



A gripping thriller that plunges readers into a world where vampires lurk in the shadows and revenge is a dish best-served cold. LITERARY TITAN

THE ORPHAN MAKER

Blood & Flesh Saga



D . A . C H A N



THE ORPHAN MAKER

BLOOD & FLESH: BOOK 1

D.A. CHAN

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To every soul who sharpened their grief until it became purpose.

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PROLOGUE

I had three rules.

Rule number one: Never engage at night. No matter how many people die, or how many more monsters they create, never engage at night. It's suicide. They're stronger, faster, and their senses are sharper. In other words, don't be stupid.

Rule number two: Never take in victims. If they're strong, they'll survive. They'll find a way. Hell, they may even become vampire killers, and God knows we're few and far between. But until they either die or become killers, they're useless. Worse, they're dead weight—they'll slow you down and you'll be just as dead as they are.

Rule number three: Trust no one. People are sick, scared, lustful, and selfish. Give a saint a good enough reason, and he'll become twice as evil as a son of the devil. If you can't trust yourself enough to handle things on your own, then you have no business being alive in the first place.

Last night, I finally caught up with the Orphan Maker, the sadistic vampire who killed my wife and son. I had her in the palm of my hand. All I had to do was stick to my MO, follow the rules, and she would have been dead this morning. But I got stupid...and broke all three rules. Now, I've got a burning bite mark on my shoulder, a ten-year-old dead weight sleeping on my

couch, and an elite vampire killer who wants to add my head to his collection.

I had three rules. Should've kept them.

TICK TOCK

I finish tying my bootlaces when two knocks come from the door, followed by one, then another two. *Jessica*. I pull my jacket over my back to hide the bite mark, not expecting the cold leather to act as a soothing balm over the throbbing, burning sensation pulsating all over the wound. I take a semiauto from my weapons cache and screw in the silencer. Mag's full, safety's off; *now* I'm ready to answer the door.

"Jess?" I ask three feet from the door, with an Uzi in my right hand and a hunting knife in my left.

"You going to let me in or you going to point a gun at the door the whole night?"

Sexy, bedroom voice, with a hint of sarcasm. That's Jessica. I holster my hunting knife on my left leg and unlock the door for her to come in. The moment she does, she flicks her curly, dark brown hair and winks at me.

"So, what's the big emergency, killer?" Her left eyebrow goes up as she flashes me the crooked smile that she knows I like.

I jerk my head toward the living room. "It's on the couch."

Jessica makes herself at home, as usual, her black high heels knocking on the apartment's wooden floor as if announcing that the owner is home. She takes one look at the kid passed out on the couch and turns to me, surprise written all over her face.

“What the hell, Damien? What happened?” Jessica’s playfulness has disappeared, and I can’t blame her. It’s the first time I’ve ever brought home a victim; the first time I got stupid. “He’s dead weight,” I say. “I need you to take care of him.”

“And what am I supposed to do with him?”

“I don’t know, Jess. Call the Society. Tell *them* to take care of it. Don’t they have rehab for vamp vics?” I’m being sarcastic; I know there’s no such thing. The Society’s as heartless as the monsters they exist to kill. But, hell, I can’t kill this kid, and I can’t help him either.

“You hear me laughing, Damien? That’s not funny. Call a social worker or something.” Jessica exhales and walks to the kitchen.

“C’mon, Jess. I’ll pay you twice the price of a double barrel, all for a phone call. Just ask ’em if there’s anything they can do to take him off my hands...” I notice that Jessica is heading for my fridge, so I quickly add, “I’ll have one too.”

Jessica shuts the fridge door and tosses me a cold one. Nothing like downing a nice cold bottle of beer after getting your ass handed to you on account of your stupidity. I’m thinking of increasing my offer as she pulls a chair out from under my dining table.

“I’ve got more than enough shotguns, Damien, for you *and* the Society’s Killer. I told you, you should’ve just signed up with them.” Jessica shoots a glance at the chair opposite her, telling me to sit at the table.

I pull the chair out, making sure I keep the noise down to avoid waking the kid. “And I told you that I don’t give a damn about the Society and their laws.”

“I do.” Jessica glares at me.

“Yeah right, Jess. If you really did, you wouldn’t be here.” I grin as I take a seat. “You know their rules: For every city, one Killer, one Supplier, one Watcher, and one Cleaner. You’re their Supplier, but I’m *not* their Killer.”

“You may not be *their* Killer, Damien, but you *are* a killer. And you get your supplies from *their* Supplier. Ergo?” Jessica raises her beer bottle as she does her eyebrow. I love that crooked smile of hers.

“Well, you *are* the best Supplier the Society has to offer. And I pay a whole lot more for your weapons than their Killer.” I raise my beer bottle in response to her cheers from across the table. “How’s Charlie, by the way?” I only ask because I know where she spends all my generosity on.

“Going off to college next week.” Jessica squints at me, and then adds, “On scholarship.”

“Damn. Smart kid.” I crane my neck and glance at the boy on my couch. He’s still passed out, and probably will be for the next few hours. “Unlike this one... So you’re not paying much tuition now. Tell me, where do you spend my money on?”

Jessica chuckles. “None of your damn business.” She jerks her head in the direction of the living room. “Damien, he’s only a kid. What do you plan on doing with him?”

I stretch and crack my bones to relieve myself of the occasional back pain. “No idea,” I say as I push the beer bottle to my left shoulder. The cold numbs the burning sensation of the wound, and it feels good, too good, good enough to make me groan.

The smile on Jessica’s beautiful Mexican face is replaced by suspicion. “What’s with the shoulder?”

“Nothing,” I say. But the truth is, I want her to know. Rule number three. Don’t trust anyone, especially one who’s connected to the Society. But what the hell, I need her to know.

“What’s with the shoulder, Damien?” Jessica rises to her feet and takes a step toward me.

I set the beer bottle on the table and sigh as I get out of the chair. I take two steps toward her, dragging my feet, the sound of my footsteps as coarse as the leather jacket scraping my wound underneath. “Don’t freak out, Jess,” I say as calmly as I can. “You’re not going to like this.” I arch my shoulders back, all the while taking a deep breath through gritted teeth, to let the jacket fall off.

“Holy shit!” Jessica gasps as her hands go up to her mouth. “You got bit?”

I smirk.

“You got bit?!”

I look at her in the eyes before taking my beer bottle from the table. “Tick-tock, Jess.” I raise the bottle. “Cheers.”

Jessica walks back and forth in my kitchen with her curly, dark brown hair in her hands. “You’re screwed, Damien! You’re in transition!” She stops, takes a deep breath, then places both hands on her slim waist. “What are you going to do?!”

“Relax, Jess.” I chuckle, albeit nervously. “How long have I got? A month?”

“More or less. Maybe twenty-five days? Twenty-eight? Thirty-three?” Jessica exhales expletives between numbers. “But you won’t even have to wait for the transition to end, Damien. The Society, they’ll have your head long before then.”

The Society again. I hate those hypocrites. “Will you calm down, Jess? It’ll take at least three days for their Watcher to review the city surveillance, and another seven days for them to send their Killer after me.”

“No, Damien. You don’t get it.” Jessica shook her head before looking away, and I could swear it was partly to hide her tears.

“The Society found out that the Orphan Maker’s in town and gave us orders to keep an eye on you. They also recalled their resident Killer. The *new* Killer’s been dispatched four days ago. He’ll be arriving tomorrow.”

I shoot her a glance that says *I’ll handle it*, take a deep breath, and crack my neck. “What time and where?”

“JFK. 12:40. The red-eye from London.” Jessica’s breathing picks up as she spits out the details. The fear in her eyes tells me that I’m *really* screwed.

“You got a name?” I ask even if I already know.

“Arthur Bishop.”

“Shit.”

Pre-Reunion

Kid's still sleeping. Best not to wake him if I want to focus. I march into my bedroom and pull open my bedside drawer. *A pistol, a blade, my old pocket whiskey hip flask... Where is it?* I crack my neck again, if not out of habit then to keep sleep at bay. I remove everything in my drawer, looking for the damned... *There it is!*

I walk back into the living room and survey the space. Couch by the far end of the wall, TV in front of it, two windows with blinds pulled down. Where's a good place to hang a calendar, one that'd remind me of how long I've got before I have to give Arthur Bishop a call to do me in. *Pssh... Arthur Bishop, wait for my call? Never going to happen.* I shake my head as I grab the calendar from my bedroom door, and yawn while hanging it on the wall at the far side of the room, on the space between the two windows.

When I see that it's not going to fall off, I flip my notebook to the research tab. My eyes follow my fingers as they scan the pages for the heading "Transition Effects – What happens to humans when bit." *Should've used the heading "How Damien Shaw kicks the bucket."* I rub my eyes again, as if to tell sleep to get the hell away from me. *It'll have me anyway, permanently, soon enough;* my fingers find the heading, and then the conclusion:

- Days 30–32 – Subject feels weak, sluggish. Teething

and appetite disappear.

- Day 33 – Subject dies. His cells are reanimated by vamp venom. Transition is complete.

Thirty-three days. That'll be on... I do the math, flip the calendar to next month, and draw an X on December 16. Two more months and I would've neglected another birthday. But it doesn't matter now. All that matters is I find and kill the Orphan Maker before Bishop finds and kills me. I look at my notes once more and mark the key phases of the transition...my transition:

- Days 1–9 – Subject feels normal. No physiological changes.
- Days 10–14 – Subject's appetite doubles due to reanimated metabolism. Extremely irritable.
- Days 15–23 – Subject gains strength, speed, stamina, and heightened senses.
- Days 24–29 – Subject begins teething, craves blood; animalistic instincts take over.

I take my red marker and draw stars on days 15–23: November 29 all through December 7. I take a deep breath and stare at the dates, the dates when I'll be most dangerous. *My kill week.* Now, I just have to make sure I know where she'll be at that time.

I toss the notebook on the table and head to my mini fridge in the storage room. Opening the dirty white fridge door shows me that I still have a few tranq shots left. *Should've told Jess to get me another dozen before letting her storm out of here.* I take one out and inject the kid right before cuffing him to the metal table

by the couch. That should keep him under for a few more hours, and I should be awake to uncuff him even before he wakes up.

I walk back to my bedroom, dragging my feet, which weigh a thousand pounds. I let myself fall on the queen-sized bed and kick off my boots. For the first time in years, I don't care about arranging them neatly by the door. Everything's supposed to have a "proper place" so I know exactly where things are. But not tonight. Tonight's different. Maybe it's because I also know where my proper place will be. The black X in the box of December 16 appears in my mind, followed by Jessica fuming at me for being careless tonight, right before walking out of the apartment. *Still got to call her tomorrow, order a dozen transqs...and pay in cash this time. Shit. How the hell did all of this happen?*

I think back to a few hours ago. Everything was going as planned. The Orphan Maker had been dating Ryan Folley, president of Folley and Strauss, and designer of the newly constructed building down at Second Street. And just like all her other vics, a month was all she could take before her urge to make his kid an orphan took over...and tonight was his expiration date.

I followed him and his family into his new building. Darwin Tower, named after his father, Darwin Folley. He was taking his wife and kid to see his office on the twenty-third floor. The one with a view that overlooked the sunset, and undoubtedly overpowered any secretary's moral compass. The bastard was going to show off by making his family proud of the place where he'd undoubtedly planned to take his future mistresses; he deserved to die. If the Orphan Maker didn't kill him, I like to think I would have.

I watched them from the building across the street. It was the perfect opportunity to keep my distance *and* test my rifle's new scope; I had also installed audio surveillance the night before. The three of them rounded the corridor on the twenty-third floor and came into my sights; from where I watched, his office was all glass. He unlocked the door and let his wife and kid in first. The moment he entered his own office, someone tapped his shoulder from behind. It was her.

"Hello, lover," she said right before pulling him into a deep, wet kiss. Through my audio gear, her voice was as smooth as silk and as cold as a tombstone.

Ryan tried to keep his cool, but his wife had none to begin with. She started spitting out expletives, her head bobbing like a blond ping-pong ball, while waving her finger around like a crazed maestro. She grabbed the kid to drag him out of the office with her, but that wouldn't happen. I know this vamp. *Hell, I slept with her...and swear to God I'm going to kill her.*

"Move out of the way, slut!" Mrs. Folley spat. She had already lost her head. Little did she know she was going to lose it literally. She grabbed the vamp by the arms and pushed her out of the door. Wrong move. The monster only grinned, craned her neck sideways, and shoved Mrs. Folley on the chest, sending her flying back into the office and crashing into one of the blue velvet sofas that faced the glass bookshelf by the wall.

