

KALLYSTEN



BABY STEPS

Baby Steps

(excerpt)

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Baby Steps - blurb

As a Special Enforcer, Alexandra should know better than to get close to a vampire like Joseph, even if he saved her from certain death. The S.E. records name him as a likely killer, and his interest in her can't possibly mean anything good. And so when her friends introduce her to a potential human boyfriend, she ignores her feelings for Joseph and demands that he leaves her alone.

Fed up with her games, Joseph takes her to her word and leaves Cleveland, intending to put as much distance as possible between them and forget her along with his feelings for her.

Two years later, though, when Joseph has to return to Cleveland, he still cares about Alexandra, much more than he would like. And Alexandra, single again and now a new mom to baby girl Marian, never managed to completely put Joseph out of her life and mind.

Step by step, Alexandra will offer Joseph her friendship before entrusting him with her life and her child's. But will Joseph ever trust her again with his heart?

Prologue

Cleveland, June 20th, 2006

The vampire in front of me isn't showing his fangs, but I can tell he is angry. Murderously angry. I could almost believe he's about to kill someone. He knows better than that, though. Or at least, I hope he does.

I've never really had the occasion to see him angry before tonight. The hard look in his gold-flaked blue eyes can't mean anything else, though. In truth, I'm not all that surprised, and I can only brace myself for the storm I can see rising; the storm I provoked, maybe not completely by accident.

I knew this moment would come sooner or later. It has been bound to happen ever since that night, a couple of weeks ago, when my coworkers walked in on Joseph and me near that blood bar in the Flats while we were engaged in some very heated kissing. They didn't say anything—mostly because I ran away, unable to listen to the reproaches I knew were coming. If I had found one of them kissing a vampire, I'd have given them the same speech.

People have this romantic idea of vampires as misunderstood creatures, lonely and in need of acceptance, but I know better, like all Special Enforcers. Not all vampires are killers—of course not—but all vampires can kill as easily as they can kiss. And this one vampire, even though we have never caught him red-fanged, has killed before. Why I was kissing him when I know that—I couldn't have explained it to my friends' satisfaction if they had asked. I never could explain to myself the kisses that happened before that night.

I could have told them how the first kiss we shared was a thank you one, requested by Joseph as reward for saving my life. He didn't expect me to agree, and in truth I only did it to shut him up. I could have tried to show them how my near death experience affected me far more than they suspect; how they and our boss are only making things worse by keeping me confined to easy jobs. I could have admitted how lonely I feel every time I get take out food for one at my favorite Vietnamese restaurant and see the couples seated in the dimly-lit dining room. I could have said that, at thirty-one, I am quite simply despairing that I'll ever find the right man.

It's something else entirely I told my friends, when I saw them the next day at the agency. Even though their expressions said much more, they accepted my plea of momentary insanity, assuring me that it was understandable that I needed comfort after what I have been through, and very cautiously suggesting that, maybe, just maybe, I needed to meet new friends. New male friends. New male friends of the human variety. It was only a measure of my desperation that I agreed to meet their friend Rick.

Quite to my shock, I liked Rick. He is cute. Well mannered. Funny. And very much human. We have gone out a few times, first as an awkward double date thing, then by ourselves. There have even been a few kisses. Nice kisses. Not earthquake-inducing kisses, but nice ones. He has shown interest in my work, so far without signs of thinking that it's too dangerous for a woman. He asked to come along, to see exactly what it is that I do and, after thinking about it for a few days, I accepted. I didn't take him right away, though. I had to clear the ground first. I didn't want a glitch when I took Rick on

patrol. The same glitch who is glaring at me right now. So much for my planning.

I knew this moment was coming, I knew it all too well, but I couldn't avoid it. When I started dating Rick, I still sought out Joseph's company for my nightly rounds around Cleveland. I used to hate having someone with me as I worked, but seeing death from a little too close changed that, and even if he has fangs, it's comforting to have him nearby. Most nights, things ended with more of these kisses that started it all. Never more than kisses, not even talking about those kisses and what they mean. They don't mean anything. They can't. I'm a Special Enforcer, he's a vampire. I should know better. So should he.

Tonight, I went to his apartment before nightfall. I told him that I wouldn't patrol, and not to bother looking for me. He shrugged off the news with his usual nonchalance, and I breathed a little more easily that he had believed me without questions. Now, I wonder if he believed me at all. Why else would he be here, on the Cleveland State campus, a place where I hardly ever patrol?

"What kind of game are you playing?" Joseph growls at last.

"What does it look like?" I shoot back, trying not to let my uneasiness show. "I'm patrolling. You know, people like me walking around and staking vampires like you? Do you want to make my day and try to bite someone so I can finally get rid of you?"

He snorts. "Is that what he's here for? To serve as bait?" He gestures toward the human at my side with the hand that holds his cigarette, and the red tip draws a wide arc

in the cool night air. The smell is familiar; it irks me, as it always does.

I cross my arms, annoyed at the turn the evening is taking. I wonder what Rick is thinking. I wonder what my friends will think when they hear about this. And I hope as hard as I can that Joseph won't do anything that would require his immediate staking.

"I don't see that what we're doing is any of your business," Rick says.

Joseph's heated gaze, which has been glued to me so far, slides to him. He doesn't say anything, but then his eyes come back to me again, and now through the anger I can see the hurt, too, and the accusations. Yes, I lied to him. Yes, I told him I wouldn't patrol tonight to keep him away. Yes, that guy next to me is my boyfriend. Yes, I have been dating someone else while going out with him.

Yes, I am sorry.

All of this conversation is done silently as we just stare at each other, and Rick must know that something is going on because he is quiet now, as if waiting for the end to come. It soon does.

Joseph throws the cigarette stub away as he steps forward, and I expect him to hit me. I am ready for the blow, ready to reply in kind. Yet he does something I didn't imagine he would. He cups my face in his callused hands, and at the same instant his mouth is on mine: forceful, demanding, and, as always, perfect. For a second, I let myself fall into the kiss...and then realize that I can't, not here, not now, not with Rick just next to me, not even if I want it so much. Hands flat on his

chest, I push Joseph away. To my surprise, he doesn't fight back. Not physically, that is.

"Enough games," he says in a cool voice that is in complete contrast with the storm raging in the depths of his eyes. "Tell me you didn't feel anything, Sandra. Look at me and tell me that right now, in this one second, you didn't feel more than you ever did with this prick. Tell me I'm wrong when I say there's something. Or tell the dickhead it's over."

I hate how he knows me so well. I hate how he dares to give me an ultimatum. And I'm quite sure I should simply hate *him*.

A hand, a human hand, rests on my shoulder, and I have to fight my initial impulse to shake it off. Joseph's words suddenly make an awful lot of sense. 'Enough games,' he said. The time for playing is over. The time for lying is over. Not just lying to him, to my friends, but also, lying to myself. It's time for me to move forward. The question is...

What do I want?

Whom do I want?

The vampire in front of me or the human at my side? In that second frozen in time, as Joseph awaits for a word from me, I can't help but wonder: What future would I have with someone who doesn't value human life the same way I do, someone I might some day have to kill, someone who might some day kill me?

It's at the same time the easiest decision I have ever made, and the hardest.

“You’re wrong.” I lie to him one last time. “There’s nothing. I didn’t feel anything. You need to leave, Joseph.”

As the words fall from my lips, for just an instant, there’s a flash of the deepest pain I ever witnessed on his features. And then, there’s nothing. Nothing but an impassive, inexpressive mask of marble. He doesn’t even look angry anymore. He straightens a little, standing to his full height as if a weight has been lifted from his shoulders, and considers me for a moment longer. And then, he nods, and without a word, he turns around and strides away.

As I watch him disappear, the hand on my shoulder squeezes lightly, and I can hear comforting words being spoken to me. But I don’t comprehend them, because another understanding has just filled my whole mind, leaving room for nothing else.

Joseph is gone.

There was a goodbye, in that last glance, in that nod, even if he didn’t say the words. He is not simply gone from my sight, but gone for good.

It’s not the first time I snapped at him and told him to leave me alone.

But this time will be the last.

Because this time he left.

Chapter 1

Haventown, October 13th, 2006

It has been months since I left Cleveland. I've been all over the country, and even though I've spent a few weeks here and there, it feels like I spent all that time in my car. It's more than time for me to stop for good.

I bring the car to a halt and look through the small part of the windshield that is free of paint. The building has changed in almost fifty years, but no doubt, that's the one.

"Welcome home, Joseph." I take a drag on my cigarette. This is where I spent the first few weeks of my life as a vampire. Memories float to the surface of my mind. For the first time in years, I think back of the night I met my Sire. Through the eyes of the Special Enforcer I was then, she was first a dangerous creature, and second the most beautiful woman I had ever met. More beautiful, even, than the woman I still had trouble referring to as my ex-wife. I wasn't too happy at the idea of staking her. I still don't know why she decided to make me a vampire—why she picked me. I never dared to ask, afraid I wouldn't like the answer, and she never explained herself.

Putting the car in motion once more, I drive around the corner and find a place to park. I hope it will still be there when I come back. The neighborhood isn't exactly the safest in Haventown. Oh well. If someone steals it, I'll just steal another myself. It wouldn't be the first time, or the last. It's more annoying than difficult—annoying because of having to black out the windows on a new one so I can drive during the day. Just in case it

does disappear while I'm conducting my business, I grab the half empty bottle of vodka in the passenger seat and slip it in my jacket's pocket. It's sticking out, but it will do. My other pocket is bulging too, with another kind of liquidity. I hesitate an instant about the clothes and weapons in the trunk. The clothes can be replaced, but I'm attached to the crossbow and sword in particular. They're good weapons, and they have come in handy a few times in the last months. Some vampires can be very touchy about new fangs arriving on what they consider their territory. Showing up with a weapon in hand probably wouldn't give the best first impression, however, and I really don't want the landlord to close the door on me. I could find another place, of course, but I've crossed the country to come back here, to the source; it would be silly to do something stupid now.

