about how you were our great and mighty leader, but you sit before me now wearing contacts to try and assimilate with the humans. Where is your pride? Where’s your dignity? This is me that you’re talking to!”

McDonnell looked down at Malachi’s desk.

“Look at me when I’m talking to you!!!!” McDonnell made eye contact with him again. “I’m not one of these civilians on the street that are fans of yours. I have seen you drink the blood of countless thousands of humans and now you decide that you want to wear your righteous cap? Please! Are you ashamed of what you are? You call me a psychopath but what you should be calling me is a patriot.”

“A patriot? Have you gone mad? Do you know how many advances we’ve made in the last five years?”

“Advances for whom? Have you been so blinded as to not realize who has really been advancing? Did you really expect this great experiment between vampires and humans to actually work? They are scared of us and they should be. You’ve seen how it’s been since your great speech. You cannot continue to straddle both sides of the fence – you’re either a vampire or a human; you have to pick a team and stick by them at some point. What you in all of your and The Commission’s infinite wisdom have failed to realize is that your ideas and lofty expectations have been remarkably shortsighted. You thought that there would be peace but it’s only going to lead to war.”

“That’s what you’re hoping for, isn’t it? A war between vampires and humans is all that you’ve ever wanted.”

He smiled. “People hope to win the lottery; people hope to get a raise on their annual review. I don’t need hope for things that I know will happen. The time for us to take our natural place in the pecking order is upon us and time is also one of the things that you’re running out of. You can’t play peacemaker any longer. Join us or die right along with the humans.”

A look of sadness crossed McDonnell's face as he rubbed his eyes. "I don't know where you lost your way, Malachi. I used to have such high hopes for you but now all I have is disappointment."

Malachi snickered as he stood up and walked over to the window where he pulled back the curtains to reveal the city many stories below. "Come over here, please; I would like for you to see something."

McDonnell got up out of his seat and stepped up next to Malachi, both of them gazing out at the city. Malachi pointed at the canvas that was God's horizon as the sun set in the sky. "Do you see it?"

McDonnell looked confused. "See what?"

"The setting sun; it's a fitting metaphor for this moment in the history of the world. Light is still visible but the darkness is quickly approaching to engulf the earth and with it come all the things that go bump in the night and make ones heart go pitter pat in their chest. I am the one that will be leading the darkness. To quote something that you once told me, the world is on the brink of major changes and I am the one that's going to be handling the reigns of the revolution. Your voice no longer speaks for our race." He patted him forcefully on the back twice. "I think that both of us have always known that one day I was going to kill you."

McDonnell took a step back and stared at Malachi, shocked by the words that he had just heard. He turned and walked towards the door.

"Hey!" Malachi shouted out at him, stopping McDonnell right as he opened the door. "I'll be seeing you."

McDonnell said nothing as he turned and exited the office.

Chapter 5

Clayton brought the bottle up to his lips and took several large gulps of the golden tequila. He had drunk so much that it no longer burned any more. Draining it he flung the empty bottle onto the floorboard where it landed on top of a large black duffel bag that was zipped up and very bulky. He wiped his big meaty hand through his oily hair and then wiped the profuse amount of sweat from his brow. His stained wife beater that barely covered his gut was soaked with perspiration.

Beside him in the driver's seat was a mousy looking man by the name of River. He briefly took his eyes off the road and glanced over at Clayton with growing concern on his face. Clayton was now sobbing and heavy tears were rolling down his face. River turned his eyes back to the road as he swallowed the growing lump in his throat. "You alright, man?"

"Yeah, I'm good." He wiped his face again and then looked over at River. "Thanks for doing this for me; I wouldn't be able to do it by myself."

"You're welcome." He exhaled. "Are you sure that we're doing the right thing? I mean, we don't know if they..."

"I know that they took him, River!" he interrupted him, already knowing what he was going to say. "Jason wouldn't have just run off – not my son; not my Jason. The police can try to get me to believe that he ran away but they don't know my son like I do; he wouldn't do that because he was a good kid. Those vampire motherfuckers took him, I know it. You're with me, right?"

“Of course I am; I wouldn’t be here if I wasn’t. We’ve kicked a lot of ass together but what you’re talking about doing ups the ante by a million degrees. This is a suicide mission.”

“What else do you want me to do then? Do you want me to sit around and wait for the vampires to police themselves? They don’t give a damn about us and there is no fucking way that they are going to investigate and prosecute any of the people involved. There’s no way! You seen what happened in Japan – the vampires attacked and all it took was one person to have the balls and strike back, letting them motherfuckers know that this shit is real right now! We’re about to do the same thing here that they did over there.”

“Innocent kids died in Japan.”

“No, River, vampires died over there. There is no such thing as an innocent vampire; remember that!”

“I got it.” There was no sense in arguing with him so he gave up on trying. “So what exactly is the plan here?”

“It’s simple – we’re going to find us a vampire and fuck them up. They took one of mine so I’m going to destroy one of theirs.”

“This city is full of vampires so how are we going to know which one to pick?”

“I’ll just know, alright? Can you do me a favor and just shut up and drive; I need to think.”

River went to say something but hesitated, instead focusing on the road. Clayton unzipped the duffel bag and removed a 9MM pistol from it which he tucked under his

shirt and into the small of his back, a lighter which he stuffed into his front pants pocket, and a small glass jar full of gasoline which he placed inside the pocket of his overcoat.

Now loaded up with an assortment of weapons he returned his attention to the windshield where, after a few miles, he spotted an albino looking woman walking alone with very few people around. “Up there River, is that one?”

He leaned forward to get a better look. “Yeah, I think it is. What do you want me to do?”

“Pull up a little bit in front of her; I’ll get out and ask her for directions. Keep the truck running and do NOT take this bitch out of drive, understand?”

River nodded his head up and down. “I gotcha.”

He pulled up and stopped the truck about six feet in front of the woman. Clayton reached inside the glove compartment and pulled out an ink pen and a flyer which he placed inside the pocket where the gas was at. He looked over at River. “Be ready. I’ll be right back.”

The door opened and Clayton exited the vehicle, approaching the woman with a friendly smile that masked his true intentions. “Excuse me, can you help me with some directions?”

She stopped, looking up at him with a set of big beautiful maple syrup colored eyes. Staring at her he actually felt disappointed, thinking that he had made a mistake in his selection. “Where are you trying to get to?”

As she smiled he could see the faintest glimpse of the fangs in her mouth and he felt good again. “I... I’m trying to get to 57th and Main but my buddy and I are a little lost; we don’t come to this side of town much.”

“No worries, I can get you there; you’re actually not that far off. What you need to do is...”

“Hold on a second, let me get something to write this down.”

Using his right hand he reached inside of his coat and retrieved the jar of gasoline which he quickly brought out and smashed across her face, the liquid and fumes taking root inside of her mouth and nose. As she took a step back in shock, her hands rising up to her face, he whipped the lighter out and flicked it, the flame shooting out as bright as the sun. “This is for Jason!”

He tossed the lighter towards her and the fire kissed the gasoline fumes and took bloom, engulfing the woman in a blanket of Hell fire. She dropped to the ground and rolled around and, as she did, he pulled out the 9MM and emptied the clip into her flaming body.

Laying on the ground the most terrible sound came from deep within her, a high pitched scream much like a whistle that flew outwards through her mouth. Clayton covered his ears with his hands and then looked around to see that the few humans in the area were covering their ears as well but the five vampires that had just exited the convenience store were looking at him, anger on their faces as their fingernails descended and formed claws.

Clayton took off towards the truck as they began to give chase, diving into the front seat. “Go, go, go!”

River floored it as Clayton slammed the door shut. The truck shot off like a bullet and rocketed down the street. Now sitting up in his seat Clayton looked through the back

window to find that the five vampires were hot on their tail and getting closer, no longer running, but now flying through the air.

“What the fuck, Clayton?!?!”

“I don’t know what happened. She made some kind of noise that was like a signal for them. Don’t worry, just keep driving; I’ll handle it.”

He dug into the bag of weapons and pulled out a shotgun. He looked towards his right and it was then that his door was ripped off and one of the vampires reached in to try and grab him. Clayton pointed the shotgun at its chest and pulled the trigger, the blast knocking the vampire back and causing it to fall to the asphalt and roll as cars swerved to keep from hitting it.

River continued to navigate through the street at breakneck speed while Clayton leaned out of the truck and let out shot after shot, taking aim at the vampires that continued to pursue the truck, keeping them temporarily at bay but not losing them. The shotgun ran out of bullets so he ducked back inside the cabin, tossing the shotgun to the floor. Into the bag he went again, this time pulling out an AK-47.

The sight of the big black AK scared River even more shitless than he already was. “Where in the fuck did you get that from??” He quickly turned back to the road, weaving through cars and speeding through red lights and stop signs while his head swiveled around like Linda Blair, checking the rearview mirror for vampires while also trying to keep an eye on Clayton to see what he was going to do next. Cold sweat poured down his face.

“I don’t need you to ask questions, I need you to drive,” he calmly replied back as he flipped the safety off of the AK-47. “Take the ramp up ahead and get on the freeway –

we've gotta put some distance between us and them. Hold your ears because this will probably get loud.”

He let off a shot, sending a single bullet flying through the back window of the truck, shards of glass flying in all directions. Clayton knelt down, placing the barrel of the gun through what was left of the window and took aim, letting off a barrage of shots, most of which found their way into the bodies of the vampires that were giving chase.

River guided the truck onto the ramp to enter the freeway and then floored it again, pedal to the metal with the engine screaming like a banshee as the RPM's and speedometer rose like the temperature in Texas during the height of summer.

The five vampires split up, two veering off to the left and the other three moving over to the right, their speed increasing as they began to make up ground on the truck, ducking and trying to dodge the bullets that continued to explode from the gun.

Clayton swung around, firing at the three on the right. As he did one of the two on the left, a big strong male that was built like a bull, sped up and then slammed into the side of the truck causing River to temporarily lose control as the truck bounced off of a minivan. Clayton lost his balance and fell backwards, his back against the dashboard, as River grabbed the wheel and again gained control of the vehicle.

Regaining his composure Clayton screamed out “DUCK!!!!” and, as River obliged, Clayton unloaded on the vampire that had rammed them, stitching his body up with a row of hot lead from his neck to his belly button that knocked him out of the air and into the back of a Honda Civic. He turned and pointed the AK back through the window but then relaxed when he realized that the remaining four vampires had started to fall back.

“I think that they've given up!” he shouted. “The fuckers have quit. Fuck yeah!!!”

“Are you serious?” asked River, not believing it. He let his foot off the gas a little bit and then turned to see what Clayton was looking at. The vampires were growing smaller in the distance and appeared to be standing around their fallen comrade as he lay in the crunched up Civic. “I don’t believe it.” He looked back at the road. “Shit!!”

Coming straight for them was a vampire and he sliced through the windshield like an Olympic diver through a swimming pool, detaching River’s head as he traveled through the back window and performed a flip in mid air, landing on the pavement with the type of precision that would have garnered him a perfect ten from the stingiest of judges. He tossed River’s head over his shoulder as he watched the truck skid to the right and then roll over three times, ejecting Clayton from the cabin before coming to rest against a tree.

Lying on his back, eyes closed with his left arm hanging by the slimmest piece of tendon and his right hand still somehow managing to clutch the AK. He coughed a few times and then opened his eyes. He attempted to rise up but the pain was too intense. Letting out a yell he laid back down, his eyes looking up at the sky.

Fear displaced the pain and his eyes were as large as hula-hoops as a vampire stepped up and stood over him, the very vampire that he had burned and shot earlier. Although it was healing her face was melted like a Barbie doll that had been left out in the sun and her hair was burned completely off.

“Remember me?”

Chapter 6

He was still an imposing and intimidating figure even at this stage of his life.

Because of that, people generally had one of two reactions whenever he showed up or his name was thrown up in a conversation: they either hated or loved him; there was no gray area with this man.

General Freedman was constantly looking for that little push that he felt would give him the edge that he was searching for and, as he watched the videotaped footage of former President Clark and former Vice President McDonnell discuss the existence of vampires and how humans should be tolerant and accepting of them, he knew that he had found it. It was like a sign from God pointing him towards his destiny as everything fell into place around him.