Ryan fastened his fingers around the vamp's throat and pushed her back against the wall, but with one quick motion, she plunged her hand into his stomach; blood gushed out and turned the white carpet crimson. I knew exactly what she'd do next. She'd thrust her hand upward, through the ribcage, to reach for his heart. Then she'd crush it from within, something about literal irony that always tickled her sick sense of humor.

Mrs. Folley screamed, but nobody would hear her except their soon-to-be-orphan...and me. She crawled on the floor, tried to get away, but there's no outrunning a vampire, much less by crawling. Her husband's mistress-turned-murderer strolled behind her, whistling no tune in particular, and took a trophy from the shelf. It was blunt on one end and shaped like a metal plate on the other. And with one swift stroke, she brought the trophy down on Mrs. Folley's neck, slicing her head clean off her shoulders.

I kept my scope on her the entire time, waiting for her to leave the way she did me and my family years ago. But she didn't. Instead, she sauntered toward the boy sitting on the floor, who was clearly in shock, picked him up by the collar, and did something I didn't expect. She raised him up, made him face my direction, and grinned.

"Hello, lover," she said slowly, maliciously, seductively. A demonic smile pulled at her lips as I zoomed in closer. She looked directly at me, and I remember my heart pounding against my chest as I lay on the floor with my rifle pointing directly at her head. God, I wanted to pull the trigger! But I hadn't made any calculations and would've missed... Worse, I would've killed the kid! I remember my head feeling like it was about to explode as she giggled.

"He looks so much like little Zachary. Right, Damien?" she purred, driving me mad. "What's the matter? Do you miss him?" She blew a kiss at me, then whispered, "Do you miss *me*?"

In that moment, I threw my rifle to the side and darted out the building with a semiautomatic in one hand and a blade in the other.

RELIVING DEMONS

I roll over, making my wooden bed frame squeak. The bite wound on my shoulder still stings, the soreness pulsating like it had its own heartbeat. *In a month, I won't have one.* I lie on my stomach and prop myself up with my elbows, my forehead resting on my sweat-stained pillow. The last thing I want to do is remember my own stupidity. But I have to. I have to make sure I learn from my mistakes. My lungs draw in air as I replay the rest of the evening's events.

I sprinted across the street, my feet hitting the pavement like hammers on nails, each hurried step bringing me closer to my own grave. But at the time, I didn't care. All I wanted was to spray her with bullets until she could hardly move, then gut her like a fish before chopping her head off. The only problem was nobody's ever heard of a human winning against a vampire in hand-to-hand combat.

Entering through the front entrance was a mistake. Not because I was greeted by two dead bodies—the guards never stood a chance—but because the Society's Watcher would have video footage of me entering the building. Regardless, I calmed myself as I pushed the elevator button, reminding myself that there was no need to hurry. Knowing her, she was probably waiting for me in the office with Folley's kid, if anything, to mess with my

head. But I didn't take any chances. Well, any *more* chances. I raised my gun and blade as the elevator opened...

Empty.

As if the thought of killing my family's murderer wasn't infuriating enough, the elevator sounded like it was mocking me by playing a Christmas tune: "I Saw Mommy Kissing Santa Claus." *God, I hate elevator music.* I took deep breaths to oxygenate my blood while watching the floor number increase.

Twenty-eight. I raised my weapons.

Twenty-nine... I took a deep breath and held it.

Thirty! This is it!

The hallway was silent. And cold. She was toying with me, probably getting a kick from listening to my heart race. *Not for long. This monster dies tonight.* I stepped out into the hallway, weapons ready to draw blood. If she had a heartbeat, it would've fluttered at the sight of me shifting my gaze from one room to another, one end of the corridor to the other, from the ground to the ceiling... *I hate hunting vampires, especially one as methodical as this one.*

I got to Folley's office at the end of the hallway. It didn't sound right, not in my mind. *At the end of the hallway. Translation: one way in, one way out. Shit.* I span around in haste, expecting her to be right behind me, blocking the exit. Nothing. I burst into the office and checked every corner before paying attention to the kid sitting in the middle of the room. Still nothing. The cold sent shivers up my spine, making the hair on my nape stand on end. The urge to make a run for it, grab the kid, and drag him out of the building was unbearable. But I kept reminding myself that it was just adrenaline.

"Hey, kid. Get up!" I said, but he just stared at me with blank eyes. I studied the expression on his face, behind the drops of

his parents' blood. He was still in shock, which meant I had to shake him out of it. I took a few steps closer to him to... *My God, he does look like my Zachary.* "Snap out of it, kid! What's your name?" Still no response. I flipped my blade so the hilt faced him, and shook his shoulders as hard as I could.

The boy's eyes indicated consciousness. *Finally!* "What's your name, kid?"

"Jake," he replied in a barely audible whisper.

"All right, Jake. I need you to be brave. You're a brave young man, right, Jake?"

He nodded, although still clearly oblivious of what was happening.

I gently pulled him to his feet, keeping one eye on him and another eye on my peripheral. "We got to get out of here, Jake. It's not safe here." I kept my tone as even as humanly possible, but I knew that he sensed the tension in my voice. He glanced at his parents once more, then looked back at me.

"You understand what I'm saying, Jake? *We need* to get out of here." I pulled him to his feet. My gut screamed at me. *We'll either walk out of here in fifteen minutes or be carried out the next morning in body bags.* I got down on one knee to balance myself as I put the boy's weight on my left arm. The moment I did, a pair of ice-cold hands grabbed me from behind and tossed me clear across the room. I crashed into Folley's desk, fell to the ground, and rolled away just in time to dodge the iMac that almost fell on me.

A coarse, boisterous laugh filled the room. "*You* were hunting *me*, Damien?!"

I oriented myself the moment I stopped rolling on the floor: had to let go of my knife to avoid stabbing myself, but my semiautomatic was still in my hand. I caught a glimpse of a

red-and-black dress and opened fire while still lying on my side, laying waste to the bookshelf. Pieces of paper fell to the ground, and I was pissed. I was hoping to make it rain blood. I scuffled to my feet and dove to retrieve my hunting knife on the ground by the wall, spun around fast enough to catch another glimpse of her, and released another spray of bullets, punching holes in the wall.

Hold still, damn it! My eyes followed the blurred silhouette streaking out the door, her laughter scratching my very soul. I shot a quick glance at the boy. He was curled up in the middle of the room, arms over his head, head between his knees. I aimed at the door while consciously ignoring the pain in my ribs. *Must've cracked a few on the table.* "Come out, Valerie!"

"Daaamieeeeeen..." She sang my name, in the exact same way she used to when we were together, when she made me chase her around whatever hotel room we were staying at. *The chase ends now.*

"Mr. Shaaaaw..." Her voice raked at my ears, making my temper rise and my fingers clench the hilt of my hunting blade even tighter. *One mistake. Just make one mistake, monster. I swear I'll have your head!* I took cautious steps toward the door. The sound of her voice told me that she was right beside the door, but her vampiric hearing would also alert her to my approach.

My mind raced to figure out a way to lure her out, or at least to find out where she was exactly. Then I noticed a reflective surface in the corridor: hanging outside by the door was a painting of a sunset encased in a glass frame. I squinted and focused on the reflection instead of the sunset, then leaned to the side, slowly, to scan the hallway.

I leaned to the side more and more, to get the right angle. The reflection on the painting, behind the sunset, revealed a woman.

Gotcha! She was still as a mannequin with scarlet nails on pale fingers. Her dress, red silk with black and gray vines crawling up her legs like hollow veins, draped from her waist just tightly enough to compliment her figure. I inched closer to the side until her reflection revealed more of her. Her hair, jet-black and wavy, playfully thrown over one side of her face. I slowly lifted my right foot, silently taking another step to the side. *I must see her face. I need to know if she's on to me.* But before I could lean sideways, *she* began to move...slowly putting herself in view.

The sunset on the painting disappeared, replaced by the reflection of the face of the monster behind the door: she smiled at me with blood-creased lips that seemed crazed and frozen, and with unnaturally large, red eyes that reflected the moonlight.

OBSESSIONS

The burning sensation from my bite wound pulses through my entire arm, demanding my attention. I trace the teeth marks with my finger, sending small jolts of electric pain up my neck. *At least the wound's closed.* I trudge to the men's room and splash cold water on my face before staring at myself in the mirror. My eyes look tired. *Hell, I've been tired for more than a decade.* Should've slept more last night, probably dreamt nightmares. I don't need sleep for that. My whole life's a nightmare. I take a deep breath and survey the men who enter after me. An older man in a suit, followed by a kid with a backpack, then a teenager with headphones. Their attire are typical of people in airports.

I check my watch once more. I still have an hour before the red-eye from London arrives, before Arthur Bishop deplanes. If my shadow was sent from the Society, it would be a man so he could follow me into men's rooms. This lady's tailing skills are subpar and will probably make rookie mistakes; she must be working alone. I need to know why.

My pace has been casual and consistent since leaving the men's room; and so has my shadow's. I duck into a corner and head straight for the door that says "for airport personnel only," knowing that she would follow. The walkway is empty save for another door at the end. Pinning her here is risky, but there

isn't enough time to do it elsewhere. I pull out my modified pen and snap it in two where I had prepared perforations, effectively turning it into a shiv. There's just enough space for me to lie in wait behind the door and wait for it to swing open.

The moment my shadow steps through the door, I hold my breath. Three steps in and I'm right behind her. I grab her left hand and twist it before she can react, and shove my palm against her chest before she can let out a scream. With one swift motion, I grab her other arm and pin her against the wall, using the pressure of my body weight to stop her from struggling—although, she doesn't even put up a fight. Pinning her is too easy. She's had no training; she couldn't possibly be part of the Society.

"What's your name, and why are you following me?" I ask without letting go of her hands, pushing the shiv up against her neck.

"Don't kill me," she coughs, barely catching her breath. "I'm unarmed."

I push her against the wall again, making her cheek feel the cold concrete. "Your name and the reason you're following me. Or I put you down right here," I lie. She's an inconvenience to be handled, like the Folley kid—not a monster to kill.

"Chrissy," she says, "please."

"Last name?" I ask as I note the fear in her blue eyes.

"Bright," she says after I lessen the pressure I had been applying on her chest. "I'm unarmed, sir."

"I know you're unarmed. Why are you following me?" I ask without changing my tone or removing the shiv away from her neck. "If someone walks in the other door, I will slit your throat and walk away. Answers. Now."

Chrissy glances at the door at the end of the walkway, then looks straight at me. “We have the same goals, Mr. Shaw. I’m after the same people.”

“*Mr. Shaw, huh? And her tone’s firmer.*” “Same people?” I ask without hiding the cynicism in my voice. “And who am I after, Ms. Bright?”

“I lost my sister last year.” Chrissy clears her throat and takes a breath while opening her hands in a submissive gesture. “She and her husband were murdered, leaving me with their daughter. I’m convinced that the people who murdered them are connected to the same people who murdered your wife and son.”

Can’t be. Or does she know? I got to make sure. Got to gain her trust. I release her and take two steps back to give her some space. She clears her throat again, then runs her fingers through her long, blond, wavy hair before patting her blazer. I wait for her to refocus before dropping the shiv into my coat pocket, making sure that she sees what I’m doing; her blue eyes follow the blade disappearing from sight, and I note that she’s visibly less tense than a moment ago.

“How long have you been following me?” I know the answer. She’s made all the rookie mistakes; today was probably her first time. I want to know if she trusts me enough to tell the truth.

Chrissy shakes her head. “Not long.”

Half-truth. Smart. But I got to be smarter and either get her out of my way or make her cooperate with me within the next hour.

“Better go home, Ms. Bright. The people we’re after are—”

“Dangerous?” Chrissy interrupts. “They murdered my sister, and you just threatened to kill me, Mr. Shaw.” Her sarcasm is as blatant as my cynicism earlier. “I think I know what danger looks like.”

No, you don't, not the blood-drinking kind.

“Look, Ms. Bright, you have a niece who depends on you. Go home to her. You’re of no use to her dead, and no use to us alive.” I say the last line slowly. Deliberately. And I see it register in her eyes just as quickly as she hides it. She glances at the door behind me once more, just as I shift my shoulder in response to the itch of the bite wound.

“What makes you so sure?” Chrissy challenges. *Exactly as planned.*

I check my watch, both to see how much time I have left before Bishop arrives—thirty minutes—and to show her that I don’t have time for her, at least not right now. “I caught you tailing me and pinned you without breaking a sweat. That means you have no training. You didn’t say a single buzzword since. That means you have no team to bail you out. You’re working solo, and you’re inexperienced. All you have is information, and information alone won’t get you your sister’s killer. It’ll only get you killed. Go home, Ms. Bright.” I start walking away when she grabs my arm. My first instinct is to break her wrist, but muscle memory isn’t what’ll win the day today. I got to play smart. So I stop and wait for whatever she has to say.