With a last glance at the car, I walk toward the entrance of the building, finishing my cigarette on the way, my gaze taking in my surroundings in an unconscious reflex. Always best to know your ground, you never know when you will need to run. That's what I was taught, a lifetime or two ago. Some lessons just never fade. Tall buildings line the street, faded bricks and cracked marble adorning their facades. Back when I was turned, this was one of the nicest streets in town. Things have changed, even if I haven't.

Crushing my cigarette stub under the heel of my boot, I knock on the door. Hard. The landlord was in his twenties when I was here last; he must be getting up there in age. When the door finally opens, it's to reveal an old woman. Old, but she has a taser in hand and she holds it steadily as she asks me what I want.

"I'm looking for an apartment," I reply, and wonder if she's the guy's wife.

"You're a vamp?" she asks, her heavily lined eyes going down to my feet then coming back up.

I nod, and she invites me in. She doesn't lower the taser, doesn't relax in the slightest. She notices my pointed look, and her smile turns almost apologetic.

"We've been in this business for a long time," she explains. "Certain precautions are necessary. Nothing personal."

I decide, right there, that I like her. I'm not sure why, just a gut feeling. It might have to do with the fact that her heartbeat isn't worried in the slightest, even though she knows I could be dangerous.

We are in a hallway, with a door on each side and a staircase in the back. She leads me to the door on the right, marked with a bronze plaque that says 'Office.' I go in, and just as I sit down, another woman enters the room from a side door. She looks somewhere around thirty, a little shorter than me, long blond hair. She sits down on the other side of the desk. Even if her eyes are blue, not green, I can't help but see another woman in her, a woman I left months ago in Cleveland.

I try to shake off the feeling, along with the memories. "You're in charge here?"

"I am," she replies, sounding slightly amused. "Karen Schutz. And you are?"

"Joseph. You're Will's daughter?"

“Yes.” She tilts her head to one side as if trying to see through me. “My father retired some years ago. I hope dealing with a woman won’t be a problem, Mr. Joseph.”

“Just Joseph.” I flash her my best smile. “And no, I don’t have any problem with women. None at all.”

Not with women. With one particular woman, yes, but I’m working on that.

She chuckles again at the leer I give her. “Good. Why don’t you tell me how I can help you?”

At this point, I can think of several interesting ways she could help, but I tell her I want an apartment. Not just any apartment, but the topmost one on the sixth floor. Anything else she might be willing to help me with—well, we’ll just see about that later, won’t we?

“You’re lucky, it happens to be free at the moment. It is our most expensive one, however—”

“That won’t be a problem.”

She nods. “We will be glad to have you as a tenant, then. Standard agreement applies.”

She rattles off a list of rules, which I don’t pay much attention to. I’ve heard them before, in more than one city. She also gives me her price, and I don’t discuss it. I pull out the envelope from my jacket and count the money for the first six months in front of her. Hard earned money, that. I’ve lost the count of how many games of poker I’ve played on my way, although the little stop in Vegas was rather helpful.

She is not dazzled at the sight of the bills now on her desk. I suppose that she's used to seeing that kind of money. She quickly makes it disappear in a drawer and stands. "I'll show you upstairs, then."

I stop myself before I can reveal I don't need a guide. Following her up the staircase, I feel as though I'm stepping back in time. Everything looks as it did a few decades back, and I almost expect to find my Sire waiting for me behind the heavy metal door when my landlady unlocks it and hands me the key with a smile.

"If you need anything, I'm in the apartment 3B."

I watch her go, wondering if I imagined the way she emphasized the word 'anything.' Shaking my head, I walk into my new home. If the outside of the building and the staircase haven't changed, the apartment itself is somewhat of a surprise, and I tour the place with a bit of nostalgia. The apartment is one large room, maybe thirty yards by twenty, with a Spartan bathroom. I remembered the walls as being white; they're now dark blue. Facing the door, heavy drapes cover the only window and hide the view of a quiet street and a park where I learned to hunt. A king-size bed dominates the room on the left, matching dark wood dressers on each side of it. On the right, there are two open spaces: one a minimalist kitchen with only a fridge, small cupboard, microwave oven and sink; the other a living room with a television and seating area.

I hesitate for a second, thinking of getting my few possessions from the car, but decide it can wait. I walk over to the kitchen. The standard welcome bag of blood is there, and I drain it straight from the fridge, not bothering to heat it. Then I move over to the sofa, and shrug out of my jacket before sitting down, placing the

bottle on the coffee table in front of me. I surf through a hundred channels or so until I find something half decent, and try very hard, like every night, every day since I left that cursed city in Ohio months ago, not to think of her. I try not to see her face in my mind. I try not to taste her on my lips, not to feel her heat in my arms, not to breathe in her scent, not to hear her voice. I really try.

It works just as well as usual.

Now that I'm here, I can admit it to myself: this little road trip across the United States was just as much about finding myself again as it was about getting away from Alexandra. Physically, it worked, because I can hardly go any farther this way without crossing an ocean. Mentally, it's a different story. Good thing I have my old friend here. Only half a bottle, not enough to get drunk, but at least I'll get a little buzz. Hopefully enough to drown her parting words. A vamp can dream, can't he?

Oh yeah, dreams. Those are another thing altogether.

Half the time, I dream of fucking her to death. It always starts the same. The same burning, violent, nothing-else-exists-but-us kiss like those we shared a few delicious times. And then, it's always different. Sometimes it's sweet and tender. Sometimes it's rough and hard. Sometimes a mix of both. And sometimes indescribable. Just like her.

The rest of the time... Well, she still dies, but it's not as pleasant for her. Strangely, not as pleasant for me, either. The idea of killing Alexandra is about as appealing as taking a walk in the sunlight. And no, that's not to say that I am suicidal.

Not suicidal, but pathetic, without a doubt.

Isn't it pathetic the way I just left? She told me to go, and I did. Since when do I listen to what anybody says, especially a Special Enforcer? I should have kept fighting; that's what I should have done. Fight with her, fight for her, fight her, until she—

Until what? Haven't I learned my lesson already, first as a human and then as a vamp? Again and again, I make the same mistake. I fall for a woman and she leads me on, just to hurt me in the end. She makes me believe in love, only to betray me. Alexandra, and my Sire before her, and a wife who broke her vows before that. Enough, already. I did the right thing when I left. The best thing for me. At least now I'm done playing.

And if I just keep repeating that to myself, maybe I'll end up believing it.

* * * *

Cleveland, July 4th, 2007

My neighbor's grandchildren start shrieking in her backyard just before the firecrackers erupt in a series of sharp explosions. The sound startles me out of my daydream and I blink.

My mother and Paul are standing by the grill, working together to flip burger patties and turn corncoobs. A few feet away, downwind from them, Theo is smoking a cigarette, a small smile fleeting on his lips as he watches Paul. Every now and then, Paul glances up at him, and each time he does, his face lights up with a grin. Next to

Theo, Dad and Rick are talking. Dad stopped smoking years ago, but if a cigarette is lit up closeby, he never loses an occasion to dirty up his lungs a little more, as Mom says. Still, it's better than him running through two packs a day, so she pretends not to notice, and he always kisses her cheek afterwards, like a thank you for not nagging him. Myself, I never liked the smell of cigarettes, but lately I find I don't mind it so much anymore.

It is the first time my parents have met Rick, and things seem to be going fine so far. He talked with my mom earlier, asking her about their drive up from Columbus. He lived there for a few years, and he assured her that the Fourth of July fireworks are more grandiose in Cleveland. Now he's chatting up my dad, talking about his job. I wonder what Dad thinks of him. He's never too fond of my boyfriends.

"Thirty years," Dad says, puffing up his chest a little. "I joined the Academy fresh out of high school, found a place in a Columbus agency the day I graduated, and ten years after that I founded my own agency. Alex was just a baby—"

"She was four!" Mom calls from the other side of the yard, laughing.

Dad throws a quick frown in her direction then shrugs, turning his attention back to Rick. "Anyway. I ran that for twenty years. Ended up with four other S.E.s under me, and they took over the agency when I retired."

Rick raises his beer in a toasting gesture. It makes me remember the warming can of soda in my hand, and I take a sip.

“Thirty years in such a dangerous line of work, that’s an inspiration.”

He glances at me as he says it. There’s just the smallest bit of worry in his eyes. He has never said anything, probably because I’ve made it clear that I’ll leave him before I leave my job, but I know he worries. Who wouldn’t?

Dad chuckles as their beer bottles clank together. “I’m not sure about being an inspiration, but I’ve got battle marks to prove how dangerous.”

I look at my mom and catch her eyeroll. She leans in to whisper something to Paul, and the two of them share a laugh. Oblivious, Dad is pulling up the right leg of his shorts, exposing the round scar on his thigh. My throat tightens as memories flood my mind—at nine years old, I knew what a femoral artery was, and how fast someone could bleed from it. I take another sip of tepid soda. It’s just unpleasant enough to distract me, and I look back at the men to see that Theo is showing off his battle scars, too. He has pulled up his t-shirt, and on his lower abdomen, the same round scar that adorns my father’s leg stands a little paler than the already pale skin around it. Rick makes appropriately awed noises. I almost gag on my soda.

“Stake,” Dad says. “Civilians think S.E.s die from being bitten. Truth is, we get staked by our own weapons more often than not.”

“Why not use swords, then?” Rick asks. He turns toward me, and raises his voice a little even though I’m only a few yards away. “Isn’t that what you use, Alex?”

Being addressed directly sends a jolt through me, and I struggle to answer a simple question. Mom saves me by calling out that the food is ready. Dad, Theo and Rick walk over to the grill, and after a few seconds I follow them. Paul is placing the burgers on warmed buns, leaving it to us to add the condiments we want. For a moment, we're all busy getting food, but as soon as everybody is served, Rick brings the conversation back to Special Enforcers.

"So, swords? Aren't they safer?"

Swallowing a bite of food, Paul throws Theo a teasing look. "Not everybody can wield a sword," he says, the laugh clear in his voice.

Theo replies with a discrete but very meaningful finger.