Forty years he had served his country in it's many times of need – forty long years. He often wondered where all that time had went. It's funny how life changes a person. It seemed like only yesterday when he was nothing but a fresh faced, green, and wet behind the ears recruit who had no idea as to what he was going to do with his life. In all honesty he had really only joined the military as a way to get a little job security and an escape from the small backwoods Mississippi town that would have offered him nothing but a lot of drinking and a lot more trouble had he stayed there; he had never envisioned the Army as a career.

He had heard it said countless times before but, when it came to his life, he truly believed that if it wasn't for the Army he would either be in jail or six feet under, more than likely the latter. He was out of control back then and he had known it but he was powerless to stop the downward trajectory on his own. Besides marrying his high school

sweetheart, joining the military was the greatest decision that he had ever made. He was like fresh clay in the hands of the United States Army, molded from a boy that was young, dumb, and full of cum into a physically and mentally tough son of a bitch that had clawed his way up the ranks from being a soldier on the front lines ducking and dodging bullets into a four star general that had helped to call the shots.

After retiring eight years ago he had wasted no time jumping into the political arena head first, once again dedicating himself to the people. He used his military background as a springboard to successfully run for mayor of the town that he had grown up in and then, after being seasoned for four years in that role, he set his sights on a much loftier goal – he was going to throw his hat in the ring to be the next President of the United States. He had mulled the decision over and over in his head and, after having counsel with his pastor and through a lot of prayer, he felt good about his decision. It wasn't until he talked to his beloved wife about it, her giving him a thumbs up and a kiss, that it was really cemented; if she hadn't have approved of it then he wouldn't have given it a second thought.

That was three years ago, but this was now. He had won a second term as mayor and, sitting in his recliner in the mayor's residence, his legs crossed and right hand tapping on the arm of the chair, he stared at the flat screen television that was mounted on the wall of his darkened media room, becoming more furious with each image that flickered across the screen. He couldn't remember how many times he had watched this footage but he knew that it was an awful lot; so many times in fact that he had to replace the DVD five times now due to the constant viewing. He knew how it made him feel to be watching it but that was exactly why he did it – he needed that fuel to keep him going.

Each time he watched it, he caught something new that he had failed to notice before: a subtle change in someone's voice, the twitching of an eye, or a movement of someone's hand; it almost became like an obsession for him.

The sight of his wife walking into the room with a tall glass of ice cold lemonade in her hand caused him to sit up. Martha was still the most radiant woman in the world to him, looking exactly as she did the first day that he had laid eyes upon her over forty years ago, granted she had a few more wrinkles now and her honey blond hair had been transformed over time into a platinum white. She still had those wonderful green eyes that sparkled like two flawless twenty carat emeralds.

She handed the glass over to him and then sat down upon his lap. "Thank you, beautiful." He kissed her on the cheek, inhaling the soft floral scent of the perfume that wafted from her neck.

"You're welcome." She glanced over at the television, seeing the familiar images. "Couldn't resist watching it again, could you?"

"You know how I am, Martha; I can't help it. In order to be a good leader and make everything right I feel like I need to study the past in order to find out where things went wrong."

"I know. You're going to do a great job as President."

He gave her hand a gentle squeeze. "Hopefully I can get around five million or so people to feel the same way that you do."

"Why are you so worried? Your numbers are looking great; you're leading in almost all of the polls and you have the support of the most powerful woman in the world and all of her friends and followers. If the vote were today you would win by a landslide."

“I know what the polls say and I’ve heard all of the reports but, as I learned time and time again in the military, numbers are just that; they’re only numbers and are always fluid and subject to change at any moment. I like being in control and right now my destiny lies in the hands of the people of the United States. I keep wondering what else I need to do in order to secure that extra vote. Each vote is like a potential bullet and I need to have as many bullets as possible in my arsenal come November.”

“I understand your concern and I know just how much this election means to you. I have faith in you; the American people have faith in you as well. You’ve been blessed this far and you’ve got to believe that those blessings will only continue to bear fruit.”

“You’re right, Martha; you’re always right.” He took a deep breath and then exhaled through his nose. “You’re like sweet music to my savage beast. What would I ever do without you?”

“You would survive as you’ve always done.” She got up off of his lap and then bent down, planting a kiss on the top of his chrome dome. “Are you coming to bed soon?”

“Give me an hour.”

“I’m going to hold you to that; one hour, mister.”

“Yes, ma’am.”

His eyes remained on her, a boyish smile on his face as she walked out of the room and made a left, disappearing down the hallway. He took a few swallows of the lemonade and then set it down next to the latest issue of *TIME* magazine. A close up picture of his face graced the cover, his penetrating eyes staring straight ahead at the reader, reaching into and gripping tightly onto the soul of every person who managed to look at it. ‘Why the President and every vampire in America should be afraid’ was the headline.

Reaching over he picked the magazine up and briefly thumbed through it until he got to the article about himself. There was a picture of the current President on the left hand side – President Tracie Black, the nation’s first ever female President of the United States – and General Freedman’s photo on the adjoining side in his full military attire. She was a tough senator from New York and was good at what she did; to General Freedman what that amounted to was being good at riding the coattails of President Clark all the way to the top.

As his eyes continued to examine the picture and skim over the article he could feel the anger once again building up inside of himself so he set the magazine down, his eyes again focusing on the television. He never understood how the American people elected her; she was weak just like her predecessors and people had to be extremely naïve in order to not see that.

He shook his head and continued to think, his mind jumping to the fact that, in a little over a month, he would be having his final debate with the President and, subsequently, his last chance to further convince the majority of the people out there like President Black who were pro-vampire that they were wrong. Making vampires the equivalent of humans was, to him, an act of treason. The terrorist attacks that vampires had committed, and that’s all you could describe them as, only served to hammer that fact home even further for him. You can’t get a zebra to change his stripes. Vampires were like wild animals that pretended to be domesticated, all the while patiently waiting, sitting back and biding their time, waiting for the perfect opportunity to strike. He knew what was coming and he hoped that the American people – people all over the world for that matter – would start to figure it out before it was too late.

Chapter 7

They lived in an ideal location, amongst everyone, but, at the same time, around no one. Residing in Milwaukee allowed them to remain anonymous amongst their Midwestern neighbors. Malachi had found the perfect house for him and his group of followers to live together and not be disturbed. Their nearest neighbors were well over a mile away. The eight thousand square feet dwelling was more than enough for each of them to have their own space and it served as a more than suitable base of operations for Malachi.

He sat in his office, eyes fixated on the empty space of his desk. Moonlight poured into the office – the only source of light in the room – but his vision was so keen that it made no difference to him whether it was daylight or pitch black. Sitting there, he thought about what they had accomplished so far and he was impressed by all of their attacks and had confidence that future operations would go just as smoothly. What he had in store would make everything that happened before be considered chump change. What he planned to do next would really serve as the catalyst to kick start his reign, that he was sure of.

He placed his improbably clean Italian leather boots on top of the desk and tilted his chair back to get more comfortable. It was necessary for him to have this time to sit back and reflect without being distracted. His followers had already gotten used to him spending hour upon hour doing this. They were also used to him voicing his opinion on how humans were beginning to look at vampires as being weak and how it disgusted him that they possessed so much power over them while vampires went along living side by

side with them like dogs. He had much better plans for the vampire race and humans were the only obstacle standing in the way of that plan.

He looked over at Angoria as she slept peacefully on the couch in the far corner of the room. He liked to say that she kept him tame and also inspired him on his quest to make sure that the vampire way of life was preserved, sticking by him to make sure that they did any and everything necessary to see that their agenda was fulfilled; he loved her for that. Watching her now he could see a smile form upon her face, almost as if she could read his thoughts while she slept.

His mind traveled back to how they first met in Romania where they both had been born and raised before joining the cause and making the journey to the United States. He had seen her in passing and her scent was intoxicating to him, making him drunk with love. Like him she was a pureblood and that pushed him even harder to approach her. Their eyes met and they spoke to each other without ever having to say a word. He would have liked to say that they were the first to truly fall in love at first sight but he strongly believed that his parents held that title. Then, just as now, she was exquisite with her long and slender body with skin as white as milk. Her dark hair, splashes of red throughout, extended down to her back and felt like spun silk in his hands.

As happy as he was with her and everything that he had accomplished so far his heart still had a void in it; not being able to fulfill his purpose was making him angry, though he knew that day of glory was swiftly approaching. He closed his eyes and inhaled her fragrance at which point he immediately became calm again.

A knock on the door took his thoughts off of her. "Enter my friend," he said, already knowing who it was. He removed his feet from the desk and then sat up.

Strader entered the room, his presence exuding authority as it always did. Malachi admired his power which was why he had hand picked him as his right hand man. He looked over to where Angoria was sleeping and then up at Malachi, being sure to keep his voice low. “May I?” he inquired, motioning to the chair.

“Of course.”

He sat down. “I’m beginning to have some concerns and I would like to gain some understanding from you.”

“I implore you to speak freely with whatever it is that is on your mind; you know that I value and respect your opinion.”

“Thank you. Do you feel that it is absolutely necessary for us to make these attacks and then creep back into the shadows until the next one? Why not continue to strike at them until they beg for us to stop?”

“There will be a time for that but right now is not that time. It is imperative that right now we continue on the path that we’ve been traveling on until we’ve received enough attention to force the United States to act. Once the United States is drawn into this game of ours, and it WILL happen, the rest of the world will follow suit and then we will get what we’re looking for. Right now humans haven’t been pushed hard enough; there are too many of them that like us and too many vampires that are okay living with humans. There has to be a wedge driven between the two and that’s where we come in – it’s the only way to get back on top; without a war we will never be able to claim our place. We still have some vampires that don’t approve of what we’re doing and that’s only because their eyes haven’t been opened and that’s where you, Angoria, I and the rest come in; we

are the ones that will wake them from their slumber. Do you remember how the Americans were forever changed by 9/11?”

“I do.”

“That’s what we have to do; we need to give them a similar type of attack. We will suffer a few losses – casualties can always be expected – but it is those very casualties that will help fuel the engine that will drive us to victory. Can you imagine what would happen if we unleashed all of our attacks without the rest of our brothers and sisters joining us? We would be missing out on an integral and vast tool, one that could potentially side with the humans if we don’t steer them in the right direction. Do you understand?”

Strader did understand more clearly now. The goal was to rally up every vampire to fight in order to make their eventual strikes against the humans that much more effective.

“I see your point.”

“I ask that you be patient, brother. What I have planned will force America’s hand and signal to them that we mean business.”

“I have faith in you,” he said as he rose up from his seat. “I have no more questions. Thank you for your time.”

“Anytime.”

The door to Malachi’s office had remained open during their conversation and, about twenty feet down the hallway, Strader could see Kanice looking towards the room with her attentive eyes. He had no time to humor her so he walked off in the other direction.

Kanice looked sad and slightly disappointed as she watched him walk away from her. She had always felt drawn to him but that feeling was never reciprocated by him back to her. She supposed that it was only natural that she felt this way towards him since it was he who had made her this way so, therefore, a part of him coursed through her veins.

Before being turned she had been widely regarded as one of the deadliest assassins in all of Japan. Her father, the unquestioned lord of the feared Five Hand Clan, taught her everything that there was to know about the masterful art of killing all starting at the tender age of five. She was only six when she first took a man's life and that pleased her father to no end.

Over the years her skills continued to blossom and, with her father's blessing, she started her own clan at the age of fifteen where she was considered legendary until the sword of a rival clansman finally ended her reign and brought her down, leaving her blood soaked body to die in the street. That was when Strader appeared to her like an angel out of the depths of darkness to which she was drifting into.

That was many years ago, now she was here in this house with him and others like her who championed for the rights of vampires. Feeling the need to occupy her mind she exited the room and headed towards the workout facility to get polished up on her martial arts training. Upon entering the empty room she brushed the short bangs from her eyes, already knowing that she was going to be here for a while.