“Yeah, you’re right, Mr. Shaw.” Her tone has changed; she’s become more compliant. “I don’t have training or a team. All I have is information. But if your operation is so secret, that means I must have a *lot* of information to find out about you.”

Can't even bluff to save her life. But I got to wrap this up and get her to agree to my terms soon. “Ms. Bright, information and obsession is a dangerous mix. It’ll make you do *stupid* things and get you killed.” I scratch the bite wound and relish the irony. “And my team doesn’t have the time to babysit a rookie with

a death wish.” I leave the walkway and head to the arrival area. Chrissy follows me and pulls a piece of paper out of her purse.

“We’re after the same thing, Mr. Shaw,” she insists while shoving a photograph in front of me—a screenshot of a surveillance camera recording, which tells me that she has access to surveillance footage. I take the picture from her and look closer. It’s of an outdoor café in the city. *What am I looking for? There’s nothing here but... Oh God!* On the upper right of the photograph, Folley is having lunch with the monster. But at the table next to them is the Society’s former Killer—the one they recalled and replaced with Bishop. *Is this a test? For her to see who I’m tracking? Or is she fishing for information? Just how much does this lady know? And if the Society’s Killer had her in his sights already, why didn’t he take her out? Did the Society want her to kill Folley to draw me out? What would they want with me?*

“I told you, Mr. Shaw,” Chrissy says while catching her breath, “I have a *lot* of information.”

KILLERS

Made it just in time. The passengers stream out of the doors and head for the conveyer belts; Bishop would be a head above everyone else—won't be hard for me to spot him. Still can't believe I got her to be the bait; not so much because she was difficult to convince. On the contrary, it was all too easy. Pull the strings tied to anyone's obsessions and they become puppets. No, I'm not surprised at all that she agreed to it, but because I've never used people before. Not innocents. And not like this. But then again, if all she has is information and a death wish, she's dead anyway; nothing wrong with using one walking corpse to kill another.

I stay in the coffee shop adjacent to the arrival area, facing the wall to make sure not to draw Bishop's attention. I have new eyes after all: soft, pale blue, and quite attractive. All she has to do is get close to him and measure the size of the bag that he picks up from the conveyor belts...and be obvious about it. All I have to do is find a look-alike, feed her false information, and trust in her inexperience.

My finger glides across my cellphone screen, pretending to scan through the latest updates of my social media news feed, while my eyes stay glued to the mirrors covering the wall. Bishop should be out of the door by now. A part of me regrets putting Chrissy up to the task. What was I thinking? *Should have stuck*

with my MO. A sarcastic chuckle escapes my lips. *When have I heard that before?* I take another sip of coffee and crane my neck to look for either Bishop or Chrissy—and catch a glimpse of her by a pillar, looking as suspicious as ever.

The crowd surrounding the conveyer belts begins to dissipate, leaving Chrissy more exposed. Still no sign of Bishop; the Society's changed its routine. I take one last sip of coffee and lean forward to stand when from the corner of my eye, I notice Chrissy freeze. Instinct has me follow her gaze, and sure enough, we lay our eyes on the target I gave her: a look-alike. By the entrance to the men's room, at the far corner, a man almost as tall as Bishop pulls out a phone while fiddling with his bags. I wait for Chrissy to do what rookies do—act suspicious—hoping for Bishop to show himself and make a move. And just as my luck would have it, a few steps from the look-alike, Bishop walks by.

He's bigger than I remember, and taller. Maybe six foot five and two hundred forty-five pounds. *What was it that Jess called him? Ah yes, a "proper killer."* Still, he's just a bullet to the head. Just got to make sure things go my way; if it comes to brawn against brawn, he won't go down easy—unless we meet within my kill week.

Chrissy moves forward to execute the plan—despite the obvious fact that she's more exposed. *She can't be that stupid, but she could be that desperate to prove herself to me and my "team."* My eyes follow her on the café wall's mirrors. She pulls up her phone and pretends to type something important while standing right next to the look-alike, just as Bishop steps up right beside her; he's a giant compared to her. No way it's coincidence. Bishop knows.

Take the bait, "proper killer," I think to myself. And just as the thought crosses my mind, he subtly eyes her from head to foot.

My heart races. I can feel it pound against my ribs; I hate that I feel myself get nervous, but grateful that my heart's still beating. *What the hell is he planning now?* I shift in my seat and scratch the bite wound, unsure of what to do next. This is not part of the plan. *She isn't part of the plan. Never was. Never should've used her.*

A moment is all he takes before Chrissy walks away from him and heads straight for the exit. I take a deep breath, then exhale slowly to focus. My hand itches to dig into my coat pocket, if only to feel the smooth plastic handle of my homemade pistol. But now's not the right time. *Play smart, Damien. Not here, not now. Not anymore.*

The thoughts in my head buzz in my ears as I enter the parking lot. *Why'd Bishop eye her without doing anything? What was the plan? Has Chrissy realized I fed her false info? Sent her after a look-alike? Why'd the Society change their standard routine? What do they want with me? Do they want me dead?*

"Using strays now, are we, Damien?" says a voice behind me in a thick Irish accent.

I spin around to face the Irish mountain behind me, adrenaline shooting through my system. "When they're useful," I respond after a moment's delay. *How the hell didn't I notice him following me?*

Bishop drops an eyebrow and cranes his neck sideways as he takes a puff from his cigar. "Not very useful, by my estimation."

I take a quick breath to respond, but before I can, he cuts me off. "She approached too eagerly, stared too long, measured your bait's belongings with her eyes too obviously, and shot a glance at ya before making her exit. The poor lass, untrained and unwanted—the way she carried herself, one might even think that ya wanted me to come and say hello."

“Hello, Arthur. Been a long time,” I respond without hiding my sarcasm. *Should never have used her. Rule three. Shit.*

“A long time indeed, Damien.” Bishop eyes me from head to toe while blowing his cigar smoke. “Ya look tired,” he says with his eyes locked on mine as he readjusts the sling on his shoulder with ease, revealing both its weight and his strength. The bag must have weighed at least forty, maybe fifty pounds.

I keep my chin up to meet his gaze and grin. “Looks can be deceiving.” *He’s big, a true fighter.* Just looking at him now makes me believe that the rumors about him are true. But I’ve always been the better strategist.

Bishop nods his head without breaking eye contact. “How’s the shoulder?”

He’s baiting. “Functional.” *He can’t possibly know.* “Blacks and blues, comes with the territory.”

“No reds?” Bishop asks. The urge to sell the lie is stuck in my throat. The smarter play is to say nothing more. “Ah well, what do we know, eh, Damien?” Bishop looks almost convinced. Almost. “I must admit, though, I’m quite impressed. Balls of steel ya got there, charging in to kill it.”

I shake my head and chuckle, mostly to hide my embarrassment. “She’ll be dead soon,” is all I can say in response.

“Oh yes, I agree.” Bishop smiles like the Cheshire cat. “I’ll have its head soon enough. Perhaps I’ll even feel generous and let ya have it as a gift—professional courtesy and all.”

Can’t kill him now. Too many witnesses. Don’t be stupid. Play smart, Damien. “She has a pretty head. You can keep it, Arthur.”

“Perhaps I will.” Bishop’s Cheshire smile widens, if it were possible, and he cranes his neck again. “Ya *do* have other *lovely* heads to mind, after all.”

My hand twitches, itching to pull out my pistol and unload the entire clip into his brain through his mouth. But before I can respond, he turns and walks away.

“Well, it was pleasant catching up with ya, Damien. It’s been long time.” Bishop waves goodbye, but it feels more like he’s waving me off. “I’m off to pay a visit to Ms. Lewis. I shall give her your regards.”

My hands tremble as I reach for my car keys. Adrenaline. And white-hot anger. *He’s going to press Jess for details.* The bite wound itches again. *Unless he already knows.*

ONLY HUMAN

Day 7's about to end. *Still no side effects. I'm on schedule.* I look at my watch before taking another bite. 17:32. Jess won't be there for another two hours. *Nothing like killing time with an In-N-Out burger.* I take hold of the steering wheel and twist as hard as I can to the left, cracking my back. Then to the right. *That's bad for your back,* Elizabeth would have said. I take a deep breath and shake my head, as if to shoo the memory away. Every time Beth crosses my mind, the face of the monster soon follows, the face she wore the night she took Beth and Zach away from me.

I shoot a glance at the playground again. Folley's kid just sits in the sandbox, making random mounds of sand. I wonder what Ms. Bright and the social worker's talking about and wish I had mics on the bench they're sitting on. I bet she's asking if anyone came to visit the kid; if *I* came to visit. Not a chance. She's also probably asking about how the parents died—not that social workers would know anything about it. What I *do* want to know is where she's getting her information.

They shake hands and Ms. Bright stands to leave. I finish the rest of my burger and grab the keys, waiting to see if I have to start the engine or get out of the car; if she hails a cab, I'll start the engine. Instead, she makes a phone call. I finish off my Coke

while waiting for her to make up her mind. *I hope this was worth it.*

Chrissy removes her hair tie and lets her blond hair hang loose; probably about to meet a guy. Boyfriend or suitor, most likely. She turns around abruptly as she puts away her phone; looks like whoever she was talking to was already there to pick her up. My eyes trace where she's facing and take note of a man. Tall, lanky, young, glasses, short black hair, slouches a bit. Chrissy also looks like she's happy to see him. There's a skip in both their steps as they approach each other. A quick kiss on the lips and hands lingering on elbows. *Boyfriend, and probably serious.*

They start walking away but don't head for the parking lot, which means I've got to tail them on foot. I get out of the car and cross the street, making sure to stay away from the playground, away from Folley's kid. The closer I get, the more familiar the boyfriend is to me. I check my watch again just to make sure I still have time. 18:07. Jess'll have dinner with Charlie soon, and I'm tempted to text her to take her time with her son, maybe even cancel tonight. But I need supplies. She's been aloof all week; I've got to show her that I haven't lost it yet so that she'll still sell to me.

I turn the corner and recognize the street I'm in. I was here three days ago, setting up surveillance on the monster's new hunting grounds: Pierre's Pizzas. *Can't be coincidence.* I cross the street so as not to get too close, and continue following them. If they enter Pierre's, I'll be able to hear everything they talk about.

My eyes are fixed on the boyfriend. *Where the hell have I seen him before?* If he's familiar to me, then he's probably bad news. They walk with their arms wrapped around each other's waists, like a real couple, and I have to wonder if they're really dating,

or if she's just using him—or maybe he's using her. *If I could just remember who he is, I'll know who's using who.*

The boyfriend leads her into Pierre's, and there's a look of surprise on Chrissy's face. It isn't exactly a place for dates. The pizza's crap, and the kids are noisy. Why'd he take her there? And which of them knows what? Chrissy's a rookie. If she knows that I bugged the place, why'd she want me to know about her social life? If it's to leave a message, she could do it without bringing a guy with her. No, it can't be Chrissy. It's the boyfriend. He knows something. He's involved somehow. But if *he* knows that I bugged the place, what's he trying to tell me? If he knows that this is *her* new hunting grounds, why bring Chrissy there?

I slide into a booth of the restaurant across the street, order a coffee, and pay for it in advance. The moment the waitress leaves, I pull out my phone and earphones and go online. Wherever they sit in Pierre's, I'll have eyes and ears. *No coincidences.*

My God, this is boring. Jacob's done nothing but dote on Chrissy for the past twenty minutes. So far, it looks and sounds like a real date. If not for the fact that Jacob looks familiar, I'd have already left and chalked it up to life's sick sense of humor. I take a deep breath, crack my neck, then crack my back. I got to decide now. Leave and meet Jess, or stay and die of boredom, and then get reanimated by vamp venom and become a monster twenty-six days ahead of schedule. I call the waitress's attention and ask for a glass of water. Fifteen more minutes, then I'm out of here.

Chrissy rests her chin on her hands as she leans forward. “How is it that I feel like you’ve known me for so long?” she asks.

Jacob leans forward and starts saying something I can’t hear. I increase the gain on the mics and filter the noise: “Sometimes people just have a connection, right? Like, I think we’re supposed to be together. The way you feel? Like I’ve known you for so long? I also feel like you’ve known me for a long time.”

“Really?” Chrissy shakes her head. “C’mon, Jacob. I don’t know you *that* well yet, at least I don’t think so.”

“Don’t say that, Chrissy.” Jacob takes her hands in his. “Who’s to say that you don’t know me as well as I know you? I mean, like I’m supposed to be the one to tell you how much I feel that you know me, right?”

Chrissy shakes her head from side to side, and I imagine that she’s rolling her blue eyes at him. “You’ve got some pretty low standards for what it means to be known by someone, Jacob.”