"And to be fair," Paul continues, untouched by his partner's display, "swords can be just as tricky as stakes."

It's his turn to show a scar, this one a thin raised line that curls around his biceps and across his forearm. Dad peers at it then shakes his head. He looks at me, and unmistakable pride colors his voice as he says, "I guess we know who's the best S.E. here. No scars yet."

I look down at my untouched burger and force myself to take a bite so I won't have to answer. Silence falls over our little group. From the corner of my eye, I catch Theo, Paul and Rick looking at each other. The three of them know. My parents don't.

My mom is the first to notice the suddenly strained atmosphere. She looks at me intently, her eyes

searching, but says nothing. My dad catches on soon enough. "What? What's going on?"

"Nothing." The word grates my throat.

My father's voice drops to a deeper octave. "Alexandra, don't lie to me."

That's the voice he used to use when I broke curfew, or when I had bad grades. I hadn't heard it since I told him I was moving to Cleveland and wouldn't take over his agency. Just like that, I'm twelve again, and ready to promise I'll get straight A's until I'm out of high school.

I give myself a shake. I'm a grown up, and I can take care of myself. "I've got a couple scars, too," I admit in a detached tone. "It doesn't mean anything."

I can tell by his furrowing brow that he won't be satisfied with that answer, so before he can ask, and to show him and Mom that, no, I'm not ashamed, I have nothing to be ashamed of, I tug at the knot that holds the scarf at my throat and pull it away. Instantly, I can feel everyone's eyes on my neck, and I have to struggle not to cover the bite mark with my hand.

"When?" Mom asks, a hitch in her voice.

"A year and half ago."

"And you didn't tell us?"

Her wounded tone makes me uncomfortable. I shrug. "What for? You know my job's dangerous."

I wish Theo or Paul would say something to alleviate the mood, or even Rick, but they keep quiet, and instead it's

my father who says, "From the angle of that bite, he was behind you. How did you stake him?"

"Her, actually," I mutter. "And I had help."

The last thing I want is to go into details about who helped me that night. The last thing I want is to think of Joseph. Desperately, I change topics, exclaiming how good the food I've barely touched is, then asking Rick if he told my parents about his job. After a little prodding, the conversation starts again, now on safer subjects.

For the rest of the afternoon, I can feel eyes following my every move. My mother is afraid, though she won't say anything. She refused to talk to me for three weeks when I told her I was entering the Academy to become a S.E., but she has never reproached me for my choice since. My father, I think, is a little disappointed. He likes to brag about me following up in his footsteps, but now he won't be able to say anymore that no vamp has ever laid a hand on me. I'm not sure what Rick is thinking, but he stays close to me all day, and when night falls and we go to the lake to watch the fireworks, his hand never lets go of mine.

I should feel warm and loved, but I feel lonely. Cold. The beauty exploding in myriads of colors in the sky doesn't touch me. Nothing has, not for a year and half. Not since I came so close to dying.

No, that's not true. Something did; someone. He made me feel alive again when his own life ended long ago. He made me feel warm, even though his hands and lips were cool on mine.

I sent him away.

Chapter 2

Haventown, September 25th, 2007

“Joseph?”

“Yes, sweetie?”

“Who is Sandra?”

And with these three words, the fragile card castle I’ve been building in Haventown crumbles. I can make myself not think about her, but it doesn’t change anything to the fact that she’s still there.

It’s been more than a year since I became a free vamp again. Free... Yeah, right. I don’t know if I’ll ever be free as long as she lives. A year since I became anonymous again in a big city, free to kill. And again with the: yeah, right.

I tried to kill, the night I arrived in Haventown. I went out, picked up a scent that was alluring, and hunted down a very pretty girl. She thought I was interested in a fuck; I didn’t say otherwise. We had a grand time in a not so grand room. But when it came down to killing... I bit her, no problem there. She tasted good enough, although after reheated blood for so long, anything fresh would taste good. I just couldn’t finish her. I left her unconscious, but I know she survived, and now she has one more story to tell about how her life sucks, literally. I’ve tried hunting men, but it’s not any better. I feed, but I can’t kill. I’ve tried, God knows how hard I tried, but I can’t. Because when I’m about to, I see green eyes—never anything more than eyes—looking at me with

something between disapproval and pity. And I just can't kill.

And then there's Karen. Turns out, my landlady is a vamp groupie. I found out when I came back from my first botched hunt with a few bottles and the firm intention to get drunk out of my mind. She was waiting for me, and my plans changed. She offered, and the marks I left on her shoulder weren't the first ones a vampire had given her. We've been seeing each other since then. Each other, as well as others, too. I never claimed she was the only one, and neither did she. I'm the only vamp, though. I guess there's only so much blood she can spare. We don't talk about it, and it's just as well that neither of us is asking questions that wouldn't help anything in the slightest. Until tonight.

"So?" she insists. "Who is Sandra?"

She doesn't sound jealous. There's no room for jealousy in whatever it is we have. She's simply curious. And so am I.

"Where did you hear that name?" I ask as casually as I can, but she sees right through me and smiles softly.

"Something you said last night."

I blink, and try to remember. I'm pretty certain I didn't call out her name when I came. I don't call out names. I'm very careful not to.

"While you were sleeping," she adds, seeing my frown.

I said her name while I was asleep? I said her fucking name, which I haven't said aloud since I left Cleveland, while I was asleep?

Karen is still waiting for an answer, but I don't have one to give her. That name does not mean a thing anymore, not for me, not ever again.

I get out of bed, get dressed, and storm out before she can ask again. Before she can say it again. Within three hours, I've visited four bars, emptied five bottles and picked two fights. Won both, I might add. I may be incapable of killing a stupid human being, but I still know how to use my fists to inflict a maximum of pain. Sadly, I don't escape a few blows myself, and when I'm back at her place, a full ten minutes before sunrise, I'm looking rather... bloody. It's only fitting, isn't it? Karen is waiting for me, and she insists on patching me up, even though she knows as well as I do that it's not necessary. So I keep quiet and let her clean, disinfect, and bandage. We go back to bed, and she curls around me almost protectively.

She never says Sandra's name again.

* * * *

Cleveland, October 2nd, 2007

When I entered the academy to become a Special Enforcer, I was subjected, like every new candidate, to a battery of tests that assessed my physical fitness, mental state and eventual psychic abilities. On that last front, I was a little taken aback when I was told I had minimal seer traits. Not enough to actually predict the future, they said, but enough that I should trust my instincts as much as possible.

For the past week, my instincts have been screaming more and more loudly that something is coming. Something that could potentially be very bad. It started with a knot in the pit of my stomach, and it has only been getting worse since, to the point that I've been throwing up for the past three days. I've tried meditating as I was taught to see if I could pinpoint the source of this coming threat, but every time I do, all I see is Joseph's eyes. I just know they're his. I've never known anyone else with such clear blue eyes.

For a while, I thought I needed to force him out of my mind to reach whatever lay beyond his image, but in the end I got it. As much as I wish otherwise, he is the threat I'm sensing.

"I need something of his," Theo reminds me as he spreads out his collection of map books on his desk.

I asked him this morning if he would help me localize Joseph. I may have a bit of a seer inside me, but I am useless where magic is concerned. Paul and I can only do basic disinvent spells, so Theo is the one who performs spells at the agency.

"Something of Joseph's." The knot in my belly tightens a little more. "Just... give me a sec. I'll be right back."

If he replies, I don't hear it. I'm too busy rushing to the bathroom in the back of the agency and vomiting the salad I had for lunch. Quiet steps enter behind me, and after a few seconds Paul offers me a glass of water and a cool washcloth. Still kneeling in front of the toilet, I rinse my mouth and press the washcloth to my face, grateful.

"You really think you're sick because he's planning something bad?" he asks, worry tinting his voice.

“I don’t know,” I struggle to get up, and rinse my mouth again at the sink. “I just know something big is coming, and I think it’s related to him.”

He rests his hand on my shoulder as we return to Theo’s desk. Theo raises a questioning eyebrow at me. I just nod.

“Something that belonged to him,” he reminds me.

My desk is next to Theo’s. I tug the large cardboard box from under it and place it over the files that haphazardly cover the top of the desk. I pull the top open and look in, wondering what to give Theo. He joins me and peers in.

“Is that his stuff? Where did you get it?”

I shrug, uncomfortable. “From his landlord. I went there a few days ago to see if he had heard from him, and he gave me this stuff. I think he was glad to get rid of it.”

What I don’t say is that I didn’t manage to open the box until now. I’m not too sure why. From what I understand, the night I told him to leave, he did so without going back to his apartment first. All that he left behind is in this box. I feel a bit queasy again.

Theo reaches in and pulls out a bunched up bit of fabric. I recognize it instantly. A muscle ticks in my cheek. I can imagine the feel of the dried blood that stiffens the fabric. The blood flakes on Theo’s hands. His eyes widen a little as he looks the torn piece of shirt and he glances at Paul quickly before turning his eyes to me.

“Is that his blood?” he asks.

“Mine,” I say in a strangled voice. “When I was bitten.” Of its own accord, my hand rises to touch the scars on my neck. I can’t begin to fathom why Joseph would have kept this. “That would affect the spell, wouldn’t it?”

Theo drops the fabric back inside the box and grimaces. “Yeah, it would. Why did that creep keep this anyway?”

I don’t respond. I don’t know what to respond. After a second or two, he looks inside the box again.

“Let’s see...”

This time, he grabs a small, bright red booklet. I’ve never seen it before, but I know what it is as soon as Theo opens it, revealing the small headshot picture inside.

“His passport?” I say. “Will that work?”

“It should.”

He returns to his preparations and I follow. Paul and I watch from opposite ends of the desk as Theo mixes some herbs and recites an incantation over the passport. A ball of light comes into existence and hovers above the maps that cover the table. Then suddenly, Theo falls silent and the light touches a map of California on the far left of the table. All three of us bend over it, and Theo reads the name of the town where the light settled. He sounds relieved.

“Haventown. It doesn’t look like he’s going to set fire to the river quite yet.”