As Kanice began to work out her frustrations Strader continued his stroll, passing by but not looking into Gethina's room. As was the usual for her she was alone, a copy of *Men Are From Mars, Woman Are From Venus* in her hands. Though it appeared that she

was deep into the book it was all a ruse; as had been the case ever since it had happened, more frequently as of late, her mind kept flashing back to the assault at the fair. She had no problem at all killing humans but she couldn't shake the idea of biting Michael with him being so young. She had never done that before and she now felt guilty for allowing such power to be inside the body of a child. But what could she have done? There were only two options if she hadn't done what she did: either, best case scenario, one of the others would have turned him or, worst case scenario, they would have killed him and possibly her as well.

The sound of a door slamming loudly dislodged her thoughts and she, along with everyone else in the house, knew exactly who it was. Sherona was home and she was very drunk again, fresh from a night out of heavy partying which was the norm for her. Stumbling to her room she collapsed onto her bed and fell asleep before her head hit the pillow.

Sherona was never the most popular member of the group but they had to put up with her because Malachi wanted her around and Malachi always got what he wanted. Grimble was a split second away from killing her when they first crossed paths with Sherona but Malachi had intervened and spared her life. Taking notice of her pin-up model looks he felt that she could be of use to him later on, especially considering that she was only eighteen at the time. Her sex appeal would make it easy for her to seduce any man, and some women, and that was always a good ace to have in the hole.

Kanice was still working out, waving and slicing her katana swords through the air with a workman's precision. She had been at it for more than four hours now and had built up a solid sweat that flew off of her with every movement she made. Michael was sitting in the corner studying her – taking it all in – noticing her immense level of concentration and how focused her eyes were. Her movements were quick and deadly but also elegant and even beautiful, all of them punctuated by grunts like the sound Serena Williams makes after a wicked backhand shot.

Strader stepped into the room and was content to chill off to the side, leaning with his back against the wall, one leg propped up behind him and his arms crossed on his chest. Upon noticing him Kanice stopped what she was doing and placed her arms to her sides and then bowed towards him, recognizing his presence as she did with everyone who entered a room she was in. He gave a nod back. “Why do you waste your time practicing with weapons as if we need them? Our bodies are the only weapons that we will ever need.”

Kanice walked over and placed the katanas back on their spot on the wall alongside an arsenal of assorted weapons such as throwing stars, daggers, and swords just to name a few. “I am very much aware that our heightened speed, strength, and abilities make us lethal enough to where the use of weapons is more or less pointless but we are not invincible. Let me ask you this: what happens when humans develop weaponry that requires us to do more than just fight with our bare hands?”

He waved his hand in a dismissive manner, her question being a ridiculous one to him. “Let them. Their knives, guns, tanks, or whatever else they come at us with will not be able to stop us.”

“Pride is the downfall of a foolish man.”

“It’s a good thing that I’m a vampire instead of a man then.”

“Hmmmpph,” she replied, letting him continue to think whatever he wanted.

Strader pushed himself off the wall and then walked over to the specially made punching bags that were made out of concrete and steel. Regular bags didn’t stand a chance – concrete and steel were the only combination that would hold up for more than a few days.

“See you later,” said Kanice to Michael as she exited the room.

“Bye.”

“Come here,” Strader told Michael, motioning him over. Michael got up and walked over to him. “I’m going to teach you something very valuable so pay attention. Watch this.”

Michael watched intently as Strader reared back and unleashed a powerful right hand onto the bag, a huge chunk of concrete flying off of it and landing onto the floor where it cracked into smaller pieces. He held his undamaged hand out for Michael to see. “All you need are these. We are the most powerful creatures to ever walk the earth. You hit it now.”

Michael took a swing, his fist landing against the concrete with an anti-climactic thud that barely shook the bag. “Owww!!” he said as he looked at his skinned up knuckles.

His effort made Strader smile. “Simply being a vampire isn’t enough; you’ll need to make your body strong.” He began to punch away at the bag, the three inch thick chains that held it rattling as the punches got harder. With one final left he struck the middle of

the bag and shattered it, the bag bursting into pieces and hitting the floor, the awesome sound of its destruction echoing in the room.

Michael stood in amazement. “That was awesome. Will I be as strong as you one day?”

“Mikey, you have no idea how strong you can be.”

*

The next morning Angoria rose with the rising of the sun. Her silver eyes found her mate as he sat at his desk still knee deep in meditation, failing to even notice that she was now awake. Quietly she got off the couch, the black satin sheet that had been covering her body fell to the floor revealing her perfectly sculpted body – her breasts were still as perky as a teenagers and her legs were defined and smooth as freshly buffed marble. She made her way to the connecting bathroom and slipped into the shower.

Fifteen minutes later she emerged from the bathroom, appearing like a Greek goddess. She was still naked and her body glistened from the beads of water that continued to slide down her skin. This time Malachi paid full attention and stood to pay the utmost respect to the beauty that was walking towards him. She smiled shyly as his eyes caressed her body.

He stepped from behind the desk and pulled her close as she got to him. Their lips gently touched as he pulled her tighter. He could feel her hand as she began to unzip his pants and grab him; he was not lacking and she wanted ever inch of him inside of her.

The fingernails on each of her hands extended down several inches and she used them to rip his clothes off. He scooped her up, light as a feather she was in his arms, and then placed her down upon the desk.

“Take me. Take all of me.”

Take her he did, penetrating with force as she wrapped her arms around him, dragging her claws into his back with each thrust he pounded into her. Blood dried on his back as his cuts mended themselves and they continued to make love like ravenous lions, clawing and biting at each other.

Chapter 8

The sky was an inky black and the moon was absent outside the window as Sherona, Grimble, and Strader sat in Sherona's room trying to decide on which club or bar that they were going to hit up; this was always a problem for them. Sherona wanted a place with plenty of men, Strader wanted somewhere with good music, while Grimble just wanted to drink.

Strader was sitting on Sherona's bed, looking on at her while she finished touching up her makeup, transforming her skin from pearl white to a nice sun-kissed peach complexion. Grimble was relaxing on a beanbag in the corner, eyeing Sherona and wondering what it was that men found so fascinating about her. He took a long look around the room that was filled with mirrors of all sizes and pictures of her. He couldn't help but think about how vain she was.

"Ok, if we're not going to Rave then how about The Bad Genie?" asked Grimble with a thick coating of irritation in his voice.

"That's a human's only club," she replied.

"What's your point?" asked Strader, not concerned with what type of club it was.

She finished her makeup and then glanced over at the both of them. "I was just saying. If you guys don't care then The Bad Genie it is. Question is, can either of you keep up with me?" She held her arms out, ready to be escorted out of the room.

Both Grimble and Strader rolled their eyes, walked out of the room, and then headed towards the garage. As they traveled they passed by Michael's room and he popped his head out.

"Where are you guys going? I want to go!"

Sherona walked up and gave Michael a hug and a kiss on the cheek, leaving a big cherry red impression of her lips on his face. “Sorry little man but you can’t go on this trip; it’s for grown folks only.”

“I hardly ever get to do anything. For the last five years I’ve been stuck in this house just like I was stuck in my wheelchair; I want to do something like you guys.”

Strader knelt down and whispered into Michael’s ear. “I’ll take you somewhere real special tomorrow, okay?” He winked at him.

That wink excited Michael. “Promise?”

“I would never lie to you, Michael.”

“Okay.” He ran back into his room and they continued on their way.

*

The Bad Genie was popular tonight, evident by the line of anxious club goers wrapped around the building, some bopping to the sound of the loud techno music as it pulsed from inside the club while others chatted on their phones or with their friends that they were standing in line with.

The three compadres turned the corner and walked up to the front of the line – why should they have to wait behind humans? – Strader and Grumble walking a step in front of Sherona.

The security guard, a buffed up and bald muscle head in a too tight fitting shirt, looked at them and noticed their silver eyes, instantly recognizing them as the vampires

that they were. "This is a humans only club," he told them, holding his hand out in front of Strader and Grimble.

Strader eyed the bouncer and the hand that was so dangerously close to touching him. He growled deep and low. "Don't you know that it is illegal to discriminate against vampires? We could sue you...., or worse." He bared his fangs at the guard in a menacing fashion.

The force of the growl and the sight of Strader's fangs startled the guard and caused him to take a few steps back. He held his hands up and let the three of them pass without any further harassment.

Grimble followed behind Strader, duplicating the same growl that Strader had given and Sherona followed him. "They're such animals!" she said mockingly as she caressed the man's chin with her left hand and then walked past him. "I promise that we'll play nice."

The smell of cheap perfume, acrid cigarette smoke, heavy cologne, and warm, pulsating blood hit their noses as they stepped foot inside the club. The DJ was rocking on the turntables and the dance floor was packed full of people.

"See you later, boys!" she shouted over the music as she walked backwards onto the dance floor, her shoulders already moving up and down to the rhythm.

"I'm thirsty," Grimble leaned over and told Strader. "Lets get something to drink."

"Lead the way."

Strader followed Grimble as they made their way towards the bar, brushing against body after body, somehow resisting the urge to shove them aside or simply devour them like pieces of sushi. Grimble imagined how much fun it would be to send one of them

into a wall and hear their bones crunch, the thought of blood flying out of their mouth as they slid down the wall and collapsed to the floor putting a smile on his face and an erection in his pants.

Strader's head tilted upwards, his nose open as he inhaled the aroma of the humans gyrating around him: women dancing with other women, men dancing with women and grinding on their asses. His eyes closed for a second and he clenched his teeth tightly, wanting so badly to bite into and devour the neck of a woman that had the audacity to run her hand across his crotch as she walked by him. She and all the rest were clueless as to how tempting they were; stupid fucking humans.

They arrived at the bar and Grimble pounded his fist on the top of it. One of the three bartenders, a young exotic looking woman named Christina, walked up to them. "What can I get you two gentlemen?" Catching a good look at Grimble and realizing that he and Strader were vampires her friendly face was replaced with one of trepidation.

"How much for a shot of your blood?" inquired Grimble, a dead ass serious expression on his already scary face. She said nothing; all she could do was stare at the two of them. His expression switched from deadly to playful. "I'm just fucking with you. Two shots of Patron, please."

A wave of relief washed over her and she was able to smile again. "Coming right up."

As she walked away his faced turned serious again. His head was aching and the cigarette smoke was putting him in a foul mood.

Christina returned with the shots, setting them down in front of Grimble. "That will be \$10.00."

Grimble produced a \$100 bill from his pants pocket and passed it over to her. “Keep them coming; two shots every five minutes. Can you do that for me?” She took the money and then nodded her head up and down. “Good.”

He downed the first shot and then the second one immediately after. *Damn they taste good.* Alcohol seemed to be the only thing that numbed his senses to the point where he could tolerate humans, at least that was the excuse he gave.

Strader kept his back turned to the bar, opting instead to look out at the dance floor as he tapped his right foot on the floor, enjoying this particular musical selection. He looked back at Grimble and prodded him on the shoulder, motioning for him to check Sherona out. Grimble turned and took a gander at her.

Sherona had everyone’s attention as people were being drawn to her like Winnie the Pooh to a honey pot. There were at least twenty-five to thirty people surrounding her and the men were having a hard time keeping their eyes off of her. The women who were not dancing stood by with their girlfriends, faces full of disgust as they quietly spewed insults back and forth to each other, trying to hide the fact that they all wished that they could be like her.

As they continued to watch, Sherona whipped her head around in the air, her eyes closed as her body bounced up and down to the infectious beat. A man approached her from behind and held her close at the waist while the two women stepped up and danced in front of her, kissing her neck and chest with tender exploring pecks. Sherona loved it, her mouth gaping open as she laughed.

The track abruptly switched and the music got slower and more intense, the percussion on the track loud and powerful. Grimble turned back to the bar and wrapped

his hands around the next set of drinks that had been brought to him. Strader kept his attention on the dance floor, his head nodding back and forth as he got more and more into the music.

Sherona pulled one of the two women that was kissing her closely in front of her, the woman's body pressing up against hers as she looked deeply into her eyes and then kissed her softly on the lips. The woman stared back at Sherona as the kiss ended, finding herself wanting more of her. Sherona smiled, gave her a wink, eyeballed the other woman that was dancing in front of her, and then turned around to dance with the man that was holding her by the waist.