“Oh, I think we know each other *pretty well*,” Jacob teases, taking her pointer finger and bringing it close to his mouth.

“Stop it!” Chrissy says, obviously embarrassed. “This is a *family* place... Kids might be watching!”

Holy shit! Jacob Witmer! The Watcher! I hit the home screen on my phone to send Jess a quick text, apologizing for not being able to make it tonight. Without waiting for the “sent” notification, I go straight back to my surveillance app and listen while sliding out of my booth. *He doesn’t know I had bugged Pierre’s! Impossible for him to take Chrissy there if he knew.*

I quicken my pace the moment I turn the corner, all the while keeping my eyes on my phone and my ears on their conversation. Nothing but a lot of flirting, from him more than from her, which means he’s the one pursuing her. But Watchers aren’t

supposed to have social lives; they're supposed to watch and review twenty-four seven, which means he's breaking Society protocol...*for her*. I see my car and make a beeline for it while putting two and two together in my head. *But if he knows that Pierre's is her new hunting ground, why take Chrissy there?* I look both ways before crossing the street. *Unless he's still doing his job while dating her. Two birds with one stone.*

The moment I get in my car, I jam the keys in and start the engine. Got to get home and watch the place. I smirk at the irony: *Going to be doing the Watcher's job while he dates someone who used to watch me*. I look at the traffic, and my foot's just about to put its whole weight onto the pedal when I hear a familiar voice intrude into the couple's conversation.

"So sorry to bother yer lovely dinner," the voice says, "but I can't believe our good fortune running into each other, Jacob!"

"Arthur..." Jacob's tone is civil, but I hear defensiveness and unease. "Yes, uh, long time no see. Like, four years?"

"How do you know each other?" Chrissy asks, clearly intrigued.

Arthur clears his throat. "Forgive my lack of manners, miss. My name is Arthur Bishop. I am an...*associate*...of Jacob's." I can hear Bishop's smile through my earphones; can't see his face from the angle.

"Yes, from London." Bishop places a hand on the Watcher's shoulder. "Jacob here is such a workaholic. Glad to see him outdoors, for a change, and with such a lovely lady to keep him company."

Chrissy leans forward, and I can see the smile on her face as she looks up at Bishop. "Thank you, Arthur. Chrissy Bright. You look very familiar to me," she says as she offers a handshake.

“Pleased to meet you, Ms. Bright. And I get that a lot. Common face and all.” Bishop shakes her hand and turns to Jacob again. “Jacob, it’s been a pleasure...” The Killer leans closer to the Watcher, but it feels like he’s leaning more toward the mic. “Truly, Jacob, enjoy the pleasure of her company. *We’re* only humans after all.”

GLASS HALF EMPTY

“Jess? Open up.” I knock on the door impatiently. I know she’s home, and she might be pissed, but I don’t care. Things just might be falling into place, and I need to know if she’s still on my side. “Jess, c’mon!”

“What the hell, Damien?” Jess shouts behind the door as she goes through the four locks on it. “It’s six a.m.!”

“Almost seven,” I counter just as she opens the door and storms back in for me to follow.

“I don’t care,” Jess says, clearly more annoyed than concerned; not even curious why I woke her up so early. “You ditched me last night! Texted me something about a plan? This better be good.”

I crack my neck as I walk to her kitchen counter, which still smells like coffee and candles. “Coffee?”

“Yeah, yeah...” Jess waves her hand as if to dismiss me. She drops into her favorite chair across the kitchen, facing the living room, and pulls the brown-and-white shawl over her shoulders.

I take the coffeemaker and pour the leftover coffee from last night into two mugs. A teaspoon of sugar for me, and none for her. “Small world we live in.”

“Meaning?” Jess points at the cupboard next to me, reminding me to use saucers.

“It’s going to be a shit show,” I say as I place both cups on saucers and carry them to the living room.

Jess scoffs, then takes a sip before shaking her head. “Don’t shit where you eat, right? I don’t want any part of it.”

“Too late.” I stir my coffee for a bit, just to make sure all the sugar’s melted. “You’re knee deep, Jess, and you don’t even know it.”

Jess sets her coffee down on the table and moans. “Well, and a good morning to you too, Damien.” She leans back in her chair and places a hand on her forehead. “What did you get me into?”

“Not me.” I take my phone out and open the pictures I took of Witmer the Watcher with Ms. Bright last night.

Jess rolls her eyes as she takes the phone from my hand. “Her new vics have nothing to do with me.”

“Look closer,” I say before drinking a mouthful of coffee.

She huffs, clears her throat, then looks again. “No...”

“Yup.”

“Our Watcher?”

“Yup.”

“Broke protocol!”

I grin, and let her see it, before taking another sip. “He was lonely.”

“He’s being stupid,” Jess says as she places my phone on the table and drinks her coffee.

I shrug as I look around. “You’re going to miss this place, huh?”

Jessica glares at me and makes sure I see her glaring. I flash her another grin before I finish my coffee. That’s three for three. They replaced their Killer, their Supplier’s been selling me weapons, and now their Watcher’s compromised. “So, when’s the eval going to happen?”

“Should be a month from now... Damn it!” Jess shakes her head.

“But you’ll still be open for business until then, right?”

“Yes, Damien, wow.” Jess leans back and moans. “Thanks for caring, by the way.”

She’s right. I should’ve been more sympathetic, but being transferred might actually be good for her, if ever it happens; it’s still possible that Witmer scrubs all evidence of him breaking protocol, and the Society never finds out about his love life. Possible but unlikely. No one’s that good, especially when it comes to those people. And Jess is right. I asked not so much because I care about where they’re sending her; wherever it’ll be, they’ll still pay her, and she’ll still be able to take care of Charlie. No, I asked because I need her here, in the city, for at least two more weeks.

“C’mon, Jess. We both know it’s possible to prevent it.” I crack my neck, then my back. “All we have to do is—”

“We? There’s no ‘we’ here, Damien. I’m not getting roped into a crusade.” Jess sets her coffee down and raises her hands in surrender. “This has nothing to do with me.”

“Just hear me out.” I set my coffee down on the table as well and step toward her. “We can make this work.”

“You’re not listening.” She flicks her hair and points her finger at me. “I’m not getting involved in this.”

“You already are. You sell to me more than you ever have to their Killer,” I say, failing to hide my frustration.

“Only because you pay more,” she counters, “but that doesn’t make me involved. I just sell. Period.”

“And you got to send Charlie to—”

“Stop!” Jess says and points to the door. “You do *not* bring my son into this conversation. Not now, not ever. Understood?”

Damn. I shouldn't have crossed this line. "All right, okay, I get it."

"No, you don't, Damien. So let me make this clear. My son will never, *never* know about this world. Vamps, Killers, none of it! Or so help me God—"

"I get it, Jess," I say with my hands in the air.

"If our friendship even meant anything to you—"

"I said I get it! Jeez..." I let myself fall into the couch opposite her and shake my head. Still, I have to get her to listen at least once. My plan's good. She just needs to hear it. "I apologize, Jess. Never should have mentioned Charlie."

Jess stares at me, disbelief still obvious in her eyes. "Damn right you shouldn't have."

I change my approach by changing my tone. Softer. More sympathetic. "All right, look. I just have one request, and after this, I'll leave...maybe get some sleep. God knows I need it."

"Yeah, you and me both," she says, rolling her eyes. Knowing her, she's still pissed. I can't blame her, though; touched a sore spot too early in the morning. Still, I ignore her last comment and continue.

"Just hear me out *once*, and if you say no, I'm out of your hair. Hell, in a few weeks you won't have to worry about me at all."

"That's not fair, Damien... Don't remind me."

"I know, Jess, I know. It's not fair. But it is what it is." I learn forward once more and rest my elbows on my knees. "And I've thought about it over and over. I just need you to hear it, *once*."

"Once," Jess says with a finger raised...her middle finger.

I grin at her. She smirks at me.

"This city's gone to hell," I say candidly.

She shrugs. "Tell me about it."

“But your life’s good here,” I quickly add, if only to remind her that she’s got a good thing going. For herself and for her son. “And with both me and my vamp out of the picture, your life can go back to the way things were. Think about it, Jess. You just sell to Bishop or whoever they’ll assign here, no need to give a damn about either Watcher or Killer. You can mind your own business, make good money, and you can keep this world away from whoever you want.”

Jessica looks at me suspiciously. I know I got her ear, and she knows that I know. She scans me head to foot, then raises an eyebrow for me to continue.

I exhale and go through my reasonings in my head. She has to see this my way. “Your people know the Orphan Maker is one of the worst, which is why they sent their best. They can’t afford mistakes. Not again.”

Jess nods but is still clearly suspicious. I hate that she knows me this well. No, not really. I’m grateful she knows me at all, and I hate myself for hating that she knows me this well. *I’m going nuts*. I scratch the bite wound on my shoulder, more out of habit than anything, then crack my fingers. “But they already *have* mistakes to correct: their Watcher is breaking protocol, and you’re selling to me—which they’ve allowed so far because I’ve taken out four vamps for them—”

“Not for them,” Jess interrupts. “You killed them for practice.”

“Doesn’t matter,” I say while waving my hand. “To them, a dead vamp’s a dead vamp. I killed four, their Killer killed one.”

Jess huffs. “It was never a competition, Damien.”

“It may as well have been, Jess,” I counter, “and that’s my point! You were just betting on the winning horse. You still

sold their weapons, helped them make a profit, and are fulfilling their grand vision of making vamps extinct!”

“Good speech. But they won’t buy it.” Jess picks up her coffee from the table and takes a sip.

“They don’t have to.” I shift in my seat and quickly stretch my back before continuing. “These are valid reasons for them to keep you here. You’ve got discernment, unlike Witmer. He’s got to go because he’s compromised. But you made all the right decisions, leading to the heads of *two* vamps.”

“Two?” Jess stares at me in disbelief.

I shake my head and smile at the irony. “Yeah... As you said, this friendship *does* mean a lot to me.”

Jess covers her mouth with her coffee, but I can see her eyes, and all the hurt behind them.

“Again, it is what it is, Jess.” I chuckle nervously. “Help me kill this vamp. For old times’ sake. Then I give myself up to Bishop.” I cringe at the thought of it...at the way I talk about how I plan to end things. But hell, death and taxes, right? I look at Jess in the eyes and tell it as it is. “I’m added incentive—or justification—for why you’re a good Supplier, a good fit for them and for this city. It’s the least I could do.”

Jessica shakes her head, then practically jumps out of her chair with a huff. “What kind of heartless monster do you think I am, Damien?” She paces around her apartment while adjusting the shawl on her shoulders. “Use you as a bargaining chip? As some kind of reason for the higher-ups to justify my staying in this city? Do you even hear yourself?”

Does she? I get up on my feet and saunter to the concrete beam by the window, adjacent to her pacing route. I think about it again. My plan’s not perfect, I know, but at least it’s something,

and it gives her a shot at normalizing her life after I leave it. *What the hell am I thinking...*

Jess wraps the shawl tightly around her shoulders and rants without looking at me. “You’ve gone mad! Batshit crazy!”

She’s probably right.

“I don’t know if it’s the vamp venom or sleep deprivation!”

Probably both.

“What makes you even think I want to continue this kind of life?”

Good money. Savings for Charlie. I don’t know...good dental?

“Damien.” Jess stops pacing and looks at me directly. “After this, *this* vamp, after *you*, I’m done.”

Damn it. I pretend to not have noticed her voice crack. “What do you mean?”

“I mean I’m done. I’m out.” She runs her fingers through her hair as she clears her throat. “It’s hard...even looking at you, knowing you’re...you won’t be...”

“I know.” I nod without looking her in the eyes. “And I’m really sorry—”

“Tsk!” Jess walks up to me and stares into my eyes. “That’s actually part of the problem, you ass. You’re not.”

She’s right. I’m not.

“She’s a vamp. She can’t help her patterns.” Jess studies my eyes, perhaps checking to see if I actually have any regrets. “But you...you had a choice. And you chose to chase after this obsession. And in some sick, twisted way, you’ve already justified everything you’ve done and have planned to do.”

Yeah, she does know me this well.

“Charlie’s got a scholarship, Damien.” Jess sighs. “And I’ve got my own plans.” She glances at my shoulder, at the bite mark under my clothes. “I can’t risk my son’s future for your past.”

Fair point. Sucks. But fair point.

“Look, Damien.” She stares at me, and waits for me to look into her eyes before she continues. “I’ll continue selling to you. And I’ll give you priority on whatever you need over Bishop...for old times’ sake. But that’s the best I can do.”

I slam the door shut behind me as I enter my apartment, make a beeline for the fridge to grab a beer can, and drop into the exact spot where I had cuffed the Folley kid. Cold beer after a long day used to help. Now, not so much. I yawn, then realize that I’m too tired to stay awake but too anxious to sleep. I don’t need sleep. I need a plan.