I stare at the glowing light until it has faded. Haventown... The friendliest place for vampires on this continent. I was so sure my bad feeling was linked to Joseph...

"Alex?" Paul says very gently, drawing my attention back to him. "You're pale as a sheet. Are you all right?"

"I don't know," I murmur, unable to resist glancing at the map yet again. Theo is already packing up his supplies. "Could you... could you do the spell again, in a few days? Just to make sure he's not coming back?"

The look he gives me is full of pity, and far too understanding. "Anything you want, honey. But I don't think he is."

I wish his words wouldn't make my stomach lurch yet again.

I wish they didn't hurt so much.

Chapter 3

Haventown, October 10th, 2007

Since the name incident two weeks ago, I haven't been back to see Karen. Not sure why. Not sure why I'm back tonight either: habit, path of least resistance, fondness? Who knows?

She doesn't question me. I like that about her. I don't question her either, even when I notice marks that are not mine on her breast. She notices that I notice, and seems a little disappointed by my blatant lack of reaction. I wonder what she expected. The thing with expecting too much from people is that you're only setting yourself up for disappointment.

A couple of hours later, a short and well-trimmed nail is tracing patterns on my chest as I mindlessly take slow drags on my cigarette. And then her voice rises, quiet but determined.

"I want you to sire me."

I half choke on a puff of smoke and pull myself to a sitting position, dislodging her from where she was resting against my arm. She sits up, too, first pulling the sheet up to cover her chest, then thinking better of it and letting it drop as I glare at her.

"What the hell was that?"

"I want you to sire me," she repeats, unabated.

"No."

The answer is immediate, automatic. I don't even have to think about it. I've never turned anyone into a vampire, and I doubt I ever will.

"Why not?" she questions as her hand reaches to caress my back.

Because I can't kill, for one thing. Except, she doesn't know that. She never needed to know. And she still doesn't need to.

"Because your parents are decent people. It would be a pity for them to become your first meal."

"I wouldn't—" she starts, outraged, but I stop her immediately with a sharp gesture.

"Yes, you would. Without a blink or a second thought."

She doesn't seem convinced and puts on that stubborn look that has amused me so much in the past months. Not now, though. Not anymore.

"No. I love them. I would never hurt them."

I'm getting annoyed. "Love hasn't got a thing to do with it."

"Are you telling me vampires can't love?" The challenge in her eyes is clear. "I've been around enough vampires to know that's a myth."

For a half-second, I'm speechless as long gone words echo in my mind

I thought I'd grow to love you after we got married. I didn't. I want a divorce.

*Of course we can feel love, Childe. I just don't love **you**.*

There's nothing. I didn't feel anything.

"No," I lie through my teeth. "We can't love. We fuck, we kill, we hurt other people and ourselves, but we don't love."

"So you don't love her," she continues, unyielding. "You don't love Sand—"

Before she can finish that sentence, I pounce on her and pin her to the bed with a hand to her neck. My fangs extend before I even know it, and I snarl at her.

"You want to die? Fine. Die."

I dive for her throat, and she doesn't move. She cries out when I tear into her flesh, and her hands shoot to my head, but instead of trying to free herself, she just pulls me closer. Her blood seems bitter on my tongue, but I keep pulling on it until the hold of her fingers on my hair weakens.

I stop. She passed out. My mouth still on the punctures, I lave the bite with my tongue, and slowly close the wound. She looks like she's sleeping, like she's dead. She's not dead, though. And she won't die tonight, not because of me. She might die tomorrow at another's fangs, but that's none of my business, not anymore.

I find the first aid kit she always has in the room and tend to her neck, a final exchange of favors, I guess. I dress quickly and get ready to leave before the sun

becomes a problem, but somehow I can't leave without a word. Not again.

On a piece of paper, I scribble a note, place it in her hand, and then I leave.

*I lied. We can love. But it's not worth it.
Just like nothing is worth losing the light you have in
you.
Take care of yourself, sweetie.*

I don't know where I'm headed. I just know where I'm not staying, and not going back. Thankfully, there's quite a bit of space between Haventown and Cleveland.

* * * *

Cleveland, November 5th, 2007

I watch intently, and sure enough, the second little blue line appears.

With shaky hands, I dispose of the test, and run some cold water in the sink. I watch the flow for a few seconds, mind blank, still not understanding. I finally snap out of it and wash my hands before pressing my wet palms against my cheeks. My eyes focus on my reflection in the mirror, and suddenly, at last, the line and its meaning crash down on me. It explains also why I've been feeling so sick lately, and that feeling that something big is about to happen.

I'm pregnant.

I'm not sure if I should panic or smile. My reflection looks stuck somewhere between the two.

Pregnant. How could this happen? OK, I know *how*, what I mean is... I don't know, it just feels so weird. I never even thought about having a child. Or rather, I thought about it when I almost died. And at the time, the idea felt as strange and impossible as it does now. Except that now, it's not just an idea, not just a possibility in the distant future: if I live long enough, if I find the right person, if the time is right... It's the 'right here, in nine months or less' kind of deal. It's scary. How am I going to raise a child? I'm going to be a terrible mother. And my job? How can I make my rounds and fight if I'm pregnant? What about after? What about if I get killed and leave the baby to be an orphan and—

It's not scary; it's terrifying.

And at the same time, it's one of the most wonderful things that ever happened to me. For once, instead of killing, I'm going to create life. For once, instead of feeling so dead inside, I actually start to feel alive.

There are tears in the mirror, but the smile that is there also says they are happy tears.

Suddenly, Rick's face flashes through my mind, and I feel almost guilty about not having thought of him until now. He is going to be surprised, because this certainly wasn't planned, but I'm sure he will be happy, too. I've heard him say more than once how he loved being part of a big family—he has four siblings—and how he wanted to have several kids of his own someday, too. Well, the someday is going to be sooner than either of us thought. I can't wait to tell him. Things have been a little tense lately. With my feeling that something was coming, I've been on edge. I guess being pregnant didn't make my mood any better. We haven't been arguing, not really,

but I've caught that light in his gaze more than once, like a question he didn't ask, like a doubt he wouldn't voice. This should quell his doubts about us, I'm sure.

Time passes too slowly as I wait for the afternoon to end and for Rick to come back. Finally, soon-to-be-daddy arrives. I take his hand and lead him to the sofa, and he smiles as he asks me what's going on. I take a deep breath.

"You know, that big family you were talking about? Well, we got an early start."

He looks a bit puzzled, so I guess I haven't been quite clear enough. "I'm pregnant." I can't help it. I chuckle at the bewildered look on his face.

"Pregnant?" he says when he finally finds his voice again. "How can that be? I mean, we've always..."

His voice trails off in confusion, and I take his hand in mine.

"Not always," I remind him. "There have been a couple of times..."

He nods. "Sorry about that."

And with these three words, the temperature in the room instantly drops to freezing.

"So," he says uneasily, his eyes clearly avoiding mine. "What are we going to do about it?"

"What are we going to do?" I repeat, completely numb.

"I mean, it's probably better if we deal with it as soon as possible. Easier for you, too."

"Deal?"

I seem to be stuck on repeat mode. I just can't figure out what is going on here. He can't be suggesting what I think he is suggesting, can he?

"You said you wanted a bunch of kids," I manage to force the words out.

Pulling his hand free, he stands and runs his fingers through his hair, the gesture reminding me of someone who has absolutely no place in this discussion.

"I do," he says. "But not now. Not so soon. We're too young to have a child, Alexandra."

Too young? I'm thirty-two, he is twenty-eight. That's too young? Instinctively, both my hands come to rest on my belly. Does the growing being in there think that I'm too young? It doesn't feel like it.

"You can't ask me to... deal with it," I say in a shaking voice, not even able to say the word.

"And you can't ask me to just be ready because you've decided that you are," he shoots back, and there's something that looks very much like suspicion in his eyes now.

"I did not decide anything," I deny the unvoiced accusation. "It just happened. And for better or for worse, I will have this child."

He nods once more, and gives me a sad little smile. "I guess you're right," he said quietly. "*You* will have it. Because that's what *you* have decided, and you always do what you want, don't you? When have you ever cared about what I thought? Go ahead, have that baby if that's what you want. But it will be yours, Alexandra. Only yours."

My mind is still refusing to understand what he means when he adds, the pain clear in his voice as he avoids my gaze again: "I'll get some of my stuff for the night. I'll come back to get the rest tomorrow."

And just like that, he walks out of my life. Another man walks away from me.

I manage to restrain myself until I hear the front door open and close, and his car leave. And then I let go. I grab a pillow on the sofa, bury my face in it and let the tears out. I don't know how long I stay there, crying out until there are just no tears anymore, and eventually it's just dry sobs rocking my body.

All my life, I've prided myself on being strong, on being able to take care of myself. Where did that strength go? Sometimes, it feels it just disappeared when that vamp sank his fangs in my neck and almost killed me. It feels so much like I've lost something that I can barely bear it anymore.

I want to ask someone, ask the world, why this keeps happening to me, why I can't be happy, why he left... and then some part of me realizes that this 'he' I'm crying over is not the man who refused to be a father to my child. And the realization only brings out a fresh flow of tears.

Chapter 4

Cleveland, January 12th, 2008

According to my doctor, I've entered my second trimester. I've decided to finally tell everyone.

When I went down to Columbus for Christmas, Mom asked what happened with Rick. Theo had asked the same thing three weeks earlier, with an offer to work up a bit of vengeful magic if I only said the word. To both, I gave the same answer. Rick and I weren't at the same point in life, and we wanted different things from a relationship. It was the truth, if only part of it.

The past two months have been a little rough at times, but I'm doing better. I'm happy to be pregnant, but I've needed to do some serious thinking about my life, about where I am, where I want to be, and how raising a child alone changes that. I've made some decisions—not easy ones, but I think I'll be OK with my choices. It's time to let everyone know.