He was the stereotypical male club goer, sporting a slicked back hairdo and wearing a tight white t-shirt with black slacks and a pair of brown alligator shoes. All of his accessories were blinged out: diamond earrings in both ears, an iced out watch on one hand and a nice bracelet on the other, and he even had diamonds in his belt buckle. He had that arrogant feeling of owning her as she smiled and helped him dance by keeping the beat for him, getting turned on from the slow and hard movements as she went up and down, going lower and lower each time. The two women that had been kissing her gazed on, patiently waiting for her to turn back around and show them some more attention.

A group of five men, all being the heavily tattooed biker types, cut their way through the crowd and made their way up near Sherona. The one in front grabbed the arm of the girl that Sherona had kissed. "What the fuck are you doing, huh?"

The dancing came to a halt as everyone's eyes were drawn to the men. The man drew his arm back and smacked spit out of the woman's mouth, causing her to fall to the ground after which he set his eyes upon Sherona who was staring curiously at him.

“Is there a problem?” she asked.

“There’s a very big problem. Maybe you didn’t get the memo, bloodsucker, but you’re not welcomed here! Don’t you have your own clubs to go to?”

Strader saw the trouble that was brewing and punched Grimble lightly on the arm as he leaned away from the counter and began walking towards Sherona. Grimble gulped down his remaining shot and followed Strader, his claws descending from his fingers as he walked.

“I beg to differ,” explained Sherona, “as it looks like your woman was welcoming every part of me.” She licked her lips and that really sent the man over the edge.

“I’ve wanted to kick a vampire’s ass for the longest,” he shot back while his friends looked on, goofy smiles on their liquored up faces.

Grimble stepped up and stood in front of the man, close enough to smell the beer on his breath, staring him and his friends down as they looked at themselves in the reflection of his eyes. “What’s the problem, meat bags?”

“You and everyone like you are the problems,” chimed in one of the men, his body full of liquid courage.

“What are you going to do about it?” asked Grimble. “I don’t think that you’ll do shit.”

“Let’s just go, guys,” said Sherona as she turned and headed towards the exit, “I don’t have the energy for this shit tonight.”

“You’re lucky,” Strader warned the men. “You better hope that we never cross paths again.”

Grimble and Strader turned and began to follow Sherona. With their backs turned one of the men took the beer that he was holding and tossed it at Strader, showering him, Grimble, and Sherona with beer and shards of glass from that mug that broke over Strader's head. "Get the fuck outta here, bloodsuckers!" yelled the mug thrower.

The three of them came to a stop as did the music in the club. There was nothing but eerie silence as everyone in the club looked on at them to see what was going to pop off next.

Sherona was the first to turn around, pieces of glass embedded in her hair and beer dripping from her face, ruining her carefully crafted makeup. She stepped in front of Strader and Grimble who, by this time, had also turned around to face the five men who had just unknowingly signed their own death certificates.

"You drunk motherfuckers," she told them, her fangs descending from her gums and claws extending from her fingers. "You just couldn't leave well enough alone, could you?"

Strader and Grimble's claws and fangs got into killing position as well. Smiles crept up on both of their faces, having been waiting for this moment all night. This couldn't have played out any better.

The man that threw the beer was no longer as talkative as before. All of his courage was now exiting out of his penis as he pissed his pants.

"Looks like the party is really about to start now," stated Grimble, a wicked grin on his face.

"You just killed everyone in here." Strader grabbed the nearest person to him, a young black girl with blond hair, and shredded her stomach. Her dying scream of agony

as her insides hit the floor was the signal to everyone that they needed to get the fuck out of dodge.

There was a mad dash towards the exit, people screaming and running for their lives, pushing their fellow patrons down in a frenzied attempt to get out alive. Strader began mowing through the slower ones, using his teeth and claws to rip and destroy all who were unfortunate enough to come near him.

Sherona and Grimble set their sights on the five that had started all of these problems in the first place. Sherona leapt for the one that had originally approached her as he tried his best to flee. She grabbed him by the shoulder and spun him around, his eyes widening as Sherona's fist hurtled towards his face and connected with it, her enhanced strength causing his head to explode like a toad in a microwave as blood, bone, and tissue flew everywhere.

Grimble had one of the others pinned against the wall and was tearing at his neck and back like a rabid coyote, pulling large chunks of flesh away to where the man's spine was exposed, the pieces of meat landing on the floor like jagged pieces of steak.

Finished with that one, he levitated high above the floor, using his bird's eye view to spot one of the other three remaining tough guys. *Get him!* Grimble darted after him as the man sprinted towards the bar, picking up a bar stool along the way and smashing it across the man's back, the stool disintegrating from the impact. The man fell against the front of the bar and Grimble flipped him onto his back, a fresh tsunami of blood flowing from his throat as Grimble ran his claws across it. Splashes of blood flew into Grimble's face and he used his tongue to sample it – it was perfect; clean, warm, and abundant.

Having executed those that weren't able to make it out of the club Strader turned his focus to the humans that were left and that happened to be only the beer thrower and one of his friends. The two men were standing in the middle of what used to be the dance floor surrounded by Sherona, Grimble, and a mountain of dead bodies. He joined them as they cornered the men in.

The beer thrower fell to his knees and began to sob, begging for his life. "I'm sorry, I'm sorry, I'm sorry! Please don't kill me. Show mercy, I beg you!"

"You're not sorry, you're pathetic," said Sherona as she took her right hand and lifted him up off the floor, suspending him in the air by his neck. "I want you to see something." She spun him around so that he could see his friend. "This is what happens to people that fuck with us."

Grimble and Strader took their cue and started ripping into the man's body with their teeth and claws. He cried out in pain for a brief second before his body simply gave up and shut down, going limp and falling to the floor in an ever growing pool of his own blood that mingled with the gallons of blood that already covered the floor. His body looked like a lawnmower had run over it when they finished.

The beer thrower had no choice but to look at his friend's mangled and lifeless body. Tears rolled down his cheek as Sherona released him and he crumpled to the floor. Turning him around she looked into his eyes, seeing the fear and dread that were evident in them. "Do you think that I'm beautiful?"

He nodded his head up and down vehemently. "Yes!"

That made her happy. "You should consider yourself fortunate that my face is the last one that you'll ever see in this lifetime." With those words she bit down into his neck

and ripped away his throat, blood flying straight up in the air like a geyser. She pushed him and he fell down up on his friend's body.

The sound of sirens could be heard approaching. Strader, Grimble, and Sherona all looked at each other. "Time to go," said Strader.

"What about the car?" asked Sherona.

"There's no time," Strader informed her, "will have to leave it."

That didn't make her happy. "Man!! I loved that car."

"We'll get you another one," said Grimble. "Move your ass!"

They exploded through the roof and into the night.

Chapter 9

In almost all major cities across the globe there are certain parts of town where each race or group of people come together to live amongst their own; safety in numbers if you will. Vampire Town, or V-Town as it was more commonly referred to, was a relatively safe haven for the vampires who lived in or around Washington, D.C. V-Town was clean with very Hampton-ish with homes that had well manicured lawns, nice churches and schools that catered to the vampire community, and everything else that you would ever expect to find in the suburbs of any town in America.

V-Town was known for a lot of things but was mainly known as being the home of the Vampire Embassy, home of the government offices of the top liaisons between vampire and humans. It was in front of this grey dome-shaped building that a black limousine pulled up and came to a stop. The chauffeur exited the vehicle and walked over to the passenger side where he opened the door, allowing McDonnell to step out.

He adjusted his power tie and glanced up at the driver. "I'm not sure how long this is going to take so take a break; I will call you when I'm ready."

"Yes sir."

McDonnell walked up the steps and entered the Embassy, flashing the receptionist a welcoming smile. "Afternoon, LeeAnn."

"Afternoon, Mr. McDonnell," she greeted him with her dimpled cheeks and short brunette hair. "They have already assembled and are waiting on you."

His smile lost its luster. "Thank you."

"You're welcome."

He proceeded down the hallway at a cool pace until he arrived at the elevator. The door opened and he pressed the buttons for both the first and fourth floors at the same time, holding them in for five seconds. Once he released the buttons a panel on the back wall of the elevator opened up to unveil a keypad. He typed in the number 48626 and the back of the elevator slid away to reveal another hallway. He walked down it until he came to a large wooden door. He opened it and entered a massive conference room where four elderly gentlemen all sat on the same side of the table facing the lone seat on the other side that was reserved for McDonnell. Now that he had arrived all of the members of The Commission were now present.

McDonnell closed the door and took his seat, scanning the stonewalled faces of the four men in front of him as they looked at him in their sharp dark suits. From left to right sat Edison Chouinard, Gene Alvers, the big man at the table known simply as Diego, and rounded out by Hakan Trugut.

“Gentlemen,” he addressed them. They said nothing, only staring at him with their chrome colored eyes. McDonnell adjusted nervously in his seat.

“Do you know why we called this meeting?” asked Diego in his strong gruff voice.

“I believe that I have a good idea as to why.”

“How long have we been running this Commission of ours – nine hundred, a thousand years maybe?”

“Yes sir.”

Diego tapped his yellowing claws on the table. “It has lasted because people have respected the rules and stayed within the careful parameters that we have set forth. The

second that the boundaries start to be over-stepped is when problems arose and cracks formed in the foundation at which point all that we've built begins to crumble.”

“You are starting to make us doubt your appointment inside The Commission,” spoke Hakan in his heavy Middle Eastern accent. “We selected you to be the face of all vampires, placing you into a position of power as the Vice President of the United States, but you have chosen to align yourself with those that are threatening everything that we have tried so hard to do with the humans. Malachi is becoming a problem.”

“I understand that but...,”

“But nothing!” shot back Diego, silencing McDonnell with the quickness. “You have lost all control over Malachi and his group.”

“I can reign him back in.”

“We're not so sure about that,” chimed in Edison. “We think that maybe you have gotten in over your head. Our intelligence is informing us that humans are growing ever more weary and concerned about us and, needless to say, Malachi's actions are not helping.”

“What about Japan?” asked Gene, his red hair standing out against his bone pale skin. “Did you authorize it?”

“No sir, I did not,” replied McDonnell.

“Of course you didn't. Do you remember what we told you about Malachi in the beginning?” asked Diego. “We told you that he was a loose cannon but you insisted just as you do now that you could reign him back in. You'll have to pardon us for not sharing the same level of confidence in you that you have in yourself when it comes to Malachi.”

“I understand,” answered McDonnell with the look of a scorned child. “I had tried to groom Malachi to be a successor of sorts, an apprentice to me, and for a while I believed that my efforts were actually working. He was a good soldier but his ideals are starting to get in the way of what’s best for us as a whole.”

Hakan pointed at McDonnell. “Rest assured that you are going to be held responsible for Malachi’s actions just as much as he is. He’s your attack dog and anything that he does outside of your backyard falls back on you since you are his owner. We’ve been meticulously planning our arrival and integration with humans for way too long to have one person fuck it all up. It makes no sense to continue to have conflict with humans – we have fought that battle for ages and what has it gotten us? It benefits us so much more to be at peace and carve out our little place in the world with the humans as opposed to against them.”

“Hakan is right,” piped in Edison. “We’ve been riding the sails of a relatively peaceful five years since we came forward but Malachi and his group are making some very large waves that are threatening to capsize and undermine our efforts. The unwarranted and unsanctioned attack in Kyoto was the last straw. Now we have humans looking at vampires with even more worried eyes – all the goodwill we’ve built up in the last five years has been wiped out in the blink of an eye. Humans are being killed so they retaliate by killing our children; this is the very thing that we hoped to avoid by stepping out of the shadows in the first place.”

“It’s not a secret as to what Malachi and his group are trying to do,” said Gene. “He has become disillusioned with the idea of vampires and humans together in this world and he wants things to go back to the way they used to be, back when we feasted on them

like cattle. The only way he knows to do that is to start a war between us and them, disrupting the peace and making it so we turn on each other. We have reason to believe that he has cells scattered around the world like pawns, all of them waiting his instructions to strike and cause chaos, laying the framework for a global war pitting vampires against humans.”

“It goes without saying that he must be stopped,” commented Diego. “If Malachi is allowed to continue on his path then we will have failed.”

“What do you propose I do?” asked McDonnell.

“Use the American government; it will be in their best interest as well as ours to get a handle on this situation as quickly as possible; they have the proper man and firepower to take care of it.” Diego paused for a moment as he looked across the table at McDonnell, seeing the sadness on his face. “I know how you must feel – it’s never easy to have a friend killed, but there are times when you have to cut your losses and do what’s best for the group as a whole.”