STRIKE TWO

This was a bad idea. I check my watch again. She's running late; I still have time to change my mind. *Just get out and think of a better plan.* I glance at the door of the hotel lobby once more and hope she doesn't come at all. I know there are better ways to get the Orphan Maker, and I've always been good at strategies. If I had more time, I'd be able to come up with something better. I feel the small paper bag inside my coat pocket and think about all the things that could go wrong with this plan. *I'm desperate and lack sleep. I should leave.*

I take a deep breath and shake my head. There are better ways to get the vamp to come out of hiding. I'm about to slide out of the small booth-like chair when I catch a glimpse of Ms. Bright walk through the lobby while scanning the area. Instinct tells me to lower my head and just slip out of sight, but something inside me keeps my eyes on her just long enough for her to spot me. We lock eyes; she nods, and makes her way through the chairs and guests toward me.

She smiles at me and offers her hand before sliding into the booth-like chair across me. I take it and greet her, then ask her to sit down. The moment she does, she sets her bag aside and apologizes once more for being late, then immediately gets down to business. "After our last meeting, I'm actually surprised you called."

Not as surprised as I am. “It was the next logical step,” I say as candidly as I can, making sure not to break character. “We both want the same thing.”

A subtle smile pulls at the edge of her lips, but she suppresses herself as quickly as I notice it. “Do we?” she asks. Smart of her to.

I smile at her sympathetically. “Anna, your sister... I take it you were close.” The look on her face softens almost immediately. I bet she didn’t expect me to bring her sister up, but I had to. She swallows and glances at the waiter to avoid eye contact with me, and waves at him to come over. *Delay tactics.* The waiter quickly comes to our table and places a glass of water in front of her before asking me if I want a refill for my coffee. I shake my head and wave to dismiss him before I take out a picture of Beth and Zachary from my pocket. I stare at it for a moment, and catch myself smiling at the memory of when we took it, before placing it in front of Ms. Bright. “It was ‘zoo day’ that day. The last day we were all together.”

She takes the picture in her hands and stares at it for a moment, then stares at me. “You look happy here,” she says, her voice sincere.

“I was. We were.” *Happy. When was the last time...* I clear my throat and take a sip of coffee, letting her stare at my family longer.

“I’m so sorry.” She returns the picture, placing it gently on the table in front of me. “I can’t imagine what it must have been like.”

I smile sadly. “You don’t have to imagine... You already know.”

“I’ve never been married...”

“Family is family,” I quickly add, cutting her off. “Wife, son, sister...” I look into her eyes to check if she’s invested. “They deserved better.”

Chrissy looks at me sympathetically, takes a sip of water, then nods. “Yeah, she had everything,” she says solemnly, “perfect husband, perfect niece...”

“Perfect husband”? *She doesn’t know.* I shift in my seat and stretch out my back. “They deserved to live out their lives. Instead, they were robbed of that. And we’re left with the broken pieces. We deserve better too.” *I lie. I never deserved my family. But they deserve justice.*

She nods as she reaches for her silver bracelet. “But why me?”

“Because *we* want the same thing,” I repeat, this time emphasizing the word *we*. I look her straight in the eyes to sell the lie. “And we can’t have you running around doing your own investigations, Ms. Bright.”

“Just call me Chrissy, please. And that’s what I do.” She tilts her head slightly as she stares at me. Probably trying to figure out how much I know about her. I smirk as I exhale, then nod to acknowledge what she’s trying to do.

“We know. Investigative reporter. You can’t help it.” I break eye contact and raise an eyebrow to show that I’m more relaxed. “But if you keep making these rookie mistakes, Chrissy, you won’t be of any help to us, or to your sister.”

Chrissy shakes her head, her frustration clearly getting the better of her. “Wait, Mr. Shaw...”

“Just Damien.”

“Damien. All right. Who’s ‘us’?” She leans forward. “Who are you working with? Obviously not the police.”

“Obviously.”

“Then who?”

I grin. “A few people, with information, just like you.”

Chrissy rolls her eyes, clearly frustrated, but also invested. “So why work together? If I make these rookie mistakes...”

“Because by yourself, you’re a wild card. A liability. You’ll jeopardize our operations. But with us, you’re an asset.” *She’s bought it.* I crack my neck and let her see me check my watch. “But you’ve got a choice here, Chrissy.” I pull out the small paper bag from my coat pocket and place it in front of her. From my jacket pocket, I take out a sealed white envelope and place it beside the paper bag.

She looks at me quizzically but remains silent.

“You have a niece who needs you, and an entire life ahead of you.” I lean forward and rest my elbows on the table. “You can walk away. Trust the police, and wait for them catch your sister’s murderer.” I make sure to choose my words. *Walk away, murderer*, words that infuriate. “Or you can work with us, make sure she gets the justice she deserves, but at the cost of putting yourself at risk.” I already know she’s not afraid. I intentionally keep the cost of working with me vague so that she can’t process it fully.

“You just have to ask yourself two questions. First”—I raise a finger to count—“can you trust the police?” I already know the answer. She can’t. It’s been a year, she’s grown impatient. Impatient enough to shadow me at the airport. “And second”—I raise another finger—“can you live with yourself, not knowing, not having closure, and be all right with it, however long it takes for them to find the murderer?”

Chrissy looks at the two items I put on the table in front of her. The look on her face tells me she’s already decided the answers to my two questions, and the only thing left is for me to explain the contents of each item.

I tap the white envelope first. “This is ten grand. Cash. You can take the money, for your niece, and walk away. Forget about all this.” I push the cash closer to her. But I already know she won’t take it. I know her type. The more temptation to do the opposite of what she feels strongly about, the more her convictions solidify. “Or you can take this.” I tap on the brown paper bag and subtly pull it toward myself. Reverse psychology. “Which means you’ll work with us to catch our families’ murderer. And you tell me right now where your information is coming from.”

Chrissy glances at the white envelope, then stares at the brown paper bag. “What if I just take the money and use it to continue working alone?”

I shake my head, then stare into her eyes to let her know that I’m serious. “Then the next time you jeopardize our operation will be your last.”

“Doesn’t sound much like a choice, then,” she says sarcastically.

“You *do* have a choice, Chrissy.” I lean back into my chair without taking my eyes off hers. “Take the money and walk away, or you work with us. What you *can’t* be is a liability.”

Chrissy stares at me for a moment, then places her hand on the white envelope. I smile slightly in response. Actually, I let her see that I’m smiling. She smirks, then pushes the white envelope back to me. “He’s an anonymous informant. I’ve never met him and have no idea who he—or she—is.” Chrissy snatches the small brown paper bag from the table. “Everything he sends comes through the mail,” she says with a hint of embarrassment.

Witmer. So she just got lucky. This is the worst idea, but desperate times...

“You should have taken the money,” I say candidly. And deep down, I mean it.

She scoffs as she works on the tape sealing the paper bag. “Then you shouldn’t have called in the first place.”

OLD HABITS

*T*his better work. I glance at my watch before readjusting the gain on the mics to hear them more clearly. Chrissy's putting the plan in motion just as I instructed. Getting her to use her boyfriend by lying to her feels a bit wrong, more for her than for the Watcher. But there's no point dwelling on it now. We're here, and the vamp should start hunting now. Her pathology will compel her. And when she shows up, game over. *This time, no mistakes. This has to work.*

I nod as I listen to Chrissy talk Witmer into wearing the wedding rings I gave her. *She's good.* She tells him she's into role-play, and pretending to be a newlywed couple gets her in the mood to do things with him that would make any man jealous—and it hits me that I've underestimated both her determination to avenge her sister, and her usefulness to me, making me regret using her less and less. *Maybe I should've told her the truth.* Still, she bought the lies. That we're after a serial killer. Male, tall, and prefers newlyweds. She'll keep her eyes out for a single man in the restaurant, and won't find any. Worse comes to worst, all she'll have to do is go home with her boyfriend and make good on rewarding him for playing pretend—while I follow their hunter to *her* home, and take her out in the morning. *No, she doesn't need the truth. All she wants is what I want. Revenge.*

The video feed on my laptop shows it's going to be a full house. As much as I hate pizza nights, this is the perfect time for the Orphan Maker to hunt. *C'mon, show yourself.* I scan the three video screens for any trace of her, but nothing so far. I turn my attention to Chrissy and Witmer, just to make sure they're still being bait, and I'm relieved they've kept it up. Chrissy's on point, while Witmer's...motivated. I scan the videos again. *Sunday night, within a month after her recent kill. Hunting ground's full. Where the hell are you?*

I begin to wish I had more cameras installed, but I didn't have enough cameras. I grin at the irony. *Resource allocation.* The reason I gave Chrissy for why the police hasn't had much progress on her sister's murder. "The department lacked resources, and they didn't see the connection in the killings." I guess it's true what they say about confirmation bias mixed with obsession. I crack my neck and stare at the video feed once more, hoping for something. Anything. And just when I begin to wonder if I had missed anything in her pathology, I see someone with reddish hair pass one of the cameras.

I grab my laptop as my eyes jump from one video to the other feverishly. It's got to be her. I turn up the gain on all the mics, drowning out Chrissy's voice in favor of hearing everything else in Pierre's Pizzas. Forks, knives, and glass plates, kids playing, people talking...and that's when I hear her. "Two, please," the dead thing says, her voice as sweet and cold as death itself. *Where?* I double-check which mic it came from. *Mic 3. That's table...seven to nine. Where are you...? Damn it!* My cams don't reach tables eight and nine, and she isn't in table seven. *Does she know?*

I mute mic 1, lower the volume on mic 2 so I can still hear Chrissy at table five, and max mic 3. Witmer hasn't noticed;

he's overly focused on the dirty talk that Chrissy's been whispering into his hear—which is exactly the sort of thing that would grab this vamp's attention. I cringe at the reason I know this, right before I stare obsessively at the video feeds. *If she so much as makes a move on... No, she won't.* I catch myself getting concerned, getting emotional, and quickly take a deep breath without taking my eyes off the screens. *She's still casing her potential vics. I have time. No mistakes.*

“Babe? Something wrong?” I hear Chrissy ask sweetly through the receiver, and immediately check to see what's happening. Witmer's petrified, which only means one thing: he's recognized the Orphan Maker, and just found out that he's not meant for the field. He says something about allergies and some excuse about suddenly not feeling well, but it's obvious to me that he's broken character. And if it's obvious to me... *Damn it!* I grab my phone and quickly text Chrissy to either keep Witmer inside the premises or keep up the charade and go home with him as a newlywed couple, all the while scanning the screen for any sign of movement from *her*.

The Watcher fakes a cough and leaves a hundred on the table as he gets out of the booth. Chrissy returns her phone to her bag and valiantly maintains character...but I know they've been made, and the vamp's going to walk. I set my laptop aside and jump out of my car. Pierre's is two blocks and two corners away. I can make it on foot. If she knows they're acting, her paranoia will compel her to leave and return to her lair. Tailing her is risky, but this might be my only chance. *I hate it when plans go to hell!* I burst out of my car and make my way to Pierre's as fast as possible without looking suspicious. *“No mistakes,” my ass.*

I stop a block and a corner away and wait behind a magazine stand. It's a busy street. I've got a lot of cover. *Come out, come*

out, wherever you are, leech. She's going to come out soon. She has to. I check my watch again, then Pierre's. I know I'm right. And just like clockwork, she walks out the door. Instinct has me make a mental note of her so I don't lose her in the crowd. White and red dress that shows off her curves, high heels that announce her presence whenever she walks into a room, a gold-and-silver scarf to make her look dainty, and a small bag for a phone and a wallet. No concealed weapons or tools, but she doesn't need any.

We go up and down a few streets, turn a few lefts and rights, but something's off. All her old patterns are consistent: walking distance from lair to hunting grounds, casing couples in family-friendly restaurants, and starting the hunt on schedule. But my gut's telling me something's wrong. She turns a corner, and I follow. It's less crowded, and a bit familiar. I've passed here before, perhaps once or twice, on my way to Jessica's. She's just three blocks down to the left...but we go right, all the way down to a construction site that's been delayed due to a code violation. She weaves through the small crowd and slips into the building through an unlocked door.