It's the middle of the afternoon when my boss, Marty, strolls into the agency. He's a few years older than my dad, and has run roughly the same course: the Academy straight out of school, working for others then for himself, hiring younger S.E.s when he got too old to run out at night. The only thing he hasn't done is sell off the agency, although now and then he starts thinking aloud on how it might soon be time to get his name off the awning.

He taps the snow off his boots in the entrance and opens his coat zipper, revealing a round belly that probably only started bulging when he stopped going out to hunt.

He pulls his gloves and scarf off but keeps his winter hat on. A few words to Paul and Theo about the nasty weather we've been having, the usual inquiry about what we've been hunting lately, and then he walks to my desk. The chair gives an ominous creak when he sits.

"You wanted to talk to me, Alex?" he says, almost jovial.

For a second, just a second, the words freeze in my throat and I wonder—am I doing the right thing? Being a S.E. is all I ever wanted to do. Will I be all right if I leave that part of me behind?

I clench my fists beneath my desk and push forward. I will have to be.

"Thanks for coming," I say, trying to push a smile to my lips. "I wanted to tell you in person that I'm quitting."

He watches me with big, round eyes and says nothing, as though expecting the punch line of a joke. I am hyperaware that the office is deadly silent suddenly, and I know that if I look, I'll find Paul and Theo staring at me, as surprised as Marty is. This is as new to them as it is to him. Just last night, the three of us hunted together. There have been a few suspicious deaths around the Cleveland Museum of Art recently and from what we've heard, a clan that just arrived in town is to blame. We found a few leads last night and we were going to follow them tonight. They'll have to do it without me.

"Is it that Columbus agency?" Marty erupts suddenly, his smile and good humor replaced by irritation. "Did they offer you a job? They've been trying to take magic business from us and now—"

“No, no,” I say, extending a hand palm out toward him. “It’s not that. I just can’t keep putting my life on the line.” I take a deep breath and say it at last. I finally voice the little secret I’ve kept for myself ever since it sent Rick packing. “I’m pregnant.”

Once again, Marty’s eyes betray his surprise. I don’t even want to know what Theo’s and Paul’s expressions are. After a few seconds, Marty stands and walks around my desk, arms open as widely as his smile.

“Congratulations!” he bellows with a joyous laugh. “What wonderful news!”

I can’t suppress a grin when he draws me to my feet for a big hug that I return heartily. Over his shoulder, I dare to look at my friends. Paul’s smile is wide, and he’s already walking in for his turn at hugging me. Theo doesn’t move. He doesn’t say anything, only looks at me thoughtfully. He still doesn’t talk when Marty offers me a desk job and I refuse. Desk jobs in S.E. agencies are for people who can do magic: localization spells and the like. That’s not for me. I’d be bored silly by the end of my first day if I accepted Marty’s offer. By the end of the week, I’d be itching to go back to the hunt. It’s not that I don’t want to keep working here; I can’t.

Theo still says nothing when Paul and Marty question me about what I plan to do now. My eyes dart toward him a couple of times as I tell them I worked in a clothes store when I was in high school and plan to do that again. They seem happy with that answer, even if deep down I’m not.

It’s only after Marty has left to make phone calls to find a replacement for me and Paul has gone to meet an informant at a bar in the Flats, that Theo pushes away

from his desk and comes to mine. He picks up the chair that survived Marty's considerable weight, turns it around and straddles it. Arms resting on the back of the chair, he scrutinizes me.

"What's up?" I ask, uncomfortable.

"Are you happy?"

His question surprises me so much that a couple of seconds pass before the smile comes to my lips. "Of course I'm happy. I'm going to be a mom!"

He gives a slight shake of head. "I'm sure you'll be great," he says. "But... a sales job?"

I shrug. "It's not like I have other qualifications."

There's a hint of defensiveness in my words, and I know he can hear it. We've known each other for so long, sometimes I think he knows me better than my parents do. The reverse is true, too, and usually I can tell what he thinks, but his expression now reveals nothing.

"How long until you're back here?" he asks after a moment.

Why is he making this hard for me? "I can't—" I start, but he cuts in.

"I know, I get it."

I must look less than convinced because he adds, more urgently now, "I really do, Alex. If I had a kid and I was raising him alone, I'd take a hard look at my job, too. But—"

I close my eyes, and he stops abruptly. I hear the scraping of the chair's feet on the wooden floor and a few slow steps. When I open my eyes again, he's next to me.

"Are you happy?" he asks again.

I don't even try to smile this time. "It's not going to be easy. But I will be."

He nods. We hug. He kisses my cheek, and I let out a quiet laugh so I won't start crying.

"I know this great spell," he says, tongue in cheek, when I pull away. "Rick will never know what hit him."

I laugh again, but this time it rings true.

I finish the day by cleaning out my desk. It doesn't take long. A lot of it is files that belong to the agency, hunting reports and research about known vamps. What I do pack are a few stakes, a crossbow, a couple of knives and a sword. I don't intend to use these again, but they're mine. My father gave me the sword the day I graduated from the Academy. My throat always tightens when I remember how proud he was.

I carry the small box to my car, then the box of Joseph's things that I've kept beneath my desk for months. His life doesn't weigh much more than mine. I wonder what he would think if he knew I'm not a S.E. anymore.

The thought takes me by surprise and I stop, freezing on the sidewalk. What do I care what Joseph would think? What does it matter what a vampire thinks about my life?

I drive home angry: with Theo for asking such insightful questions, with Rick for abandoning our child before they were even born, and with Joseph for not seeing I was lying. Angry with myself. I shove the weapons box in a closet. I have time to find a more secure place for it before little hands grow curious. Joseph's box almost ends up on the curbside as trash. I can't make myself throw it away, though. He might return, some day, and want some of the things back. At least, that's what I tell myself.

Deep down, I don't think getting a few books, a stained shirt or his passport would be high on his list if he ever came back, and I guess that's why I keep my weapons where I can get to them quickly.

In the end, I put the box away in the attic.

* * * *

Las Vegas, May 30th, 2008

There's something about Vegas that intrigues me, annoys me, fascinates me and infuriates me all at once. And I can't put my finger on what it is.

I've been here for a few months already. Sleeping in my car when I'm unlucky, in someone else's room when I pick up a fuck and feed, and in palace suites when my luck comes back. Which has been pretty much all the time, lately. Having a great lot of fun. Booze, money, sex and blood, what else can a vamp ask for?

It's the longest time I've remained in one place since I left Haventown. I stayed in Miami for a couple of weeks; there were many tourists there, and many people willing

to try a wild ride in a vampire's arms. That was... interesting at first, but soon boring. Other towns, other games. Never a kill. I don't even try anymore.

Alexandra has defanged me better than the fear of being killed ever did. I hate her for that. I hate her because she wouldn't even believe me if I told her. I hate her because she threw me out of her life, and I can't return the favor. I hate her because I can't even manage to really hate her.

"Sir? Your bet."

I snap back to the present: the cards in my hands, the chips in front of me, the dealer urging me to play. I do. And win.

I stop for the night, before my internal ramblings cause me to lose everything I've won so far. It has happened before. I change the chips into cash, get a room—northern exposure: the red-haired beauty at the counter knows my preferences—and go for a hunt, if I can even call it a hunt. There's only one requirement as I wander through the crowded casino and let my eyes find someone suitable. Not a shorthaired blonde. Other than that, anything goes. Like this brunette trying her luck at a slot machine. I observe her for a while, imagining what her life is like when she's not throwing money away in Vegas. She's a tourist; that much is evident from her scent. There's a tattoo on her shoulder, only partially visible under her tank top, and I can't help but wonder what the full design is. If I play well, I might find out soon.

As I watch, two more girls in their early twenties come up, and they talk to her for a couple of minutes. It looks like her friends want to go to another casino, but she

likes it here. I can hear her say that she feels she's going to get lucky soon, and that just makes me smile. When the other two girls are gone, I come up right behind her, and at the moment she's going to put one more coin in the slot, I put one of mine instead, while whispering in her ear that it's a lucky coin. She shrugs and plays, and I don't know which of us is more surprised when she does win. Only a thousand dollars, nothing to get really excited about, but her eyes are wide when she turns to look at me. I play it cool, smile just enough, and when the tip of her tongue moistens her lips nervously, I know I still have it.

I offer to buy her a drink, and soon I'm listening with one ear as she tells me about college life and being on vacation and the small, senseless things that make up her life. It's very boring, and very safe. Nothing in her words could make me think about—

Right. Not thinking about her.

My tourist tells me my eyes are beautiful, and gets a grin for her trouble. She asks questions, too, and I either elude them or lie. She'll be gone tomorrow; she doesn't need to know a thing about me. Nothing more than the fact that I am interested, and my room number. We get in the elevator together and start making out right there. Her legs are around my waist and my hands are on her ass when the elevator stops. I carry her to my room, fumbling with the magnetic card to open my door as she nibbles on my ear. I guess she has a thing for biting—

"You're a monster!"

Or maybe she doesn't. There's a mirror inside my room just by the door. Most rooms have one. It's the most

basic warning device against vampires if someone is too slow to notice the lack of heat, and it worked just the way it's intended to. She noticed my lack of reflection as I was carrying her in, and she knows what it means.

I'm not ashamed of what I am, I've never been ashamed, but her surprised cry chills me to the bone. That, and the look in her eyes as she pulls away, lust and disgust mixed into one. I've seen that look before in bright green eyes. I hoped never to see it again.

She rushes out of the room, and I don't make a move to stop her. The door closes with a bang behind her.

Hands buried in my pockets, I step over to the window and press my forehead to the cool glass. At my feet, the city is brighter than it is even at midday, drowning out the night and stars with artificial lights. The idea builds up slowly, at first a simple desire for change that grows until the bubble bursts and fills me with certainty.

I'm leaving Vegas.

I'm leaving the country.

I've never been to Europe. Time to expand my horizons. Yes, that's the place for me right now. Half a world away. Far, very far, from anything that would remind me of an annoying green-eyed blonde. As soon as I have enough money, I'm leaving.

I'll need to make a little stop in Ohio first, and then I'll be on my way.