McDonnell nodded in approval. “Are you sure that the Americans are the best to use? President Black is more of a dove than a hawk.”

“We weren’t referring to her,” answered Gene. “There is someone else who is better suited for the task.”

Chapter 10

Inside the forest was quiet and peaceful. All the trees were tall and majestic, sitting like giants that had been frozen and were now patiently waiting for their time to be re-animated to wreak havoc upon the world. Perched high up near the top of one of these massive trees, concealed amongst its many leaves and branches, Michael was trying to control his emotions.

“Shhhh...,” said Strader as he knelt down on the branch next to him, listening as Michael’s breathing became heavier and more labored. “Close your eyes and try to relax.” Michael did as Strader instructed him to do. “Good, now what I need for you to do is close your mouth and breathe in deeply through your nose and out through your mouth. You need to calm yourself. Right now you’re excited and you have an abundance of adrenaline rushing through your system.”

“Like this?” asked Michael as he inhaled through his nose, already feeling the calming effects.

“Yes, precisely like that. I remember my first hunt and how excited I was right before it happened, the anticipation so high that I felt like a big ball of energy was about to explode out of me. There are things that you’re gonna have to learn, though, young Mikey. In order to become a good hunter you’ll need to be able to concentrate and become one with your surroundings. Our senses are naturally elevated, but, if you don’t know how to use them, they will be useless to you and you will be no better than humans. When you’re able to master your natural abilities you will then become truly unstoppable. I want you to close your eyes and tell me everything that you hear.”

Michael looked away from Strader and then glanced up towards the sky. The tree branches and leaves didn't allow him to see much, instead teasing him with only the slightest views of the whimsical cotton clouds in the glacier blue sky above. For the first time in a long time – since before the accident – he was actually able to relax. The air was cool, crisp, and clean against his skin and in his sinuses.

He cocked his head slightly to the left and then closed his eyes. “I can hear animals, many of them, from miles around. There are birds, raccoons, squirrels, rabbits, deer, and too many insects to mention.” The sound of the animals – plants being eaten by rabbits, raccoons communicating with each other, and the gentle pitter patter footsteps of the deer – gave him a profound sense of peace.

“Good. What else?”

His eyes opened, shifting from one side to the other. “I can smell humans; three of them.”

He heard the snap of a twig from the pressure of a foot stepping on it, the sound coming from a distance of about a mile way. A second twig broke and was followed by the unmistakable sound of a gun being fired. The animals in the forest scattered in all directions and Michael watched as startled birds took to the sky in retreat. All was quiet but then Michael clearly heard the sound of the humans running.

Strader reached over and grabbed Michael by the chin, lifting his head up. “Now is the time for your long awaited initiation, Mikey. It's time to prove yourself and make your first kill. You know what you have to do.”

Michael looked at Strader and then nodded before stepping off the branch and falling quietly to the forest floor below, landing as quietly as a feather on a bed of

marshmallows. He closed his eyes to focus better, hearing the laughs and giggles of the humans as they celebrated over the kill of what sounded like a deer to Michael.

Quickly he took off, sprinting with impossible speed towards the sound of the hunters. Squinting his eyes, he was able to see further, making out the three camouflaged humans, all of them clutching rifles. One was holding the dead deer up by the antlers, claiming his prize with a newfound sense of accomplishment. A guttural sound escaped Michaels's lips as he ran faster and faster towards them.

The three men at the kill site stopped celebrating and started listening, Michael's yell having caught their attention and sending a chill down their collective spines. "Any idea what kind of animal makes that kind of noise?" asked the hunter named Mark, his eyes wide with concern.

The other two men, Johnny and Tom, glanced around as well, the thrill of their kill now the farthest thing from their minds at the moment. The yell was heard again but this time it sounded like it was coming from all around them.

"Damn it, what the hell is that?" asked Tom as he set the deer carcass on the ground and pointed his rifle dumbly around in all directions.

"I don't know what it is, but I have my friend waiting for it if it decides to show itself," exclaimed Johnny, gesturing down to his gun and letting out a carefree laugh. Tom and Mark laughed nervously with him and soon focused their attention back to the deer.

With those two preparing the animal to be hauled back to the truck Johnny stepped a few yards away to relieve himself. Down came his zipper and he peed forcefully on a

tree, all the beer that he had been consuming forced his kidneys to work extra hard this morning.

As he urinated he looked up to see leaves being kicked up in the distance and the sight of a figure running towards him. He spit out the Skoal he had in his mouth as if chewing it was somehow corrupting his eyesight. By the time he realized that it was a young boy that was dashing towards him, his face was being pushed up and his body being lifted off the ground. He felt himself flying backwards as the hand continued to dig into his face, covering his eyes.

His back slammed hard up against the trunk of a tree, all the air escaping his body with the impact, his head striking the tree a split second later. Michael pulled Johnny's head forward and then savagely pushed it back again, caving it in against the unforgiving tree. Pieces of his scalp stuck to the bark as he slid down, blood dripping from his eyes and nose.

"Johnny!!" yelled out Tom, looking in the direction that his buddy had disappeared. "Come on man, we're almost done here. Even you can't be peeing that much. Don't be over there whacking off!"

"Why don't you help me out instead of hollerin' for your boyfriend," said Mark.

"Fuck you, alright?" He gave one cautious look around and then turned to help. As Tom spun around he witnessed a blur pass by Mark as he knelt down in front of the deer. Blood suddenly shot up and Mark's head rolled to the side of his still kneeling body.

"What the fuck?" Tony said weakly as he dropped his rifle and covered his mouth, watching in horror as his friend's headless body finally fell over onto the deer. Deep down Tony knew that whatever animal that just did this had also killed Johnny. He

looked up at the trees, down at the bushes, and then performed a quick circle as he scanned the forest, but saw nothing out of the ordinary.

Not wanting to be the third victim, he sprinted the tenth of a mile towards the waiting truck, praying that John had left the keys in it like he normally did. Scrambling over to the driver's side door and opening it his stomach dropped to his feet like a rollercoaster at Six Flags when he saw that the keys were not in the ignition like he was hoping they would be. "SHIT!"

He walked over to the other side of the truck and looked to where Mark's body was lying and it was then that he saw Michael standing there looking back at him in the distance. In his hand he held one of the rifles.

"Boy what are you doing out here all alone?!? Get over here, quick. There's something out here that's killing folks!"

Michael held the gun up so that Tony could get a good look at it.

"There you go, bring the gun over here. That's mighty smart of you."

Michael continued his slow approach, stopping a few feet from him so that Tony couldn't get a decent view of his eyes. The gun was pointed at the ground.

"Give me the damn gun!" he yelled frantically, wiping the growing amount of perspiration from his brow as he glanced around nervously.

The blast of the gun echoed through the forest, followed by an agonizing yell from Tony. His right foot had been blown completely off and he stumbled to the ground writhing in pain. A second shot went off and his left foot disappeared, transforming into a bloody stump that mirrored his right foot.

The sight and smell of the free flowing blood brought a smile to Mikey's face. His fangs descended from his mouth as he watched the blood pool around Tony's legs. He walked up and stuck the barrel of the gun into his mouth, muffling his cries.

"Stop, Michael!" Strader glided down from the treetop and landed next to Michael, placing his right hand upon his shoulder.

Michael lowered the gun, removing it from Tony's mouth. He looked at Strader with confusion on his face. "Why did you stop me?"

"I stopped you because in order to feed you must always do it from a living body. Drinking from a deceased human can be poisonous and possibly fatal."

"Why are you doing this?" asked Tony, tears rushing down his cheeks while he spit gun powder from his mouth. "We haven't hurt any vampires."

"Maybe you haven't hurt us directly, but people like you have." He turned his attention back on Michael. "Now, you'll want to bite down right here to access the carotid artery," he told him, pressing down on his own neck to show him exactly where he needed to do it, "that's where the best blood is."

"Okay."

Tony tried to crawl away, his movement like that of a geriatric tortoise as his stumps left a gruesome trail behind him. Michael stepped up and flipped Tony over.

He tried to fight him off, flailing his arms in a last ditch effort to survive. "Stop! Let me go! Please God let me go!!"

Michael slapped him brutally across the face, silencing him. He was fascinated at the way Tony's eyelids fluttered and the way his body shook. Michael continued to stare at Tony as his mouth kept opening and closing as if he wanted to say something but the

words never made themselves heard. He dropped to his knees and then knelt over Tony's neck, his teeth sinking into it right where Strader had instructed him. He was pleasantly surprised by the warmth and amount of blood that filled his mouth.

Strader walked up and knelt down beside him. "Drink slowly. Savor it and sip; you don't want to consume too much too fast and become sick – your body has to get used to it. As you make more kills you will be able to drink more and as fast as you want."

Michael did as he was told, letting the blood trickle into his mouth instead of gushing into it like a fountain. He continued to drink for a few moments, feeling his power increasing with every drop that crossed his lips; it was as if Tony's life was being transferred into him.

"That's enough." Strader pulled him off of Tony. Michael slowly raised to his feet, licking the blood from his lips, some of it still dripping from his fangs. "How do you feel?"

"Powerful and energized."

Strader offered him a smile. "Good. You still have a bit of work to do," he said, looking down at Tony's body that was now as pale as they were, still barely clinging to life.

"How do you want me to do it?"

"Surprise me."

Michael glanced around until his eyes finally landed on what he was searching for. He walked a few yards over to where a good sized log was resting. He picked it up, his hands barely able to wrap around it, and then walked back over and stood in front of Tony.

Tony forced his eyes up at Michael, seeing the piece of wood in his hands; his glossed over eyes saying everything that his mouth couldn't. Michael swung with a stroke that would've made Hank Aaron proud, the log colliding with Tony's head with a devastating crack, demolishing his skull.

Strader eyed the destroyed man and then looked at Michael, beaming like a proud father. "My, you are a vicious one. Let's go home; you're going to need some rest."

Michael tossed the bloodied chunk of wood down upon Tony's abused body. "This was fun. When can we do this again?"

"In time son, all in due time."

Chapter 11

The two gentlemen stood silent and motionless in front of the glass wall of the room, looking on at a platoon of doctors as they converged around a single patient who wasn't able to be seen due to those hovering around him like ants spilling out of an ant hill. The gentleman on the left, Carter Dugood, wore a dark suit and methodically chewed his gum, his steel blue eyes barely blinking as he soaked in the activity going on in front of him. His partner, an older gentleman named Dr. Samuel Morris whose face was carved with the worry of a high stress, but very high paying job, shifted nervously from his left foot to his right in his white lab coat. His hair was a mess and his eyes were salmon pink from a lack of sleep.

The sound of a single set of footsteps coming down the corridor caused the both of them to turn around where they came face to face with Tina Macintosh. Whatever brought her here must have been urgent as she was without makeup and in place of her business attire she wore a pair of grey sweatpants and a red Washington Nationals shirt.

"I came as quickly as I could," she said, skipping the introductions. "How long has he been awake?"

"As soon as he regained consciousness I had you on the horn," answered the good doctor as he turned and gazed back into the room.

"What's the prognosis?"

"Very touch and go at the moment which is to be expected considering he's been in a coma for the last five years," answered Dr. Morris as he scratched his head. "It's still too early to tell if all the surgeries we performed back then have worked. I don't even know how he is alive; he was more or less broken in half."

“You would be surprised at what people can live through when they have something to live for,” spoke up Carter.

“Has he said anything since waking up?” inquired Tina.

“Only one thing,” said Dr. Morris, “he keeps repeating the name Michael over and over.”

Tina nodded her head up and down. “His son – it is believed that he is the one that did this to him and left him for dead. He disappeared and was never heard or seen from again, that was until forty-eight hours ago. His DNA and finger prints were found on three dead hunters on the outskirts of Milwaukee. Our lab also confirmed that his DNA contained clear and undisputable evidence of him having been turned.”

“Should we tell him that Michael is still alive?” asked Carter.

“Most certainly,” said Tina, “but not yet. We’ll need him to be physically ready first. He had been working on a suit to help his son walk before this happened; it’s my understanding that our people were able to pick up where he left off and finish, right Carter?”