Where the hell are you going? I stop following her, knowing full well that this can't be her lair. But nothing makes sense: she's supposed to check herself into some hotel, or at least an Airbnb for an indefinite amount of time. This isn't part of her pattern. I take a few steps back and look up at the construction site. It's half-finished, and the building's skeleton is fully exposed. Walls, pillars, metal and plastic pipes go through different sections of the ground floor. If I follow her into this maze, I might as well shout her name and tell her to come and say hello. *Wouldn't be such a bad idea if it were my kill week.*

I turn around and assess the situation. She hasn't found her new victims yet, and this isn't her lair. She's deviating from her pattern, and she's not stupid. *What the hell's happening here?* I look up and down the street and realize that this construction site is connected to a few smaller buildings in the area. But if I remember correctly, it's supposed to be an annex for the hospital, or at least that's what Jess told me a few months back. There are a few hotels in the area, which gives me reason to hope that this deviation from her pattern is a fluke. But none of this makes up for the fact that I've lost her again. I curse everything to hell and turn around to take notes of this location, when something heavy falls from the building and makes a loud crash behind me.

I jump out of the way and spin around almost instantaneously to see what almost hit me, and my eyes fixate on a silver-and-gold scarf tied to the hollow block that had fallen from above. I pull out my phone, take a quick deep breath, and shake my head as I look up at the half-finished construction site. *Tonight's already full of mistakes anyway. What's one more?*

WISHES

I open my eyes and taste rust and dirt. No, it's blood. My blood. I try to get up, but my entire body hurts. *What the hell happened?* I squeeze my eyes shut and gather my thoughts. *Crap. She's still here!* I pull myself together as it all comes back to me in a flash. I followed her here, to this construction site, then set my plan in motion, but continued to pursue the vamp instead of waiting for confirmation. *Big mistake.*

My left shoulder is dislocated, that's for sure. I groan as I roll over on to my stomach and use my right hand to get on my knees. She had me in this position for God knows how long. Must have been half an hour, maybe less, but it felt like forever. Whenever I tried to get on my feet, she'd swoop in from nowhere to rake at my back, my chest, or my limbs, just to get me back on my knees; she always *did* enjoy playing with her food. And when I was finally able to time it right and stick a blade in her gut, well, that was when she kicked me on the chest and sent me falling down the flight of stairs in front of me.

This damned sadistic leech! I try to fill my lungs with the evening breeze, but the air in this part of the city smells like sewer, and my cracked ribs aren't having it. I look up at the stairs and remember falling off the guardrails. I tried to hold on to the steel pipe with my left arm but rammed into it instead, hence the messed-up shoulder.

“I forgive you, Damien,” she says from somewhere above me. Just the sound of her voice makes my blood boil, and I’m soaked in it. I wince as I struggle to get on my feet, and that’s when the pain from all my other wounds suddenly register in my mind. I spit out blood and expletives as I ignore my screaming muscles and grab hold of a piece of a deformed bar that’s sticking out of the cement wall, and pull myself up by sheer willpower. “I forgive you too, Valerie,” I say with a malicious grin, “so why don’t you come out and give me a hug?”

Her laughter goes through the building’s skeleton as it does through my bones, and it’s sickening. “Oh, don’t tempt me, Damien,” she says seductively, “especially not after poking me.”

“But you love the temptation game, don’t you?” I quickly remove my leather belt, make a loop with it, and slip my left wrist and upper arm through it.

“Tsk tsk tsk, Damien... We haven’t done that in a long time,” she says kittenishly.

I slowly pull the belt downward to provide traction to my left arm, groaning and cursing at the same time.

“Now, now, lover, don’t start without me.” She’s become more playful, even after I’ve stabbed her, which means either her pattern and personality have changed or I’m dead in a few minutes. Still her voice sounds closer now. In fact, it sounds like she’s somewhere in front of me.

I moan in pain as I guide my left shoulder joint back into place, and the moment I’m done, I hear her giggle from behind the concrete wall in front of me. “Was it as good for you as it was for me?”

My left arm’s useful again. “Don’t tell me we’re done, Valerie...” I look around for anything I can use as a weapon, even if I know it’s impossible to kill her at this point. “Don’t you

want another round?” I spit on the floor once more, and the cut on my lip screams for attention, overshadowing the countless wounds on my chest, back, and thighs.

The Orphan Maker steps out of hiding and into the light. “That’s what I’ve always loved about you, Damien... Your vigor.” She saunters toward me, her high heels scraping the concrete floor as if they were counting down to her next attack. And for some reason, my brain suddenly races to answer two questions. First, *why hasn’t she killed me?* It’s probably because she’s been waiting for this moment. And second, *why the hell is there still no confirmation?* I’m either going to get real lucky or royally screwed. *Got to stall. No matter what.*

“You know what *I’ve* always loved about *you?*” I smile, coldly, only because I can’t bring myself to smile at this monster in any other way.

She grins as she shows me my knife, and I immediately look at her abdomen. Her blood has stained her dress, but the wound has already closed. *Damned vamp healing.* “Do tell me, lover. I’m *dying* to know.”

You’ll die all right. “Three things.” I have to think fast. I only gave the number in the hopes that her curiosity will keep me alive. I slowly walk to a concrete wall to my left, pretending to find something to lean on. But in reality, I’m removing one direction from which she could attack me. And limping to it shows her that I’m not looking to fight. At least not yet.

“You like games,” I say with a chuckle. The irony doesn’t escape me; this wasn’t even a lie. I let my back push against the wall, which I hope keeps me on my feet and helps stop the bleeding at least a little.

She skips forward gracefully and flashes a charming smile—the kind she’d use to lure all her victims. “I *do* love my

games, Damien.” She spins around once, like a ballerina, then tilts her head as she raises her hand to her face and makes a peace sign. “Second reason?”

“You’re unpredictable,” I say with a smirk while I run my fingers on my chest as gently as possible, feeling the wounds, assessing how deep they are. Too shallow to bleed to death, but deep enough to hurt like hell.

The vampire crouches in front of me, letting her dress sweep the floor. “You’re lying...” she says melodically.

“Hah!” I laugh. “You’re right. I hate that about you. Always have.” I slowly make my way to the stairs going down, and suddenly regret following her all the way up to the sixth floor.

She half-crawls in my direction and laughs with me. “Give me the third reason!” Her tone has suddenly become more vicious, more threatening. I know if I satisfy her curiosity now, I’m dead. *Dug my own grave with this strategy. Stupid. Got to delay.*

I stop trying to get away, lean comfortably against the concrete wall behind me, and scan the monster crouched before me—she has bloodlust behind her smile and murder in her eyes—and I sigh, almost in surrender. Her smile only widens, as if preparing for some kind of ending, or anticipating a conclusion. I look straight into her eyes and inhale despite my cracked ribs. “Before I tell you, I need to know something.”

“Which is?” she asks while still half-crawling toward me, her dress trailing the floor.

I keep eye contact with her and relax my body, hoping to show her that I don’t intend to fight at all. “Was any of it real?”

The Orphan Maker stops crawling. Her smile disappears, and her eyes suddenly turn soft as she stands up and stares at me, as if trying to figure out if I’m being sincere. *I am.* And my sincerity surprises us both.

“What do you mean?” she asks as her head tilts. But for the most part, she simply stands still, a few steps away from me. A safe distance.

I push myself up against the wall to stand straight, and ask as sincerely as I can, “Did you ever, *truly*, love me, Valerie?”

She blinks twice in quick succession before her eyes fill with reddish tears. Something’s changed. It’s as if the vampire side of her is still there, still present, but resting, and I feel like I’m talking to the old Valerie, the one who loved kids even if she couldn’t have one of her own... The Valerie who actually felt guilty for wanting what she wanted from me, and hated herself for taking the affections that never belonged to her. “I...I don’t know.”

I nod as I close my eyes. She walks toward me—I can hear her shoes hit the concrete—and leans forward—I feel her breath against my face. “I wish I knew,” she whispers softly.

“So do I,” I say as I open my eyes, only to see her face right in front of me. Her eyes are wet with bloodstained tears, but I know this look. I hated this look. This was the look she always had when I left her for Beth...when she felt most ashamed.

“I also wish...” Valerie whispers, her voice breaking, “I wish I wasn’t...this.”

I look deep into her eyes. She’s telling the truth, and my heart breaks all over again...for everything I’ve done, and everything we’ve done together. But some things you just can’t turn back from. I slowly raise my hands up to her shoulders. She notices but doesn’t seem to care; her eyes are locked on to mine. I prepare to grab her, as hard as I can, and if I have to...

“And what are ya planning to do?” a strong, familiar voice asks with an Irish accent, mockery and contempt laced in every word. “Chew her neck off?”

Confirmation. Finally.

MÉNAGE À TROIS

Valerie doesn't break eye contact with me, but her eyes turn wild and feral once more.

"Well, that's a pretty little neck," Bishop says threateningly while puffing on his cigar.

"Were you?" she asks with a creepy smile plastered all over her face, and I can't help but feel that this smile is nothing more than a mask. The real Valerie is scared. "Were you going to...be gentle?"

I grin at the irony of the situation. "You know me... I can get rough," I say right before I fasten my arms around nothing but air; she had already evaded my clutches and had taken a few steps back.

"Naughty, Damien, so very naughty," she says, laughing. I expected her to give more attention to Bishop, but I was wrong. Her eyes are still on me, and only me. I take a step forward and prepare myself, especially since her back is arched and her arms are extended to either side—she's ready for a fight.

I address the other monster before us without taking my eyes off the first one. "Took you long enough."

"Aw, Damien." Bishop chuckles as he slowly paces from side to side while taking a draw. "I'm surprised that ya had Mummy call Daddy!"

“Ah, well,” I say without making an effort to hide my frustration, “you know me, Bishop. Full of surprises.”

Bishop cracks his fingers. “And here I thought ya didn’t like to share.”

“Oh, boys...” Valerie finally looks at Bishop, and grins from ear to ear, “I hope you weren’t expecting a threesome.”

Bishop removes his trench coat, revealing clothing that looks similar to light armor. He also has bracers on both forearms and shins, and from where I stand, it looks like they have small spikes on them. “The Orphan Maker,” Bishop says with a drop of satisfaction in his voice while putting on metallic gloves, “I sincerely hope ya don’t disappoint.”

Valerie cackles. “You came prepared,” she says as she glances at me, “and I’ve had enough foreplay.”

Before I can even think of what to do, Valerie turns into a blur, and the next thing I know, I’m flying across the construction floor once more. I protect my head with my arms just in time as I crash into a pile of unused steel pipes. I ignore all my wounds and bruises and scramble to my feet in an instant with a sawed-off pipe in hand and raring to go another round. I don’t care anymore if Bishop lands the killing blow, as long as she dies today. *Hell, if we get Valerie tonight, I’d be happy to give Bishop my head as a tip.*

The Irish brawler takes a defensive stance, covering his head with his hands and arms while allowing Valerie to attack him from different angles. His light armor proves effective against scratches, but his head is still exposed, and it isn’t beneath vampires to bite faces. He takes a few cautious swings to counter her, but nothing. She laughs at Bishop while dancing around him, slowing down just enough for both of us to get a glimpse of her, smiling crazily, before speeding up again.

I pick up another steel pipe with my left hand, then concentrate on her movements; when it comes to circling in combat, it's virtually impossible to avoid drifting into a pattern. I take a few careful steps closer to her radius of attack around Bishop, noting that he's subtly cocking his right hand while using his left to block as much as he can. We're waiting on each other, trying to read each other's mind. First to move will be the distraction, the second catches her. And as much as I want my fingers around her neck, my left arm's shot. *Damn it! I'm the distraction.*

Valerie moves so fast that she's almost a blur to me, but Bishop seems to be able to keep up with her. Doesn't matter. She strays a bit too close to me as she charges Bishop from the left. I throw the pipe in my left hand directly at her, and just as I expected, eyes in the back of her head. She spins around and deflects it with her hand while actually laughing at me. But no matter. I ignore her mockery and lunge at her, and see her eyes widen, changing instantly from delight to surprise, then anger, in a single moment. She sneers as she takes a step back to pounce. *Mistake.* She has stepped back into Bishop, whose reflexes and timing are indeed something else.

Bishop manages to grab her by her elbow and yank her to himself before she can even react. The moment he's close enough, Bishop suddenly detaches some kind of weapon from his left thigh. I launch myself at Valerie with sawed-off pipe in hand, hoping to stab her through the neck with the sharp side; with Bishop's help, we could decapitate her here and now. But she manages to deliver a roundhouse kick to my left arm to send me tumbling to the other side of the floor. *Humerus is broken, but no pain; still on adrenaline.* I quickly get to my feet and note that she can't seem to pry herself away from Bishop's grip.

Gloves must have a grip mechanism or something. Society perks... I watch Valerie flail against Bishop's grip, and something's off. Vampires are supposed to be twice, thrice as strong as a man. But for some reason, Bishop's feet are stuck in place, as if his boots are welded to the concrete floor. *Who cares? This is my chance!*

I dash forward and grab Valerie by the neck. "Now!" I scream as I thrust the sharp edge of the pipe at her throat, but she grabs it with her right hand. She's just about to yank it away when Bishop grabs her right hand as well. I tighten my grip on her neck and the sawed-off pipe and push as hard as I can, and I can feel Bishop using all his strength to hold on to the Orphan Maker's elbow and hand.