* * * *

Cleveland, June 4th, 2008

Nine months. The better part of a year. Who would have thought it would pass so fast? Not me. The year before seemed to last a century, but I feel like it was only yesterday that I realized I was pregnant. Time has a strange ability to expand and contract without rhyme or reason.

The months have flown by, even though my days have seemed very long since I found my new job. I'm good enough at it, I suppose, but being good at it doesn't mean I enjoy it. It's all right, though. I try not to think about vampires too often. Mostly, when I do, it's to worry about Joseph.

I'm still a little afraid that he will come back and pick a fight with me. I can't help it, I know too well what vampires can do. And now that Marian is here, I can't help but worry even more. It's silly, I'm sure. He must have forgotten me by now. Not that there was much to forget. And if he had wanted me dead, he could have tried to kill me before leaving. I guess being afraid of him is safer for my sanity than missing him.

Another thing I worry too much about is money. The store job doesn't pay as much as being a S.E, but I'm doing OK. After the initial shock of learning they would soon have a grandchild, my parents have shown their support in any way they could think of. They came up to Cleveland to help me transform the guest bedroom into a nursery. They've bought enough baby clothes that I won't need to use my store discount for at least a year. They've offered... they've offered too much, I guess, and I had to learn to say "No, thanks" as nicely and firmly as I could. I decided to raise my child as a single mother,

and while I appreciate the help I am given, while I'm grateful for it, I guess I also feel... guilty? I'm not sure that's the word. What I am sure about is that I don't want my parents' retirement funds to dry out early because they've spent too much on their granddaughter. It'll be hard to stop them, though, especially now that they've seen Marian.

Marian Olivia Rowe. She was born yesterday afternoon, although she wasn't expected to arrive until next week. My mom and dad were supposed to come up from Columbus tomorrow and spend the last week of my pregnancy with me, but all they could do was get in the car when I called them. So much for our careful planning about who would drive me to the hospital or who would be in the room with me. I wasn't able to contact Theo or Paul either. I ended up calling a cab to get to the hospital. I have this feeling that when she grows up she's going to do exactly what she wants despite what anyone else tells her—won't that be fun? When they all finally arrived at the hospital, she was already there, and there was nothing left to do but stare in awe at the beauty that is my daughter. Just like I am staring now as I hold her in my arms.

She has very thin light brown hair, the cutest nose, ten fingers and ten toes—I counted. She's gorgeous and perfect. And she has the most startling blue eyes, like two windows open on an ocean right before a storm. That puzzled me at first, since neither Rick nor I have blue eyes. My mom reminded me of my grandfather's gorgeous blue eyes, and the doctor pointed out that the color of her eyes might change during the next few months.

I hope they will remain blue.

Chapter 5

Cleveland, June 25th, 2008

Clouds drift above me, hiding the moon and stars intermittently. When I was a Special Enforcer, I'd always spend too much time with my nose up in the air, watching the sky. Theo would scold me when he caught me doing it. Stargazing is for children and dreamers, he'd say. Not for people who are looking for killers.

I could look at the sky tonight. I could look at the sky any night. I'm not a Special Enforcer anymore. I'm a salesperson. A good one at that, too. When I returned to work after my maternity leave, the manager called me into her office. She offered me the post of assistant manager and a raise. I guess I'm better at it than I thought I'd be. It means longer hours, but for the most part I can make my own schedule. That's helpful as Ellie, my neighbor's youngest daughter and now my babysitter, is a full time student at Cleveland State. She studies photography, and I've let her set up a dark room in my basement as part of her babysitting fees. When Marian's older, I'll find her a place in a good daycare. When she's older, I...

I don't know what I'll do when she's older. I don't know how I ever thought I could do this alone. I don't know if I'm doing anything right anymore.

My mom stayed with me the first couple of weeks. She showed me everything: how to feed her, change her diapers, bathe her, make her sleep, make her stop crying. But when she left, everything that had seemed so simple became not so simple anymore, far from it. My mom is just a telephone call away. The neighbor had

three children of her own and offered to help. Still, every time I have to ask either of them a question, I feel like such a failure. I've bought one of those 'Babies for Dummies' books. The thing is, I rarely ever have time to read it. Between taking care of Marian and working, I barely have time to sleep, let alone read books. Ellie's a great help; she's wonderful with babies. Paul even babysat once for me. In the end, though, it feels like I'm always running, always late, always doing something wrong. And always so very tired.

Even when I was a Special Enforcer and staying up half the night, I was never so tired. At least then I felt like I knew what I was doing. I miss it. I miss feeling like I'm helping to keep others safe. I miss looking up at the stars and finding beauty everywhere. I came out to look at the sky tonight, but as soon as I sat down on the back porch, I started crying my heart out.

I don't know how long I've been here. I don't know why I can't stop. I don't even know why I'm crying. I don't know why I cry every night. I'm just tired, and scared, and did I mention tired?

I love my daughter. She's the most beautiful, most wonderful thing that ever happened to me. That's why I'm so afraid to do anything wrong with her. She's so small and fragile, and I barely know how to take care of her. Sometimes, I'm not even sure I know how to take care of myself anymore.

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I did not intend to see her when I came back. All I wanted was my passport. I was an idiot to leave town without it two years ago. Of course, I really wasn't thinking at the time. I wasn't in any state to think.

My old landlord did a double take when I showed up on his doorstep. In between his muttering and half-apologies, I understood that he had believed me dead. I can't fault him on that. It's not uncommon for vampires to disappear without goodbyes, and when they do it usually means they've been staked by a S.E. or are running from one. For a moment, I thought I'd need to have my passport redone, which is a pain. That kind of paperwork takes months for vampires. And then, I listened more closely to what he was saying and I could hardly believe my ears. He hadn't trashed my stuff. He had put it all in a box, and given it to the first person who had come looking for me. He described a pretty, blonde S.E., and I knew immediately. Alexandra had my passport, as well as whatever else I had left in my apartment.

Waiting a few weeks or months for a new passport didn't seem so bad suddenly, not if the alternative was having to talk to her. I didn't want to see her again. I had no reason to. It would be the worst possible thing I could do to go to her now.

For a few minutes, my mind was set, and I was rather happy to find myself so strong. But then...

I started walking, intending to relax for a while before I got back in my car. I'd go to a blood bar and feed, and then I'd be out of Cleveland again. At least that was the plan. I did go to a blood bar. Then a second one. Then two dance clubs. And now I'm on my way to that strip bar where half the clientele and half the performers are vamps. I haven't fed, nor have I had a drop of alcohol, and it's not adult entertainment I'm after.

It's a stupid idea to be looking for her. She could be anywhere in town. Even if I found her, she might not be too happy to see me. I doubt she'd stake me without proof that I'm a killer, but—

I freeze mid-step. Slowly, I turn my head, listening intently. I could have sworn—

There it is again. I could recognize these sounds anywhere. People are fighting in the next street over, which runs behind the strip club. A fight here could mean Special Enforcers and vampires. It could be her.

My hopes are short-lived. When I turn into the cul-de-sac, I find the source of the noise. It is indeed a fight, and judging by the broken crossbow at my feet and the camouflage outfit worn by the human a few yards away, a S.E. is fighting a vampire as I expected. But I don't recognize the dark haired young man struggling to push back the vamp that is attacking him.

I have half a mind to leave the S.E., whoever he may be, to his fate. If he can't fight any better than this, he won't last long anyway. Something annoys me about the vampire, though. The Special Enforcer lost his weapon, but the vamp still hasn't managed to pin him down. They're both pitiful, but it's vamps like this one that give the rest of us a bad reputation.

Before long, I find myself striding to the fight. Maybe the kid will be able to tell me if Alexandra is around.

"Why don't you leave him alone," I say, loud enough to be heard over the sounds of the scuffle. "If it's a fight you want, I can give you one."

The vamp looks at me; he seems like little more than a fledgling. “Why don’t you mind your own business?” he asks, sounding annoyed at the interruption. “If you weren’t one of us—”

“I am most certainly not one of whatever you think you are,” I interrupt him with a snort. “I am a vampire.”

A flick of my wrist, and the stake flies straight to his heart. I was a pretty good shot back when I was a S.E., and vampire reflexes only added to my skills.

“And you,” I continue with a grin, “are nothing but dust.”

The kid whose life I probably saved looks at me with confusion. “You’re a vampire,” he says, and I’m not sure whether it’s a question or statement. He wipes the blood trickling from his nose, but almost immediately the rivulet is back.

Before I can answer that he should consider a new line of employment or ask if he knows Alexandra, two more S.E.s rush out of the club’s back door and into the alley between the kid and me. One holds a crossbow and the other has a hand on the hilt of the sword hanging from his belt. They look at the kid first, then at me. The crossbow rises in my direction.

“You shouldn’t have come back, Joseph,” the one with the crossbow says—Theo, I think his name is.

To my surprise, the kid shakes off his confusion and steps forward, a palm held out toward Theo. “No, he didn’t...” His voice shakes. He gulps and starts again. “He helped me. That vamp was trying to kill me, and he helped me.”

The crossbow wavers for a second, but it keeps pointing at my chest. Theo is not convinced, that much is clear. He glances at his partner—Pat? No, Paul—and they exchange a meaningful look and a shrug. I'm losing patience fast.

"Is Alexandra around?"

They glance at each other again but don't reply. I look at the kid, a nagging feeling taking hold of me. Did they hire him to replace Alexandra? Is she—

I speak before I even know it, and hearing the words aloud startles me. "Is she dead?"

"Why do you ask?" A savage smile curls Theo's lips. "So you can dance a jig on her tomb?"

I growl. "You know nothing about me. Now answer. Is she dead?"

It's Paul who finally replies. "She's not. But she doesn't want to see you."

I snort. The feeling is mutual. I don't have a choice, though. And since she has that box of my stuff, neither does she.

"Is she patrolling?"

"That's none of your business," Theo snaps, and I interpret it as: "No, she's not."

I've had enough. I'll try her home, and if she's not there, I'll find a way to track her down.