“Affirmative, ma’am.”

“And it works?”

“Fully.”

“And the weapons I had the R&D team work on?”

“In Phase 5 of testing.”

“Good.” She placed her hand on the glass and leaned forward as the doctors continued to swarm. They briefly moved and she was able to catch a clear glimpse of

Peter and his bandage covered body, his eyes wildly darting around the room.

“Accelerate the testing. I want him suited up and walking ASAP!”

Preview of “Head Above Water” by Benjamin Jones

Chapter 1 - The Book of Secrets

"Dear Diary, it's 4:09 on the morning of February 24th and I haven't been able to catch a wink of sleep - I'm too nervous to do anything but lie here. In less than nine hours I'm supposed to be getting married. I'm SO worried. My mind is overflowing with the words that she told me. Why should I believe her? Just because someone calls themselves a psychic or a clairvoyant and carries around a deck of tarot cards with them doesn't make them truly able to predict the future. If it were that easy then everyone would do it. The chances of her being genuine, as convincing as she may have been, were a billion to one but it's that one small chance that I can't stop thinking about, though.

"I don't know, I really don't know. How can one even fix their lips to tell someone that love, of all things, is going to be the death of them? People's lives are not to be played with like that. I'm afraid. My life is now one of fear - the fear of the very thing that I've wanted the most in life - love. I question everything that I do now when it comes to showing my emotions, holding back the feelings that I have for fear that I will find love and, in turn, death. It's hard. You can't help but to love and you can't help who you love. I could try to run from it but I couldn't stop loving him no more than I could stop breathing and continue to live.

"Having read over the last paragraph that I just wrote I spoke as if what she had told me was one hundred percent authentic, questioning whether I should run from love or seek it out and run right smack into dying; such nonsense. I'm getting married today and starting a new chapter in my life - a long and wonderful life - and that's all there is to it.

"With that having been said, I bid you goodnight Diary. I'll be a bride the next time that you hear from me and everything will have went just as it had been planned; it has to."

"Dear Diary, it's 4:32 AM on February 24th. I'm being overwhelmed with visions of my wedding and they're all bleak; the more I think about it the more paranoid I become. She has really gotten into my head. I think this will be my last entry. If he truly was to be the cause of my death then it would have been worth the sacrifice but I love him too much to hurt him by dying; I would rather let him go now and spare him that pain. I love you, Darryl - I always have. Even when I didn't choose you it was still always about you.

"Goodnight, Diary, or, rather I should be saying goodbye; you've been a great confidant."

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Chapter 2 - Her, I and the Wheel

"Here you go, Granny."

The sweet smell of vanilla married with orange peel and cinnamon circulated from the cup of tea and spread itself around the room as Darryl sat the steaming beverage down in front of his grandmother. He had prepared it to her exact standards - three packets of Equal and a drop of cream, just the way that she liked it.

Darryl was your every man, anyone and no one at the same time; average in looks and able to successfully blend in amongst any crowd. He was a young man at the age of twenty-two but, due to his quiet demeanor, was often mistaken to be older. His body type was like that of a basketball player, similar to a small forward if you're into the sport - tall, lanky, and weighing all of a hundred and eighty-five pounds in a rainstorm.

His grandmother, a very fair skinned woman in her late seventies named Esther, picked the cup up with her pencil thin fingers and brought it to her lips. Partially concealed by the many wrinkles, more than on a newborn Shar-Pei puppy, engraved on her face were the lines and scars of a woman that had seen more than her fair share of hard times and setbacks but who had always persevered, remaining strong and vigilant through it all, still ticking and keeping up the good fight. "All by the grace of God," she would answer whenever she was asked about how she continued to make it, every so often running one of her hands through her salt & pepper hair, "all by the grace of God." It was that simple - nothing more and nothing less.

"Be careful with that," he warned her, his eyes following her every movement with the cup. He had no choice, it was in his blood to watch over and protect her. "It's very hot so and I don't want you to burn yourself."

"I will," she replied, her voice scratchy like an old vinyl record as took a sip of the tea and then set the cup back down on the cluttered coffee table.

"How is it?"

"Couldn't have made it better if I had made it myself. Thank you, it really hit the spot." She rested her back against the faded mustard colored sofa that was older than Darryl by more than a decade. All of the pillows and cushions showed signs of prolonged wear and tear with almost all of them dotted with holes from which the dingy stuffing, the same color as dandruff, escaped from.

"You're welcome." He settled back into the red recliner that sat at a ninety-degree angle from her. Focusing his eyes on the television he watched the wheel spin round and round while contestants called out letters, Pat Sajak made playful banter and Vanna White smiled with glee as she thought about how ridiculously high her paychecks are for doing nothing but walking back and forth while touching a screen all day. "Why do you like this show so much?"

"I like the simplicity of it - you know exactly what you're getting when you watch it. People spin the wheel, guess a letter, solve the puzzle, win some money or a prize of some sorts and then it repeats itself all over again. Simple."

"I know but it's also boring."

"You kids know nothing about good television, or entertainment in general; it's far from boring. It's a nice wholesome show that the whole family can watch and play together. It's nothing like the show that you used to watch where they would make them eat live insects, rats and other forms of foolishness like that. What was the name of that show?"

"You're talking about *Fear Factor*."

"Yeah, that's it. Is it still on?"

"No, they cancelled it a few years ago."

"Good, I'm glad they did. That show, along with most of the rest of what they call game shows today, have gotten away from the whole idea as to what game shows are all about. Maybe it's the changing of the thinking of your generation but the people on television today are all mean to each other where as the ones I've always watched had people on it that were friendly to each other and weren't angry or bitter when they lost. That's why I like this show so much."

"I must admit that you do make a very good point."

"It's the same with the music that's being put out today. Some of the things that I hear coming out of people's cars is embarrassing and appalling to me. I'm not saying that all of it is that way or even that it's necessarily bad, it's just something that I'm not used to hearing. Everything seems to be driven off of degrading women or sex or violence or bragging about what they have. There is so much more in life to talk about, you know? Music used to be about love and feelings and having a message behind it. I don't know when it changed from that to what it is today."

"Not that I'm using this as an excuse but things are a lot different now. To be fair, there is a lot of good music out there but it's not being played nearly as much so it's something that people really need to seek out and find. Radio stations have their hands tied because they have to play what the people want to hear and, the great majority of the time, the music they want to hear is crap like you just mentioned. I like to call it throw away music because you hear it a few times and then you forget about it - it doesn't stick

with you the least bit. The songs that remain with you are generally classified as underground or backpack music and that's where the majority of the quality music is at."

"I'll have to take your word for it, sweetie; I don't know anything about that."

"The next time I come up here I'll bring my ipod with me so that you can hear exactly what I'm talking about."

"That's fine but I don't want to hear all that cussing, though."

"Fair enough."

They both drifted into a settling silence. During this time Darryl's eyes performed a slow scan of the living room that they were sitting in, seeing his grandmother's whole life, everything that has ever been near and dear to her, contained in this one room: scores of pictures of her along with friends and family members were stuck to the walls and on any other reasonably flat surface that would support a picture frame, piece of tape, or the occasional thumbtack; plants that snaked their leafy vines over and around the window sill and television that they resided on; the rickety coffee table that contained her many crossword puzzle books along with a red one subject notebook that was open to reveal an incomplete shopping list on one page - flower, shortening, peas and carrots - and a recipe for zesty beef stew on the other, rounded out by her ever present Bible; the left wall of the room contained nothing but birthday, Christmas, Mother's Day, as well as many other miscellaneous cards that she had collected over the last several decades; and various other knick knacks and assorted items lying around that one happens to accumulate over time.

As his eyes continued to scour the room they found their way down to his grandmother's legs which were presently covered by a blue and white striped quilt that

was pulled up to her waist. "Have you checked your sugar level today?"

"Yeah, I've already done it. I have a routine setup to where I always check it right after *Divorce Court*."

"What about on the weekends when *Divorce Court* isn't on?"

"Then I do it right after the evening news."

"Let me see your foot." He got out of his chair and knelt down in front of her, removing the quilt from around her legs to expose her swollen and discolored left foot, the sight of which brought a frown to his face.

"It's starting to get better," she tried to assure him, her eyes briefly moving from the television down to him and then back at the television again.

"That is true but it still looks terrible." He gently pressed his fingers down along various places on her foot and ankle, her deep blue and forest green flesh feeling mushy like an overly ripe banana in his hands. "Does this hurt?"

"No, it doesn't hurt much at all any more."

"That's good. What about your medication; are you taking them like you're supposed to be?" he inquired, continuing to examine her foot for a moment longer before covering her legs and feet back up.

"Of course I am," she answered back as if she was offended by his question.

He sat back in the recliner, continuing to look over at her. "Good. I want you to start taking better care of yourself, okay? You can't keep putting things like these off and thinking that it will be okay if you let it go and ignore it. This is very serious. You do remember what the doctor told you the last time that you went to see him, don't you?"

"Yes, I remember."

"If you remember then you should realize how critical it is that you stay on top of these things. According to the doctor you were only a couple weeks away from possibly losing your foot and you're still not out of the woods yet. Do you understand what can happen next? They may move you out of here and put you in a nursing home where you will lose all of the independence that you currently have. We both know that you don't want that."

"You don't have to keep worrying about me," she told him, a slight bit of defiance in her voice. "I've got it all under control now."

"I've heard that before and I really want to believe you this time. I'm not trying to get on you or anything, I'm really not. I want and need for you to understand that I love you and that I only want for you to continue to remain healthy. Do you understand what I'm trying to say?"

She nodded her head up and down several times, this not being the first time that she had heard this speech, or one very similar to it, before.

Darryl could only shake his head, feeling like a parent who was trying to talk some sense into their hard headed and stubborn child. The task seems down right impossible at times but you have to keep on trying and believing in your heart that one day it will all make sense to them. "Do you need anything from the kitchen?"

"No, I'm okay."

"I'll be right back." He got up and walked into the kitchen, opening the cabinet above the stove and retrieving a blue plastic cup from it. As he went to close the cabinet door a cockroach scurrying around in the back between the rest of the cups and glasses caught his eye. "Son of a bitch!" he muttered quietly to himself, hoping his grandmother

wouldn't hear him. Grabbing a paper towel from the roll he folded it in half and then crushed the little creature with it. The paper towel and the remains of the roach were then deposited into the trashcan.

He stepped over to the sink and cut the hot water on. Squirting several drops of dishwashing liquid into the cup he took the yellow dishrag that was draped over the faucet and proceeded to wash and rinse it. With the cup now thoroughly clean he opened the fridge and pulled out a gallon of orange juice, filling his cup half full, or half empty for all of you pessimists out there, before placing the juice back in the fridge.

Walking back into the living room he abruptly stopped as he took note of his grandmother who had drifted off to sleep just that quick. Setting the cup down on the counter he slid over to her, nudging her gently on the right shoulder. "Granny, wake up."

She slowly opened her eyes and then sat up. "I'm tired, baby."

"I know you are. Here, let me help you up so I can get you into bed and you can get some rest."

She steadied herself on his arm as he assisted her off the couch and walked her the short distance to the bedroom, cutting the lamp on as she climbed into bed. The covers were pulled up to her chin, he having tucked her in so that she was as snug as a bug in a rug. "Goodnight, Granny," he told her as he leaned over and gingerly kissed her on the top of her head. "Sweet dreams."

"Goodnight." Darryl cut the light out and then turned to walk out of the room but she stuck her hand out and grabbed his left arm. "Darryl?"

"Yes?" he answered as he turned back around to face her.

"Will you turn the light back on for a second? I need to talk to you about something."

"Sure." He did as he was asked and then sat down next to her on the bed. "What is it? Is everything alright?"

"Everything's fine. I know that I may not show it as much as I should but I really do appreciate you coming all the way up here to check on me the way that you do. Your Uncle Mike, God bless him, he comes around every now and then but he has his own things going on so I can't really fault him for not coming around more than he does. I know that he means well. You've been really good to me, Darryl; really good. Your mother would be so proud of you if she were here. I wish that she would've been a better mother to you but she did the best that she could, I guess."

"You really think that she would be proud of me?"