"Oh, boys," Valerie says while visibly straining against the both of us, "sooo eager!"

As soon as I hear her speak, I put all my weight into my right arm, but she follows my lead and lowers her center of gravity to force Bishop down to his knees to maintain his grip on her left elbow.

"Fecker!" Bishop curses as his grip on Valerie's left elbow breaks, and she quickly uses her left hand to grab the pipe to stab Bishop in the eye—which he narrowly evades, but not completely; the pipe grazes Bishop's temple. I try to swing at her out of desperation. A last-ditch attempt to at least damage her a little. But she dodges me without even looking while landing a side kick to Bishop's chest, right before swiftly elbowing me in the back. Bishop and I both fall to the floor as Valerie disappears into the shadows once more.

I scramble back to my feet, but Bishop is so much faster and is already in a fighting stance, ready for another round. *This isn't a contest.* I ready myself for another round, but I can suddenly feel my entire body screaming with pain. Dislocated shoulder,

broken arm, cracked ribs, bruises all over, and blood loss from all the scratches. *This is a death sentence.*

“Show yourself!” I shout without hiding my frustration.

“What happened to all that spunk?” Bishop says while scanning our surroundings for movement.

“I had her,” I reply while doing the same.

Bishop shakes his head and mocks, “Of course ya did.”

“He did! We were having a moment,” Valeries says as she steps out of the shadows once more and smiles at us both. She raises the sawed-off pipe and points at Bishop. “But you interrupted us.”

I take a deep breath, knowing that she could strike any time. But I also know that if she decides to take me out first, Bishop won’t lift a finger to help. Not anymore. I’m unarmed, wounded, and without any *Society perks*; we both know that at this point, I’m just in his way. If I’m to be useful now, it’s as a distraction.

Valeries turns her attention to me. “You still owe me a third reason,” she says playfully as she intentionally meanders around us. “I miss those days when it was just you and me, Damien.” The words are acid to my ears. “Why’d you have to bring a friend?”

I glance at Bishop, who had just grinned at the comment.

“Because he can’t handle yer pretty little neck by himself,” Bishop says with a thick, Irish accent and a palpably sarcastic tone.

“And you think *you* can?” Valerie laughs.

Bishop chuckles. “Why don’t ya let *me* hold yer hand, love? See if we can’t have our *own* moment?”

The Orphan Maker cranes her neck as she glares at Bishop. “That depends,” she says purringly, “will I like how you taste?”

She giggles as she tilts her head back and lifts the sawed-off pipe up, slightly above her head, and stares longingly at the blood on its tip. She licks her lips, opens her mouth, and sticks her tongue out obscenely as she lowers the pipe down and into her mouth.

I sense Bishop getting ready for a more vicious fight and rack my brain for ideas on how to survive this night. But before I can think of something, Valerie screams and hisses at us. No, not us. At Bishop.

“Well, look at that, Damien. Your girlfriend likes me,” Bishop says mockingly as he crouches, ready to engage.

She’s all yours after I’m through with her.

“Corpse blood!” the Orphan Maker screams as she drops the sawed-off pipe and spits on the floor, as if she had tasted something repulsive, then glares at me for a moment—and, if I’m not mistaken, there’s actual fear in her eyes—before disappearing into the shadows once more.

I take another deep breath and look at Bishop.

Bishop only grins as he stares at where the Orphan Maker stood moments ago. “I look forward to our second date, love,” he says to no one sarcastically with a hint of genuine amusement. He then looks at me, eyes me from head to foot, and laughs. “Hospital’s across the street. Mighty convenient for ye, aye?”

“Hmpf.” I focus on breathing steadily and say nothing more; I simply watch him make his way down the stairs. I’ll follow soon enough. Jess is only three blocks away. *She’ll kill me if I show up at her doorstep like this...unless I bleed to death on the way.* I try to fill my lungs with the night air one more time before heading for the stairs. My entire body is in hell, drenched in my own blood—which reminds me of something odd: a vampire spitting out blood. *Corpse blood.*

DEALS AND DEBTS

“I knew it!” Jess exclaims the moment she lays eyes on my blood-soaked clothes and quickly closes the door behind me. “Tell me she’s dead,” she says while fiddling with the door locks.

“She’s dead,” I say with a slight chuckle while dragging myself toward the kitchen.

“Great...” Jess turns around, sees where I’m headed, and snaps. “No! Not the kitchen!”

I turn around, my body sore all over. “Why? It was fine last time.”

“Charlie’s arriving tomorrow.” She walks over to me and slips an arm around my waist. “This way, my room.”

Never set foot in her room before. I shake my head as we reach the door to her room, and I place a hand on the doorpost the moment she opens it. “Don’t want to stain your sheets.”

“You won’t,” Jess says candidly and helps me walk through door. The moment I round the door, I’m greeted by the smell of alcohol, followed by the sight of what looks like a makeshift emergency room. She has covered her bed with plastic wrap, stacked all her things in one corner of the room, and readied the first aid kit, along with a few other medical supplies.

I stare at her and grin. “Glad to know you have so much confidence in me.”

“Shut up and take off your clothes,” she says as she walks over to the other side of the room and picks up a switchblade and scissors.

She’s all business now, and she’s pissed. *Best not to push it.* I groan as I arch my shoulders to let my coat fall off my back, but removing my shirt is a struggle as the cloth sticks to the scratch wounds that riddle my chest and back.

“Never mind,” Jess says as she swipes a few other things from her bedside table and walks over to me. “Just get on the bed.”

“So bossy... Some men like that,” I joke to ease the tension and hope that she plays along.

“Read the room, Damien. Literally.” She glares at me with her big brown eyes, then glances at the bed.

I smile at her and nod. “Thanks, Jess. I owe you.”

The sound of a spoon tapping on glass wakes me, followed by the strong scent of coffee...and dried blood. Lots of it. I open my eyes to the sight of Jessica sitting on a chair by my bedside stirring her coffee—which I find strange and unfamiliar. “Trying something new?” I ask without trying to get up, knowing that my wounds would probably sting.

“What are you talking about?” she asks as she turns to face me. Her hair’s wet and her clothes are different.

“You’ve always liked your coffee black.” I test myself by moving my arms and legs. *Just sore, but no real pain.* “Either you need the sugar, or I’ve been out long enough for you to develop a sweet tooth.”

Jess sighs. “Only a few hours, but I haven’t slept.”

“You showered.”

“I had to.” She takes a sip from her coffee, and I can tell by her face that she doesn’t like it. “You ruined my favorite blouse.”

“Sorry about that. But thanks again, Jess.” I push myself up, expecting a world of pain to shoot through my entire body. *Really? Just soreness?* I sit up straight and try to twist sideways. Still nothing. Even when I lift my feet off the bed and place them on the floor, my body registers no pain from open wounds, which means either I’ve gone numb, or the wounds have closed overnight. “How deep were the wounds?”

Jess shakes her head. “Several were worse than last time, which means you’re not even supposed to be able to get up.”

“Hmpf...” I nod. “I guess this answers our question from before. Better add this to our notes. Day 11, healing and regeneration.”

“Don’t have to.” She sets her coffee down on a saucer on a small table beside the bed. “You’re the last, Damien, you and your damned vampire. I’ve made arrangements.”

“And they’ve agreed?”

“For a price.” Jess looks away. I know that look. *Guilt*. “But yes, they’ve agreed.”

“How much?” I ask even if I already know it’s not money. With the Society, it’s never been about the money.

Jess exhales as she gets on her feet and places a hand on her forehead. “A head.”

I knew it. “Does it matter to them who delivers the head?”

“No, as long as they get it.” Jess places both hands on her waist as she stares at the ceiling. *She can’t even look at me. I can’t blame her.*

“Once they have their head, you’re out? No strings?”

Jess takes a deep breath, then looks at me. “Yeah. No strings.”

I smile at the thought of Jessica free from this life, and glad she's made her decision. My short and miserable life in exchange for her future. It's the least I can do, and God knows she deserves it. I look into her eyes and nod. "Sold."

She nods back at me, exhales, and wipes a tear from her eye. "Thank you," Jess says, then clears her throat. "Now, if you can manage, I need you out of here."

"That's it? You get me in bed, have your way with me, and ask me to leave?" I say with a grin while slowly getting off her bed.

"Don't flatter yourself, Damien." Jess grins back at me. "I did all the work. You just lay there and moaned and groaned all night." She tosses a university jacket at me—probably Charlie's—and jerks her head in the direction of the door.

I chuckle-groan as I put the jacket on, but estimate that even the soreness should be completely gone by tonight. Faster healing is in, but the irritability is delayed; I guess each transition can be a bit different, and I can only hope that my kill week comes on time. I walk out of her bedroom and crack my neck the moment I reach the kitchen, more out of habit; the tension on my neck and back are gone. *Yeah, faster healing is definitely in.*

"Damien?" Jess calls out from her room, her tone all business once more. "Seriously, last night was a one-off. You know that, right?"

"Yeah," I say as I head for the door.

"Also..." she adds, and I can sense the hesitation in her voice. "Last night, you kept talking about Bishop being more than capable..."

"A proper killer," I say sarcastically.

Jess follows me to the door and clears her throat before speaking, which only means she's unsure how to say it. "Does it really

matter that *you're* the one that kills her? I mean, you could always choose to accept—”

“Thanks for fixing me up, Jess, really... I appreciate it.” I feel guilty for interrupting her, especially because I know she means well, and she stitched me up last night even *after* she asked me to keep her out of this. But I don't even want to hear the words comes out of her mouth; I don't want to hear any talk about giving up. I can't. Especially not now when I'm so close. And especially not from her—lest I think she never really knew me at all. I turn around to face her, just to make sure she knows I'm serious. “I'll send you my grocery list. Last order, for old times' sake.”

Jess exhales, then nods at me without hiding the sadness from her face. “I'll give you a discount...for old times' sake.”

I chuckle at the thought of getting a discount. “No need, Jess.”

She rolls her eyes at her mistake.

“Do me a favor. I might not have enough time to pick them up.” I check my watch and note the time. “Charge me for delivery instead? One last order.”

She takes a deep breath and checks her own watch—probably thinking about Charlie—then looks at me softly. “All right, Damien. One last order.”

I flash her a smile before I turn around and close the door behind me. As I make my way down the hall, I think about Jess and her future with Charlie. She deserves to have a good life. A good future. Probably more than I deserve my revenge. *Soon enough, Jess. I promise. Soon enough.*

vexed

I toss my blood-soaked clothes into the garbage in the pantry, stroll into my room, and stand in front of the mirror. The wounds that had drenched my clothes last night have completely closed, and the bruises are almost gone. I also haven't had to crack my neck or my back, or scratch the bite wound since I woke this morning. *Tick tock indeed.* I hop in the shower and turn on the heat to wash off all the blood that had dried on my body—and there's a lot. As I stare at the bathroom floor turning red, all the questions start running through my head. *When will I get the extreme irritability side effect? Why'd Valerie spit out Bishop's blood? What's "corpse blood" supposed to mean?*

The hot shower helped soothe my muscles, and I feel more energetic than ever despite the fact that I barely had enough sleep last night. I dry myself and throw on a black shirt and brown tactical pants to ready myself for the rest of the day. Still, the most important questions are left unanswered: *Did she intentionally lead me to the construction site? And if she did, how'd she know I was going to follow her? Unless...she's the one doing the hunting and used herself as bait.* I check my phone battery. *Eighty-eight percent. Good enough.* I grab my go bag and stuff a few more things in it—binoculars, army knife, pistol, and compass—and head out.

The street's always busy near Pierre's Pizzas. *Almost the perfect hunting grounds.* I trace my steps while looking around. This time, without having to keep my eyes on the vampire, I can focus on looking for where she may have set up her lair. It can't be far. It's never far. Not with *her*.