I move backwards, stepping away from the three Special Enforcers without turning my back on them until I'm out of the alley. I remember the talk they gave me when they realized I was interested in Alexandra. Good for her that she's got surrogate big brothers, but she can take care of herself, and she doesn't need them to meddle. Or at least, that used to be true. Why isn't she patrolling?

The question courses through my mind all the way to her home on the west side of Cleveland. I can imagine a few possibilities to why she's not a S.E. anymore. Maybe she got hurt—badly hurt. Maybe her boytoy decided the job was too dangerous for her, and she agreed so they'd stay together. Maybe *she* decided the job was too dangerous. I don't know which of these options I like the least. They all make me want to gag.

Nothing could have prepared me for this, though, and I don't have a fucking clue about what to do now. I walked up her driveway, intending to knock on her kitchen window as I did a dozen times or so a couple of years back, but I don't need to knock. She's right there, sitting on the porch steps. I wasn't trying to be stealthy in the least, but she still hasn't noticed me. I've been right here, watching her, for a good ten minutes now, and she hasn't picked up that I'm here. All she does is sit there and cry.

I can see the tiny shudders that shake her body, can hear the muffled sounds of her sobs as she tries to stifle them. It just goes on and on, and I still don't know what to do.

Her crying is none of my business. She is none of my business. She made that clear the night I left. So why should it be any different now? I've spent the last two

and a half years getting over her. I'm not falling back in the pit, not now, not when I have my plane ticket for Paris two nights from now. No, I don't want to know why she's crying. I don't care. She is not part of my life anymore. She is *not*.

There comes a time when I can't take it anymore. I pull out my cigarettes, and if I need to zap my lighter five times before finally lighting one, I can't say it's an accident. On my third try, she raises her head. On the fourth, she blinks. On the fifth, she stands.

She wipes her cheeks with the back of her hand, but she doesn't move any more than that. She's just looking at me blankly as I step closer, and I force a grin to my lips around the cigarette. She has changed a little since I left. Her hair is longer. She is even thinner than before, unhealthily so. And there's something in her eyes, in her whole face, that seems older, exhausted. Or it might just be the traces left by her tears.

"You shouldn't have come back, Joseph. There's nothing for you here."

I frown and cock my head as I take a long drag on my cigarette. I didn't expect her to welcome me with open arms, but that's a bit harsh, even for her. It makes me wonder even more what's up with her, and—

No, I won't ask her why she's not patrolling, why she was crying, why her eyes are dead. I don't need to know, don't want to know, don't want to care, can't care, can't let myself care. I'll be gone in two days, and that's the end of it. I won't come back to this country until I'm completely sure that she's gone for good.

"There *is* something for me here," I say, keeping my voice as neutral as I can. "My passport. I've been told you have it. I need it back."

* * * *

"Alex? Alex, if you're there you really need to pick up."

Theo's voice has just a hint of fear to it. I can't remember when I last saw him scared. I wait for the message to continue.

"I guess you're not there. Listen, call me as soon as you get this. Joseph is back in town, and he's asking about you. He doesn't have an invite to your house, does he? If he does I can fix that in a snap. Just give me a call. Please."

My mind is blank when I press the delete button. Should I call Theo back? It's late. I'm tired, and it's not like I'm in any danger. I think I'll wait—

The phone starts ringing. A glance at the display tells me it's Theo calling back. I think of letting the machine pick up, but I know him. He'd just keep calling until I pick up, and he'd end up waking Marian. I pick up and try not to sigh.

"Hey Theo. What's up?"

"Did you get my message?" The fear is still there.

"I did, just now. The house is safe, and we're all right."

A couple of seconds pass in silence before he says, the words slow and careful, "Are you sure? You sound—"

"I've got a bad cold," I cut, and wince at how sharp my tone is. "Listen, Theo, I really appreciate you calling me to warn me—" It's just too late. "—and I'll let you know if I see him."

He asks if I've still got stakes—of course, I do—and suggest I warn the babysitter—of course, I will—and I finally manage to get off the phone. As I hang up, I stare at nothing for a minute or two. I'm not sure why I didn't tell him Joseph had come by already. No, not just that. I lied to him. Just like I lied to Joseph when I told him I didn't know where his passport was and that I'd need a bit of time to find it. He believed me and left after that.

I shake myself off and go up to the second floor. A peek into Marian's room assures me she's still asleep. I'm tired. I should be going to bed. And yet, without really thinking about what I'm doing, I find myself climbing the narrower staircase up to the attic. I haven't been here in a while, but I find the box easily enough. I pull it under the light and kneel next to it. I run a palm across the top to dust it off, then pull the sides open.

The first thing I see, right on top, is the passport. I pick it up and flip it open. There are only a couple of stamps inside it. Canada and Mexico, both more than fifteen years ago. Did he really come back for this?

I set the passport aside and look in again, like I did the first time I truly searched the box. A few books and a handful of CDs don't say much about his tastes other than they are eclectic. Hard rock, classical music and jazz. A few books of contemporary poems, a Stephen King novel and a fantasy one that looks like it might have been written for teens rather than a vamp who is

well past three quarters of a century. A satin ribbon marks the page in the Stephen King novel.

There's also a knife, tucked in a leather sheath with two thin laces that could wrap around a forearm or an ankle. Two letters are engraved in the blade. J. L. When I first saw them, I started wondering if Danner was truly his last name.

Beneath that, three pairs of jeans and as many shirts and t-shirts. No underwear. I remember wondering, the first time I looked through the box, whether he owned none or whether the landlord hadn't cared to pack them. Everything Joseph owned can't possibly be in this box, can it?

The rest is just knick-knacks, little things that mean nothing to me, but I'm sure they all have a special meaning to Joseph. Somehow, I don't think he's the kind of person to surround himself with meaningless junk.

Then again, he does have in his possession a piece of fabric that can't possibly serve any purpose. My fingers ghost over the torn bit of shirt, and part of me is surprised that my fingers don't come away stained with my own blood—God, was it two and a half years ago, already? Without thinking, I touch the bite marks on my neck, and again I'm a little surprised to find that they're scarred, not bleeding. It seems that it was only yesterday that he saved my life. Tonight, he barely even looked at me.

"And that's a good thing," I say aloud, as though voicing the words would give them more weight.

Of course it's a good thing that he doesn't care about me. I've known from the start that there was killing in

his past. I remember looking him up in the Special Enforcer database the day after I first learned his name. I had noticed him in town before that, in blood bars mostly, but a description is rarely enough to find a vamp in the database. I figured I'd need to do some investigating, and then one night he just approached me, and he said...

I think I'll always remember what he said. It was silly and corny, and I shouldn't have laughed, but I did.

"The name's Joseph. Joseph Danner. Two Ns. Why don't you look me up in the big book of bad vamps, and then next time I see you, you'll know I don't bite and we can have a drink."

I did look him up. I did find him. His information sheet wasn't as clean as he'd claimed. According to information he gave to the Vampire Citizen Administration Services, probably to get a passport, he was born in the 1920's and sired in the 1950's. He didn't give a city of residence or occupation before his siring, but then those aren't mandatory. Entries from several Special Enforcers over the country added that over the years he'd been sighted with a known killer who used the name Stephanie or a dozen derivatives of it. She was believed to be his Sire. Several times in the past fifty years, he was investigated by Special Enforcers who believed him to be killing, but they never caught him red-fanged. It was probably the only reason he was still alive.

The next time we met, he did offer me a drink. I refused. For the next five months, he turned up every few nights as I patrolled, always offering me that drink I had sworn to myself I wouldn't accept. I even felt a bit insulted when Theo and Paul noticed I had a stalker and

asked if I needed help dealing with him. I knew better than to see him as anything other than a vampire.

And then... I touch the stained fabric again. My fingers still come up clean.

And then he saved my life.

I kissed him for the first time two months later. And four months after that, I asked him to leave.

I asked him to leave because I thought he might be in love with me, and I couldn't let that happen. A vampire in love with a Special Enforcer? That sounded like a recipe for disaster. It still does. But I don't think there's any risk of that left. I saw the look in his eyes tonight. I heard his voice when he was talking to me. I noticed the way he acted toward me. All of it, all of him, screamed his indifference.

I'd almost rather have full-blown hatred and attempts against my life than this cold nothingness. Almost.

I close the box again and return to the second floor, leaving the past behind me but taking the passport down. I put it aside, just like I put aside thoughts of Joseph and why he needs a passport.

As tired as I am, I don't sleep well, even before Marian wakes up hungry in the middle of the night. I am still yawning the next day when Ellie comes in with her laptop under one arm and a pile of books under the other.

"Paper to write?" I ask as I let her in.

She walks into the living room and places everything on the coffee table. "A couple of them, yes."

"At least it's the end of the semester and you'll be on vacation soon, right?"

She gives a quiet chuckle. "Not quite. The summer session is about to start. Shorter semester but longer classes." Her good mood fades, and she grimaces. "Speaking of which..."

I try not to react when she explains she'll need to cut her babysitting hours. That means I'll need to cut my work hours as well. My boss isn't going to be happy.

I think she feels a bit guilty, because when I ask if she has plans for the night, she hesitates before saying she's going out with friends, then adds very quickly, "But I can cancel if you need me."

"Just an hour or so after nightfall. And if I could bring Marian to you instead of you coming here, it'd be great."

Her eyebrows rise in surprise, and she smiles knowingly. "Boyfriend?"

I can't even manage a smile. "Not exactly, no."

It's only after I've left for work that I realize I haven't warned her about Joseph. I think about calling her. He can't go there during the day, and I'll be there tonight. What's left of the Special Enforcer in me is unhappy—Vampires are never safe. *Never*.—but I push the thought away, for the same reason I didn't tell Theo he'd come to my house.

It's not just any vampire. It's Joseph.

Chapter 6

Cleveland, June 26th, 2008

The sun hasn't set for more than a half hour when I park in front of her house. As I walk up her driveway, I can't help wondering if, like last night, I'll find her crying on her back porch. I haven't slept much today. Instead, I've wondered a lot. What could have made her cry like this? Did she really quit her job? Why would she? I could have sworn she'd be a Special Enforcer all her life—until she died at a vamp's fangs, or started teaching younglings how to last as long as she did.