"I know so. God I miss her so much. It really hurt me when she died. No parent ever wants to outlive one of their children, no matter the circumstances. Your mother was such a beautiful person and it broke my heart when the policeman showed up that night to tell me that she overdosed and died all alone in that hotel room. I tried my best to get her away from all that but she was too far gone; I was a failure to her in that regard. Though she wasn't always doing right in her life she always took care of me and, now that she's not here to do that, I feel like I've become a burden on you. If I wasn't here life would be so much better for everyone, especially you. You're a bright and handsome young man who should be out living your life and having fun. You should be out experiencing new things and discovering all that life has to offer, not sitting here babysitting and worrying about me."

"Don't talk like that; you've never been a burden to me."

"That's sweet of you to say but I want you to hear me out. I keep having these

thoughts that if I were to die you could take the insurance money, the little that there is, and do something real nice for yourself."

"Granny, please!" he begged her, tears beginning to form in his eyes. "Why are you saying these kinds of things? We are family; I'm supposed to worry and care about you, whether you're sick, healthy or whatever. If family doesn't worry about each other then who will?"

His words warmed her heart. "You were always a smart kid and made family your top priority at all times; I've always loved that about you. I don't know if you remember this or not but a long time ago, I guess it was about six or seven years or so, your friends had come over to the house. One of them had made a joke about me and both of them were laughing about it. You got so mad that you ended up kicking both of them out of the house. I loved you so much for standing up and defending me like you did. I'll never forget that."

"I remember," he told her as he took her hand into his, getting a little choked up as he thought about it and briefly relived it in his mind. "I did that because I love you and I will never let anyone talk bad about you."

"Thank you," she replied, a sweet little smile on her face.

"You're welcome." He leaned over and planted another kiss on her forehead. "Get some rest, alright?"

"I will. Goodnight."

"Goodnight. Love you, Granny."

"Love you, too."

He turned the lamp off and then walked out of the room, pulling the door shut behind

him. Entering the living room he made his way over to the coffee table and picked the remote up, using it to cut the television off. He next took her cup of tea which had long since cooled and carried it into the kitchen where he set it down on the counter. The cabinets were opened and he removed all of the cups and glasses, stacking them on the counter next to the double sink. Placing the stopper in the sink on the right he cut the hot water on and then squirted a fair amount of dishwashing liquid into it. As the sink filled up he took the yellow dishcloth that he had used earlier and wetted it, using it to wipe down the inside of the cabinet and cleaning it of the built up dirt and crumbs that the bugs had been feasting on.

Done wiping down the cabinet he shut the water off and then piled all of the glasses and cups into the soapy water. A new washcloth was taken from the drawer on the side of the oven as he proceeded to scrub, giving the dishes a thorough washing before placing them in the adjoining sink where they waited to be rinsed. After washing and rinsing all of them he laid them on three paper towels for them to dry. Once completed with this he repeated the process, this time with the plates, saucers and bowls. Getting a large dish towel from the same place that he got the dishcloth he dried all of the dishes and placed them back in the cabinet.

Not content with just doing the dishes he grabbed the broom and dust pan from the pantry and swept up what seemed like a mountain of dirt from the kitchen floor. Finished, he picked up his forgotten glass of orange juice and walked into the living room, making his way over to the left wall where his grandmother's collection of cards was located. He eyed a few of them, recognizing some that he had given her throughout the years as he moved toward the back wall. He stopped in front of the television and picked up a green

picture frame that contained an aging picture, about fifteen years or so it was, of his grandmother and a dark-skinned woman with short hair and hollow eyes that was Darryl's mother.

With picture in hand he strolled into the dining room where, off in the corner across from the mahogany dining room table, sat a baby grand piano that contained a fine coating of dust. He placed his cup down on the floor and then moved the piano bench out so that he could sit down. He continued to linger on the picture, entranced by the sight of his mother. The frame was brought up to his lips and he planted a kiss upon the face of his mother and then doing the same to his grandmother's face before placing the frame on top of the piano so that their faces were looking and smiling at him.

"I dedicate this to the both of you." He placed his hands upon the keys but he didn't move them, instead allowing them a moment to get reacquainted with the feel of the piano. A moment passed before he decided to play, his fingers moving nimbly over the keys and filling the house with the sound of beautiful music.

When you really think about it, life is nothing but a slow, painful and deliberate process that is designed to eventually subtract all of the things that you love and care about from you - it's up to us to make the most out of the time that we do have. I do that by making the six hour trip to see her every few weeks to try and steal a little bit of time with her, never knowing when the grains of sand in her hourglass will run out. Sitting in front of the television with her as she faithfully watches the Wheel of Fortune there is nothing more beautiful or irreplaceable than that to me.

Looking back on my life, it's amazing how important some things become when you

get older and are able to gain wisdom and insight into life and the things that really matter. It feels like it was only yesterday. I can vividly recall when I was young all the times that I sat in this very spot with Granny sitting right here next to me, teaching me how to play and appreciate music. Thinking back on all of the hours that I spent here, those were some of the best times in my life, though I failed to recognize them as such at that time. She was forever patient, always loving and caring. "You know that's not where your fingers go," she would tell me each of the millions of times that I messed up and she would then place her hands upon mine and guide my fingers onto the correct keys. Back then I never had any worries or concerns about her not being around; I always assumed that she would live forever like Peter Pan, never growing older and always being around when I needed her.

I am nothing if not a realist and, thinking realistically, I know that one day she will be taken from me just like my mother many years ago. When I hear her talk about the subject of death, as she so often does now for some reason, it only serves to hammer that point home even further. I've tried to brace myself for it because I know that it's inevitable, especially given her medical condition and the fact that she doesn't take care of herself like I think that she should. But, who am I to tell the mother of my mother how to take care of herself? She's been on this earth more than three times longer than I have so she must be doing something right. Right??

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Chapter 3 - The Black & White Beauty In a Crayon World

It was early afternoon on a crowded sidewalk in the middle of downtown Dallas, Texas. It was hot out there, which shouldn't have been a surprise to anyone who had ever lived or visited there, but the heat was countered by a light rain - more like a very fine mist - that descended upon the mass of people as they walked to and fro. The scene was typical of any given day on any given downtown street: men, women and children of various ages and nationalities hurriedly walking amongst each other, all lost and hidden in their own little worlds as they chatted on their cell phones, listened to their mp3 players, talked to their family and/or friends that may have been walking with them, and generally caring or thinking nothing about the rest of the world as it passed them by.

Amongst the nameless and faceless blob of people one person in particular stood out from the rest and her name was Leena Callahan. Within all the vibrant colors of the city and the people she walked in between and around her appearance was strange as her body, including all of her clothing, was shrouded in Black & White and void of any color at all. She looked like a movie star from the 1930's that had somehow gotten transported into the twenty-first century but, somewhere through the process of getting here, had either forgotten or lost the one critical detail that would have allowed her to blend in with the rest of the modern world. Even her tempo was off, like she was at half speed, shuffling along like a turtle in a world full of rabbits. Even in her Black & White state she still managed to shine. To say that she was beautiful was like saying that fire is hot - even a blind man could clearly see and feel it. Both inside and out she was truly a radiant woman, not in a supermodel way or in today's wacked out media definition of beauty but more in a girl next door vibe. You know the type, the cool girl that acts just like one of

the boys but looks exactly like a woman should. There was a small crescent shaped scar on her left cheek from her days of being a tomboy when she used to climb trees and get into scuffles with the boys, and occasionally a few girls, from the neighborhood that only added to her charm. It was hard, some would say impossible, for someone to dislike her as her genuine niceness oozed out of her like a punctured can of radiation, infecting all who came into contact with her. Beneath all that beauty and niceness there lied a sadness that was evident in her eyes and couldn't be hidden no matter how hard she tried to conceal it - the look of a black girl lost who had no idea how to get her happiness back.

Moonlight drifted through the open curtains of Leena's two story brick and stone home, shining like a silver blade on the hardwood floor. Most of the world was asleep at this hour but she wasn't one of them. Instead of catching z's she was busy lying on top of her queen-sized bed with a copy of *The Dreamcatcher* by Stephen King in her hand, reading by the soft glow of her bedside lamp.

Finishing the page that she was on she glanced over at the alarm clock on the dresser to see that the time was currently 2:27, a time that wouldn't be too bad on a weekend but it was a different story for a weeknight when one has to get up and go to work a few hours later. She turned back to the book and read a few more pages, wrapping up the chapter and then marking her place in the book with a DC Comics bookmark before placing it down on the dresser next to the alarm clock.

The lamp was turned off and she climbed under the covers to where only the top of

her Bratz pajamas was visible. She lied facing the alarm clock, her eyes fixated on the numbers as they stared back at her. Her eyes closed and she attempted to get some rest, quickly drifting off into a dream state. In the dream she opened her eyes and immediately had to squint, the extra bright rays of the sun blinding her. After her eyes adjusted she rose to her feet and took a survey of her new surroundings. There was a look of familiarity on her face like she had been here before, her only problem being that she had no idea where or what exactly "here" was.

Her senses were redlining, tingling from all the stimulation that they were receiving. The sunshine warmed her skin; the smell of salt water lingered in her nostrils; her eyes drank in the cotton candy clouds in the sky; the perfectly manicured spearmint grass on which she stood and the electric blue color of what looked to be spirits, the faintest traces of human futures still present on their ghostly frames. There were thousands of them and she watched with fascination as they passed around and through each other, her ears being flooded with their whispers as they said things that only made sense to themselves and sounded like jumbled up gibberish to anyone else that happened to be listening. She placed her hands over her ears in an attempt to block out the chatter but her efforts provided very little comfort.

Not knowing what else to do she decided to take off running, her bare feet crushing the grass underneath. She sprinted like an Olympic runner, her arms pumping back and forth at her sides while her heart rate rapidly spiked. Faster and faster she ran, passing by and straight through some of the spirits as she went, her feet moving in a blur much like the Tasmanian Devil from the Bugs Bunny cartoons from back in the day. Amazingly enough, as she continued to run, her feet left the ground and she was now airborne with

her body elevated a few inches above the ground. She looked down in surprise, seeing the ground below and nothing but air beneath her and it. A smile crossed her face, for a second feeling like a superhero from one of the many comics that she used to read in her youth, but her elation was short lived as, just as quickly as it started, she fell back to the earth and rolled over and over and over again, her virgin white dress that she was draped in now covered in grass stains, dirt, and traces of blood. After her hellacious fall she managed to sit up, the tears that were falling from her eyes leaving fresh trails in the smudges of dirt on her cheeks. She glanced up at the sky, the sun reflecting off of her reptile green eyes - there was a fear of the unknown contained in them.

Her eyes opened and the dream ended. She peered over at the clock to see that only nine minutes had passed. Disgusted, she turned over so that she was no longer facing the clock, hoping against hope that it would make a difference.

4:05 in the morning and nothing was working. She had counted and subsequently named every sheep that she could possibly think of but yet she was still awake. Frustrated, she sat up and pushed the covers off of herself, got up, and then walked out of the room, making a right and travelling down the hallway to the next bedroom up ahead. When she flipped on the light it became clear that this wasn't just an ordinary bedroom - she had converted this room into a makeshift art studio that contained everything that one would ever need: a large easel, many blank canvases waiting to be filled, a three foot high metal step ladder, many paint cans of various colors and hues, brushes made of different

fibers and bristles, along with other miscellaneous paint supplies that were placed neatly in the back right corner of the room. Huge sheets of plastic with splotches of dried paint here and there covered the floor.

She walked in and stood in the middle of the room, staring at the walls and ceiling which provided a stark contrast to her Black & White body. It was obvious that this room had been painted during her happier times as it had been made up to resemble a beautiful summer day. A magnificently colorful rainbow stretched all the way across the room, beginning from the wall to her left and then stretching along the back wall to the right side of the room where it came to an end. Clover colored grass lined the bottom of each wall while the ceiling was painted sapphire blue with a big, bold and fiery sun posted right smack in the middle.

She stood for a moment longer, slowly turning her head and letting her eyes take in the room. She gravitated over to the paint supplies, selecting a brush and a can of paint from the group. Pop went the lid and in went the brush, swirling around and being coated with black paint. She removed the brush and then plastered the upper part of the back wall with darkness, slinging the brush around with reckless abandon as day quickly gave way to night on the wall. There was passion in her work - the way her eyes were wide and focused with fire burning through which, for the first time, allowed her to truly look alive. She was like the reincarnation of Jackson Pollock, putting her all into the painting in a controlled rage.