I refuse to ask these questions, but that doesn't stop me from wondering.

She's not on the back porch when I get there. As I climb the three steps, I can immediately see that the kitchen door is propped open. Stepping quietly up to the door, I look in. She's in front of the kitchen counter, her back to me. Her hands are on either side of her on the countertop, gripping tight. Her head is bowed. A knot tightens in my throat.

"You're not crying again, are you?"

She jumps and turns around, eyes wide but dry, her heartbeat suddenly thundering. As she moves aside, I can see, behind her, what she was looking at: the slowly filling coffee pot. She crosses her arms as I look at her, and I am struck again by the realization of how thin she has become. I can't stop the words that escape my lips.

"You look like a stick, Alexandra. Ever heard of something called food?"

She blinks very slowly, then her eyes narrow, and she glares at me. “What is clear is that *you* have never heard of tact.”

I shrug. “Vampire here, remember? Tact’s not required for the job.”

I still can’t take my eyes off her. She’s changed so much, even more than I thought yesterday. Her cheeks are sunken, and there’s a frailty about her that wasn’t there before.

She rolls her eyes at me and grabs something from the kitchen island. She takes three steps to the door, so close that I could touch her—if I had ever been invited in her house, that is. She holds out the small, red booklet that holds my future, extending it just past the invisible barrier that separates us. I take it, and for a second we’re both holding it. If there’s any emotion in her eyes, on her face, I can’t see it. She lets go and steps back.

“There. You can leave now.”

She moves back, returning to the coffee pot. I should go, like she said, but I don’t. She has left the door open, and I watch her through it. Like a moth attracted to the flame, I come a little closer to the threshold so I can see her better. I just can’t help it.

I watch her turn off the coffee maker, pick up the full pot, pour coffee in a mug. The mug cradled in her hands, she turns and leans back against the counter. She doesn’t seem surprised to see me still there, but she does raise an amused eyebrow when I rest my shoulder against the magic barrier that keeps me out.

“So, why did you hang on to it?” I ask when the silence becomes too heavy, tapping my passport against the doorjamb so she’ll know what I’m talking about.

Her shrug seems forced. “Official document,” she says. “I couldn’t just throw it away.”

“Kept anything else? My landlord said—”

“No, just that. It seemed the most important.”

She said it too fast. She’s not meeting my eyes. There’s just a hint of red in her cheeks. She’s lying. I’m sure she is. Why would she lie about that? What else did she keep?

“Where was it?”

For a moment, I’m not sure she’s going to answer. She raises the mug to her mouth, but her lips don’t even touch it. She lowers it again and says, “In the attic.”

The attic. Is that where the rest is? I wonder what else there is. I had a really nice knife, souvenir from my S.E. days. The only thing left from my human life. I don’t want to ask her for it. She’s already said she doesn’t have anything else of mine; she wouldn’t admit otherwise now. On top of that, I don’t want her to know it means that much to me.

“Aren’t you going to invite me in for a cup of coffee?” I ask, knowing already what her answer will be.

She doesn’t disappoint. “I’m not that fond of killers having an all-access pass to my house.”

A short pause, and then she adds, very low: “You’re a killer again, aren’t you?”

The question startles me a bit, but I force an answer out. “You wouldn’t believe me if I told you I’m not, would you?”

She shakes her head, before returning her attention to her mug. The aroma of the coffee has wafted to the door, and it does smell pretty nice. She has yet to take a sip from her mug, though. She peers into it as though it holds all the secrets of the universe. Eventually, her eyes come back to me.

“If you promised you’re not here to hurt anyone,” she says very quietly, “I’d believe you.”

And why would I want her to believe me? Why would I want her not to be afraid of me? It’s not like I care about what she thinks. She was never able to see past my fangs, and of course she was right. I’m a vamp, nothing else, nothing more. Just the same, what she’s asking now proves that she doesn’t know me, and never did, and that’s only—

“I’m not here to hurt anyone, I promise,” I hear myself say, and can only curse mentally.

A sad smile curls her lips, and she nods.

“There’s enough coffee for two,” she says. “Why don’t you come in?”

Next thing I know, I’m on the floor of Alexandra’s kitchen, and she’s looking at me, both startled and amused. I was still leaning against the barrier when she invited me in, and certainly didn’t anticipate it to be

removed like that. All I can do is watch her, completely stunned. How does she always manage to do the last thing I expect from her?

Scowling a little, because she is snickering now, I get to my feet while she fills a mug for me. She sets it on the island and leans against it, her own mug resting on the granite in front of her. I sit on the other side, put in a generous spoonful of sugar and start sipping. It tastes as good as it smells. All the while, she's looking at me while pretending she's not, still holding her own mug, but she hasn't tasted it yet.

"I can see how you got so thin," I can't help myself to comment, "if you just look at your food and don't touch it, like you do that coffee."

Ah, if her eyes were stakes... Just to prove me wrong, she takes a gulp.

"So, the dickhead likes bags of bones?" I insist, although I can't say why I do. "Where is he, anyway? Shouldn't he be keeping an eye on his honey?"

She looks hurt by the bag of bones comment, and I hide a wince in my mug. It didn't come out quite how I wanted it to sound. At least I didn't sound worried about her—because after all, I am not worried, not in the slightest. Why would I be worried when I don't even care?

"The dickhead is gone," she murmurs, and her eyes are back to the swirls in her cup.

Oh. That explains the tears, I guess. What it doesn't explain is why I want to find the idiot and kill him even

more now than I did in the past two years every time I thought she was in his arms.

“So, that’s why you were all teary-faced last night,” I say, and it’s half a question. “Want me to off him for you?”

She looks at me with something very close to horror, before shaking her head, having apparently decided that I was joking. I honestly don’t know if it was a joke or not.

She sighs. “No, that’s not why I was... feeling down. He’s been gone for a while. I got over it a long time ago.”

The words fall out of my mouth before I can even remind myself that I don’t care, shouldn’t care, and should just be on my way now. Fuck this. I want to know what brought one of the strongest women I’ve ever known to her knees.

“So, what is it, then?” I ask softly, trying to catch her gaze.

Another sigh, another headshake. “It’s complicated. Too long a story for someone who is just passing by. Don’t want to bore you.”

“You never bored me, Sandra.”

Someone give me a stake now, and let me end this before I make an even bigger fool of myself! God, why am I even still here?

She raises her head, allowing me to see her eyes, and suddenly I remember why.

* * * *

“You never bored me, Sandra.”

His words are soft. And I remember a time when he was the one I could rely on, when I couldn't tell my friends how patrolling alone made me sick to my stomach with fear even if I needed so much to do my job. Only a few words, and more than two years have almost disappeared. Almost, because hearing him call me 'Sandra' in that tone doesn't change a thing. He's still on his way out of my life for good. He's been out of my life for two years.

I look up at him, and find him watching me, head slightly tilted, the faintest trace of coffee staining his upper lip. I remember the taste of his lips. They were such a good way to forget my fears at one time... I'm sure they would still be good today, for just an instant. It's tempting, but it wouldn't help anything in the long run. Even if he still cared, which I doubt he does, he's leaving the country.

Instinctively, I lean forward and reach out with my hand toward his face to wipe off the trace of coffee. My movement seems to startle him, and he jerks away from my hand. I feel the heat rise in my cheeks as both my hands return to holding my mug.

“Just wanted to wipe the coffee off your face,” I mumble, annoyed and slightly hurt by his reaction.

He blinks, frowns, and then runs his fingers over his lips, checking them as if to know whether there was indeed coffee.

"I should be going," he says, peering into his empty mug, but not moving one inch.

"When are you leaving?"

He shrugs. "I'm not sure. Maybe I will stay a few days. Say goodbye to a few old friends." He gives me a twisted smile. "Paris isn't going anywhere."

I just can't help myself. I smile back.

* * * *

Alexandra smiles, and the sun is suddenly shining in her kitchen.

I am so fucked up.

Why am I still here? Why did I tell her I was staying? The plane won't wait for me, and the ticket isn't transferable. What the hell am I doing?

Oh, I know what I'm doing. I'm starting to care. Did I ever stop? The thought sickens me. Because I know all too well how this will end. Badly. There just isn't any other way. I've been on this road before, and it leads absolutely nowhere.

"Just don't do anything stupid, OK?" she says quietly, and there's a pleading tone in her voice.

Why do I have the sudden urge to tell her that I'm not killing, and haven't killed since I met her? No, I won't tell her. It concerns no one but me.

"I haven't killed a human in years."

Fuck. Where in hell did that come from? Is there a spell on the house or on me? Something that forces me to say things I have absolutely no reason or desire to be saying? I can't believe I just said that.

And I can't believe she's not laughing it off.

She's just looking at me, seemingly puzzled by what I just admitted. I can see the questions coming, and I have no intention of answering. It's none of her business.

"I have to go." This time I get to my feet.

She rises, too, and accompanies me to the back door. She locks it behind me, though we both know it wouldn't stop me if I wanted to kill her. We also both know I don't want to kill her. She wouldn't have invited me in if she didn't believe me.

I look back before stepping off the porch. She gives a start and turns away, seemingly flustered that I caught her looking at me. I go back to my car, my hand rising once to touch the passport in my breast pocket. I got what I came for. So why do I feel so...restless?

I'm an idiot, that's what I am. Two nights in this hellish town, and I'm back right where I was when I left. But I don't want to be back. I. Don't. Want. It. Not again. Not ever again. It's not worth it. Nothing is worth the pain.

I need a drink. A lot more than one. And I need to feed. I know a blood bar in Ohio City that will serve both purposes very well. And then I'll be out of here. The hell with all of it. Better leave while my dignity is still mostly intact, while I haven't made a complete fool of myself. Again.

If you enjoyed this excerpt, the complete novel will be available in October 2009 from Alinar Publishing, Fictionwise and Amazon Kindle.

Check my website at <http://original.kallysten.net> for more excerpts and free stories.