A few hours have passed.

She stood in the room and admired her work, bits of paint speckling her body and giving her a little bit of color, at least for now. No longer was the room alive; the sun, rainbow, sky and grass had all been painted over and looked nothing like they used to - they were actually quite the opposite now. The bottom half of each wall was painted a dreary grey with dark and menacing clouds that were showering the world with heavy droplets of purifying rain. Progressing up the walls the grey gradually gave way to a starry night, complete with constellations, shooting stars, and planets that lingered off in the distance waiting to be discovered. The room had been transformed into a reflection of her unhappiness.

Less than two hours later she sat in her cubicle. You would expect her to look and be tired but her body had long ago gotten used to the months of sleepless nights. There was a slight smile on her face as she sat in front of her monitor and typed up an email. She finished it and sent it on its way before getting up out of her seat and walking to the back of the office where she passed a few of her co-workers, giving them a cursory smile. She stepped up to the Coke machine and deposited three quarters into it, pushing the button for a Sprite. The twenty ounce soda dropped down and was quickly scooped up by her as she headed back to her cubicle. She sat down and twisted off the cap, taking a long and refreshing drink.

An email popped up on her screen while she put the cap back on her soda, the sender

being Darryl. The subject was "Business Ware" and she was one of several people that had been included as a recipient. "Can one of you please provide me with the new IP address to access Business Ware?" it read. "Thank you."

"The address is 10.16.22.413," she replied back, copying everyone that was included on the email and then sending it - business as usual.

"Dear Diary, another sleepless night. My life is sad. I feel like a ghost, maybe that's why they're always in my dreams. My life is spent roaming around but never being seen. Is this how my life is supposed to be? Laying in a bed that I can't sleep in, by myself with no one to share it with? I know what you're thinking - what about Sam? I don't know how good he is for me though it is nice to say that I have a boyfriend, even if it is in name only. I want to be needed. I want to hold hands with someone and wake up to see their face, not having to worry about where they are and what (or who) they're doing. I want to be loved and not feel like if I were to jump out this window that no one would care. I'm tripping - I know that I have people that care about me. I'm just frustrated and lonely. I need to feel like a part of something."

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Chapter 4 - The Way I Am

Familiar pieces of scenery passed by in a blur as she gazed out the window. After a moment she turned and looked straight ahead, watching the cab driver as he navigated the vehicle and whistled softly to himself. "Make a left at the next light."

"Okay."

She dug into her purse and pulled out a wad of wrinkled bills. Glancing up at the meter, currently reading \$40.10, she took two twenties and a ten from the stash and then stuffed the rest back into her purse. The driver made the left, turning into a residential street full of older homes. "Make a right on the next street and it's going to be the first house on the right."

He followed her directions and then stopped in front of a small white house that was surrounded by a chain link fence. The meter stopped at \$42.70.

"Thank you," Leena told him as she handed him the money. "Keep the change."

"Many thanks. I'll help you with your bag."

He got out and popped the trunk, stopping along the way to open the door for her. She stepped out and then closed the door, following him to the back of the car where he swung the trunk open and pulled out her lone piece of luggage.

"Thank you. Have a great day."

"You, too."

He closed the trunk and then got back in the car. Leena watched as he turned the car around and then drove off. Her view rotated from the disappearing cab and up to the front door of her parent's home, her excitement level near empty at the thought of being here. Using her left hand she wiped hair from her eyes and readied herself to enter the house.

The gate opened and she rolled her luggage inside. Slowly making her way up the steps she paused for about thirty seconds in front of the door before proceeding to knock three times.

The door opened and her mother Jessie stood before her. She was a mirror image of Leena plus twenty years with streaks of grey in her black hair. "Leena!" she greeted her warmly, "you're finally here. I thought you had gotten lost."

"Hey mom. I always know my way back here."

They embraced in an uneasy hug that displayed some friction between the two of them. "Come on in."

Leena followed her inside and then took a long look around, overcome by all of the memories that were contained here. She exhaled softly to calm her jitters. "Where can I set this?" she asked, motioning down to her bag.

"You can leave it by the door; I'll take care of it later. Sit down, sit down."

Leena moved the bag out of the way of the door and then sat down on the beige sofa, her mother taking a seat next to her.

"You're looking good," she said, inspecting Leena as all mothers do with their kids.

"Thank you," she answered back, barely making any eye contact, instead opting to stare down at the floor, occasionally glancing up at the pictures that hung on the wall or at the television that was turned to an old western movie.

"It's good to have you home. It's been a long time since you've been here and we've all missed you."

"I missed y'all, too. Where's dad?"

"He's on his way home."

"He out hunting?"

"No, fishing this time. He just called a few minutes ago to let me know that he was on his way so he should be back anytime now."

"Oh, okay."

"Dinner will be ready soon," her mother carried on, trying to hold her smile and engage Leena in conversation, "and I made all of your favorites. We've got fried chicken, mashed potatoes, some green beans, potato salad, macaroni and cheese, cornbread, and a nice apple pie for dessert. Doesn't that sound great?"

"It sounds wonderful, smells pretty good, too."

"Your sister has been asking about you. She wonders why you don't call her more often."

Leena looked up at her mother at the mention of her sister. There was anger on her face. "Is she coming here?"

"She said that she may stop by while you're here. She wants to see you."

"Mom...."

"What is it between you two?" she asked, cutting Leena off. "I'll never for the life of me understand it."

"I wouldn't expect you to possibly understand."

There was a knock at the door which silenced them both. A second later the door opened and, as if on cue, in stepped Leena's little sister Rayven. She was the total opposite of Leena in every way; full of spunk, life, color and always with a smile on her face. Mom's eyes lit up at the sight of her while Leena's eyes never left the floor.

"Hey mom!" exclaimed Rayven. "What's up big sis?!?!" She rushed over to Leena

who finally acknowledged her by standing up to give her a hug.

"How are you doing, Ray?"

"I'm good."

Their embrace ended and Leena sat back down, Rayven plopping down next to her.

She took notice of Leena's purse. "Nice purse; where'd you get it?"

"Ebay."

"For real?" she asked, genuinely surprised. "I can't ever find anything on there, not at a decent price, anyway. The times I do happen to find something then someone always swoops in at the last minute and outbids me."

"I don't know how you two buy things online with all the people out there stealing identities and credit card numbers," chimed in mom. "Don't y'all ever worry about things like that?"

"I do but not with reputable sites like Ebay," explained Rayven while Leena chose to remain silent on the matter. "They have all types of encryption and security measures to combat things like that."

"Maybe I'm just old school but I like going to a store, feeling the item in my hands and then being able to walk out with it."

"I like doing that, too, but if I can save a few bucks then I'll take my chances online. Dad made it home yet?"

"He should be home shortly," mom informed her.

"Excuse me," Leena told them, "I need to use the restroom." She got up and made her way down the hallway to the bathroom where she closed the door and then flicked on the light, standing in front of the mirror with her hands on the sink. She stared at herself for a

few moments, occasionally shaking her head and looking down at the floor, before reaching down and flushing the toilet to give the impression that she had used it. Squirting some liquid soap onto her hands she washed them and then used the towel that was on the rack behind her to dry them. Off went the light and she exited the room, ready to face her family once again.

"Here you go, honey." Jessie handed the plate that was piled high with food to her husband and the father of Rayven and Leena, a man's man by the name of John.

"Thanks, babe," he replied in his deep baritone voice. He was thick and tall, built like an oak tree, with a growing gut, due in no small part to all of the great and rich food that his wife kept him supplied with.

Mom sat down across from him at the table, completing the group as Leena sat to her left and Rayven on her right. All had plenty of wonderful smelling food in front of them as well as tall glasses of homemade sweet tea to quench their thirsts.

Dad cleared his throat. "Would you like to bless the food, Ray?"

"Sure."

Leena lowered her head and then rolled her eyes. She took the hand of Rayven and her mother as they all bowed their heads in prayer.

"Lord, thank you for allowing this family to come together in celebration of not only ourselves but, most importantly, in celebration of you and your divine presence. We ask

that you bless this food that we're about to receive and hope that you will continue to bless us and keep us all in your abundant grace. In your name we pray, amen."

"Amen," answered Leena and her parents in unison.

"Did you catch anything today?" Rayven asked dad.

"Frank did but they weren't biting for me at all today. I don't know what was going on out there."

"I remember when you would take me out on your fishing trips. That used to be so much fun."

Leena looked up at her father, stopping in mid bite. Her eyes went from him to Rayven and then back to him again. "I don't recall being asked if I wanted to go fishing with you, dad."

Her father looked over at mom and then over at Rayven, mouth hanging slightly ajar as he struggled to come up with an answer as the tension continued to build in the room. "Well, Leena, I didn't think that you would want to do something like that. You were always out climbing trees and playing baseball or had your nose stuck in a book. I figured that you would be bored sitting around in a boat all day."

"It would have been nice to have been asked is all I'm saying. Give me the chance to say no instead of making the choice for me. I don't get it."

"It's not that big of a deal," Rayven tried to explain, inadvertently adding fuel to the fire and not understanding the reason behind Leena's outrage. "It was just some stupid fishing trips on a lousy boat."

"Don't tell me what is and what isn't a big deal!" Leena snapped at her. "You have some nerve. Of course it's not a big deal to you - why would it be?!?! You've always had

mommy and daddy in your life to do things with. You have no idea what it's like to feel like a mistake when everyone is making such a big fuss over and adores the little sister." She rose up from her chair and scanned the faces of her stunned parents. "All I ever wanted was for you two to love me the same way that you loved her," she continued, hot tears rolling down her equally hot cheeks. "Why was that so hard for you to do?"

She exited the kitchen, leaving behind confused looks and silence in her wake.

"Mind if I sit down next to you?"

Leena gazed over at him, her eyes puffy. "I can't tell you where you can and can't sit, dad. This is your house, not mine."

He sat down on the chair next to her, both staring straight ahead and taking in the view of the neighborhood from the front porch. "Your mother is very upset. She said that you were talking about leaving."

"She didn't lie to you," she replied, adjusting her luggage which sat near her feet.

"Why would you want to leave when you just got here a few hours ago? Don't you think that you're making a hasty decision? Maybe you should at least spend the night and sleep on it. I guarantee that you'll feel much better about everything in the morning. If for some reason you don't then you can leave tomorrow and I won't try to stop you or talk you out of it. What do you think?"

"I'm sorry dad but my mind is made up. I've already called for a cab and, once it arrives, I'm gone."

"I don't think that you truly understand what's going on, Leena."

"No disrespect to you, dad, but please don't try to tell me what I do and don't understand. The only thing I need to understand is how I feel and who is responsible for making me feel that way. I don't like feeling like this but the fact is that I do have that feeling and it burns me up inside. I just want to be accepted with open arms like Rayven but that's something that I've never gotten from either of you."

He dropped his head as her words stung his heart like an army of unforgiving and angry fire ants. "I'm sorry, Leena. I really don't know what to say. Your mother and I have made a lot of mistakes and I know that you have had to pay the price for more than your fair share of them but I think that you've grown so accustomed to looking at those mistakes that you've lost sight of the things that your mother and I have done right. We're not perfect but we're not all bad, either. We love the both of you just the same. If either of us has ever made you feel any different then we apologize to no end. Nobody here likes the distance between us and we know that we all have things that we need and should do on our respective ends to mend it but all parties involved have to be willing to take part in order for it to be successful. All I'm asking is for you to stay the night and let's start off brand new tomorrow morning. Can you do that for me?"

The cab pulled up and came to a stop in front of the house, both Leena and her father rising at the sight of it. "I love you, dad," she told him while giving him a quick hug. "I'll talk to you soon. Tell mom and Ray that I said bye."

He watched as she grabbed her bag and rolled it out to the waiting cab. "Love you, too, Leena."

The driver exited the vehicle and took the bag from her, depositing it into the trunk.

Leena got into the car and the driver closed her door before getting in and driving off.

John looked on until the car was completely out of his view and then turned and slowly walked back inside, feeling like he had lost his little girl forever.

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