The familiar street has no locations for a potential lair. No hotels, motels, or lodging of any kind. A few residential areas here and there, but nothing private enough for her compulsions. I continue down the path I took last night and look up and down every street and corner for even a hint of a possible lair. Nothing. At least nothing that fits her specific taste. *Upper class. Comfortable. Easy for her to blend in.*

I round the corner that leads to the construction site, but pause and stare at the hospital it's attached to. *It can't be. Not her style.* I make my way down to the site just like last night. But this time, my eyes are taking note of everything around it. Small diners, coffee shops, a few stores, and a huge parking lot. I take a look at my phone to confirm the surroundings via GPS, and the only thing I can confirm so far is that this really isn't her style. *Where the hell is her lair?*

The closer I get to the construction site, the more I get the feeling that this is a red herring. Still, I look around to check for construction workers and guards before slipping through the same entrance as last night. With daylight everywhere, it's easier to see why my gut's telling me this is a waste of time. I get to the same floor as last night and survey the surroundings. There's too much open space to make it intimate enough for

her compulsions, too many pillars to hide behind, and too many holes for her to use as emergency exits. *It's all wrong.*

I place my go bag on the floor and pull out my compass and binoculars, face east, and scan the area with the binoculars. There's no building or structure that's protected from the sun from sunrise to sunset, just as GPS had already confirmed. There's no real place for a transient vampire to lodge within a three-block radius, which has been her preferred distance from lair to hunting grounds. The only thing of significance from this spot is...*Jess's place. Damn it! She's hunting me!*

My brain goes on overdrive as I try to piece everything together. If my hunch is right, she wasn't at Pierre's to look for a new vic; she knew I'd assume Pierre's to be her next hunting grounds and played along. She intentionally spooked Witmer into leaving, making it look like it was a failed hunt. They left, she left, then I followed. Same thing with Folley. She knew I was watching. She called out to me. The Folley kid looking like Zach wasn't coincidence. *She planned everything to get to me. It all makes sense, and nothing makes sense. Unless...her compulsion has evolved. Shit!*

If it's possible, if her compulsion has changed...evolved, then her patterns no longer apply and I have no real way of tracking her. But is it even possible? Even the Society's records show that the compulsions never change. Every vampire's compulsion is different, but once it's established, it doesn't change. So why should I believe that she's any different? *Because it all adds up. The last piece of evidence is staring at me in the face.* I walk to the edge of the floor and stare at the hospital across the street, then turn toward the direction of Jess's apartment. She could have killed me already. Twice. But she bit me instead, then toyed with me without dealing any fatal wounds, and made sure I'd

have access to medical care. *I'm not alive because of luck. I'm alive because of her sadism... Now what?*

I close my eyes, take a deep breath, and slowly exhale as I gather my thoughts...all of which say I'm stuck. If her compulsions have truly changed—and all the evidence seems to say so—then I've got nothing to go on. *Damn her! Damn her to hell!* I feel my blood boil; I could just scream from the top of my lungs, but what would that accomplish? *Everything's gone to shit!* If only I had just one lead, one clue!

I turn around to grab my bag and head back to the stairs, when I stop dead in my tracks as my jaw falls to the floor. Standing by the stairs, wearing a white blouse, skinny jeans, and sneakers, staring at me wide-eyed, is Chrissy Bright.

DÉJÀ VU

“**W**hat are you doing here?” I snap.

“I’m sorry,” Chrissy says, clearly startled by my sudden outburst. “I just thought—”

“You were following me?” I snatch my bag off the floor and immediately walk toward her.

“No. I wasn’t...” Her eyes are sincere, which means she had followed me last night. She followed *us*. I have to know what she saw. But first, I have to calm down. She can give me Witmer, and Witmer has to have leads. I take a deep breath and slowly exhale, shaking my head without taking my eyes off her.

“Chrissy, I apologize.” I relax my shoulders and walk to her more slowly. “I was in the middle of something, and you just caught me off guard.”

Chrissy nods and smiles nervously, but can’t look me in the eyes. She’d seen something. “Are you...all right?” The way she asks makes it obvious to me that she’s suspicious of something. I can’t tell if she’s asking about my well-being because I snapped, or because actually she followed us all up here last night.

“Yes, of course,” I respond as casually as I can, but I can’t say much. Not until I know what she’s seen. And I can’t exactly ask her directly without sounding even more suspicious. Still, one thing’s for sure: neither of us can pretend that she didn’t follow

me last night, at least to this construction site. We stare at each other for a moment, and it's clear to us that we're both trying to make up a story, a lie, to sell each other. But I'm out of options. *Got to give to get.* "I'm sure you have a lot of questions."

Chrissy nods as she says, "A lot indeed," then takes a few steps toward me. "Does this mean you trust me?"

Rule number three. Don't trust anybody. I chuckle at the irony of all my mistakes, then look at her in the eyes. She's young, zealous, eager for justice. And I'm desperate for help, even if I hate admitting it...even to myself. I adjust the sling of my go bag and glance in the direction of Jess's apartment. "This isn't a safe place to talk."

One bad idea after another. "Give me a second, just let me tidy up a bit," I say as soon as I open the door and make a beeline for the calendar hanging in the living room without waiting for Chrissy to respond. I take it and toss it in my room, then gather several used coffee mugs that are scattered all over the place. I stack them neatly in the sink, look around once, then shake my head. *This will work.* I walk back to the door and open it, and the moment I do, I notice that Chrissy's actually smaller than I thought. "Come in."

"Thanks," Chrissy says as she slowly follows me into the living room.

"Please, forgive the mess. I wasn't expecting guests," I say apologetically, and I actually mean it. I haven't had guests since...since forever. Except Jess. But Jess isn't exactly a guest;

she's...*Jess*. "Coffee? Water? Beer?" I offer as I gesture for her to take a seat on the couch.

"Truth?" Chrissy asks while flashing a sweet, charming smile as she places her pink bag on the table and sinks into the smaller chair adjacent to the couch.

"All right, straight to the point it is," I say as I walk to the fridge and grab two cans of beer. "And for that, you'll need a beer."

"I'm a big girl," she says a little playfully, "I think I'll be able to handle whatever it is you're going to tell me." I can tell she's trying to act tough and lighten the mood, but I can somehow sense her anxiety from across the room...even her intentions. She wants me to volunteer information without her asking her questions first. *Smart move. Impressive*. I look at her from the kitchen and notice that she's actually smaller than I remember...and younger. Seeing her without the heels, the coat, the ponytail, and the makeup, she could pass for a college senior—which makes think that Valerie might have seen through their act in the first place. But that's all water under the bridge. And if my theory's right, if Valerie has been hunting me since day one, then she could have followed me to the airport and known all along that I was working with Chrissy.

"Here." I open the can for her and place it on the table, then open my own can and go through half of it. Chrissy takes a sip but isn't interested. Still, she forces a smile. *Not a beer girl. Figures*. I take the couch since she opted for the chair, and smile at her for a moment, just enough to make her feel that I *really* trust her. "Before I say anything, Chrissy, or even let you ask me any questions, I need to know...what did you see last night?"

The smile on Chrissy's face instantly disappears, and I notice her unconsciously rubbing her fingers together. *Self-comfort*. "It

was dark, so I didn't see much of anything." Her lies aren't as convincing today as her role-playing last night.

"You knew where to enter the site, and what floor to look." I lean closer to her and soften my tone. "You're smart, resourceful, and quick on your feet. I *want* to trust you, Chrissy. We're after the same thing." I lift my beer can to hers and smile. "What do you say?"

Chrissy looks at me for a moment before tapping my beer with hers.

"Cheers," I say sincerely, and we both drink. I finish the rest of my beer while she takes a while to get to half of hers.

She places her half-empty can on the table and takes a deep breath. "You already know I followed you last night."

"You got better at it too," I say with a grin. "You weren't too easy for me to spot."

Chrissy chuckles. "I was also too far to catch up."

I clap my hands while laughing at the mental image of her my head running after me and Valerie, then losing us in some corner, and I'm relieved to see her laugh with me. *She's still making rookie mistakes, but she's a quick study.* After we both have a good laugh together, she takes another sip of beer, sighs, then shakes her head. "I just got lucky last night...but I have a feeling I've been set up from the beginning."

"As I said. Smart." I pull up my right leg and tuck it under my left so I can sit sideways on the couch and face her. "Tell me what happened last night. Tell me everything, then *I'll* tell *you* everything you want to know."

"All right, deal."

LEAVING NEVERLAND

Chrissy takes another deep breath, then nods at no one in particular, as if to tell herself to start. “I did exactly as you asked, and Jacob and I were doing great. But I kept getting this feeling that we were being watched. So I looked around, very subtly, and noticed this woman—the redhead that you followed—sitting in the corner table.”

Table nine. Of all the tables I expected her to choose... She really was hunting me.

“I was surprised because she was so beautiful,” Chrissy says, getting more animated as she speaks, “and Jacob turned around to see who I was looking at, and that’s when everything just went crazy.”

I nod in agreement. “He started coughing. I heard.”

“Yes, he did, and... Wait a second, you heard?” Chrissy stares at me as she puts things together. “You bugged our table?”

“Of course,” I say with a straight face, even if I know where this conversation is heading.

“You heard...everything?” Chrissy asks, her face as red as a tomato.

I grin. “You were very convincing and did what you had to do.”

“Oh God!” Chrissy laughs as she covers her eyes with her hands. “I’m so embarrassed!”

“Don’t be,” I quickly add. “It was just a performance, nothing more.”

Chrissy rolls her eyes and picks up her beer can from the table. “You were right, I can’t be fully sober for this!”

As soon as she finishes her beer, I point to the fridge and ask if she wants another, but she simply shakes her head and waves her hand while swallowing. “No, thank you. I’m a lightweight,” she says as she pulls out a scrunchie from her pink bag on the table.

“So Jacob hurries to get the bill so we could leave,” she says as she ties her blond hair, “and I followed him all the way to the door of the restaurant to talk to him, but it was as if he was a different person.”

“He was fearful?”

“Angry!” Chrissy shakes her head while rolling her eyes. “He started rambling about his job, and blamed *me* for something related to surveillance and security that his employers would kill him for, but I couldn’t understand what he was saying anymore.”

“What about surveillance?” I ask without sounding too interested.

“I don’t know, something about failing his job,” Chrissy says with clear disinterest. “But whatever it was, he suddenly fell silent, pushed me against the restaurant wall, and kissed me...”

If Valerie didn’t know Witmer was involved, she surely knows now. But so far, so good. Chrissy’s filling in the gaps, and I tell myself to remain quiet and let her continue.

“It would have been romantic if I didn’t realize that he was trying to shut me up as the redhead passed, and I would have been so jealous of her if I didn’t find out later on that she was some kind of...ninja?”

Ninja? The Orphan Maker? I burst out laughing at the irony.

“What?” Chrissy asks incredulously. “You owe me answers, Damien!”

“You’ll get them, I promise!” I shake my head as I force myself to stop laughing. “Please go on. So the redhead left Pierre’s...”

Chrissy places a hand on her neck and stretches, looking up, then down. “Yes, she left Pierre’s and turned right. I remember because Jacob apologized to me, *profusely*, before storming out of the restaurant and crossing the street...and I remember wanting to follow him to talk to him but also felt like I should follow the redhead instead. And I stood there not knowing what to do, but just knowing that I had to decide. Then *you* suddenly passed by the restaurant, dead set on following the redhead.”

“All right, so where did you lose us?” I ask, getting up to get another can of beer from the fridge.

“At the intersection across the hospital.” Chrissy gets up from the chair and follows me to the kitchen, still talking. “You just turned the corner and disappeared. I turned left and went all the way down to the convenience store at Oak Street. When I figured I’d lost you, I backtracked and went to the hospital to ask the guard if he had seen a beautiful red-haired woman pass by.”

“And what did he say?” I ask as I take two more beers from the fridge and place them on the kitchen counter.

“He didn’t notice anyone with red hair,” Chrissy says with a hint of a slur in her voice as she leans on the counter. *She’s really a lightweight after all. And talkative when tipsy.* “So I figured that if he didn’t notice her, and she’s almost impossible to not notice, then you guys had to have entered a building or turned into an alley *before* the hospital.”

I open my second can of beer and take a sip, then tap at the unopened can on the counter to see if she's interested in another one.

"Thanks, but really, no," Chrissy says, her face turning red.

"So you went and checked all the alleys?"

"Yes!" Chrissy says while pointing at me with both index fingers.

"But we were probably already in the construction site by then," I add.

"Right," she says, shooting at me with her finger guns.

"So how'd you find us?"

"Arthur Bishop."

I grin as I nod. "You saw him, put two and two together, and followed him."

Chrissy exhales. "Exactly. *He* was the real mark at the airport, right?"

I nod again.

Chrissy looks at me, then stares at the kitchen counter as all the excitement and energy drains from her face. "I've gone over it a hundred times in my head since last night."

Here we go... Here come the questions.

"I have so many questions, and I've already told you everything."

"Not yet everything," I quickly counter. "What did you see when you followed Bishop up the site?"

Chrissy shakes her head, then looks up at me and smiles sarcastically. "I don't think what I saw, or what I *think* I saw, is really relevant."

"Why not?" I push. She saw *something*, and I need to know exactly what it is so I'll know what lie to sell.

“Because it was dark, and the light may have played tricks on my eyes.” She inhales deeply, as if air in the lungs increases resolve. “I stayed hidden a floor under you. There was noise, fighting, and voices, but I couldn’t really hear much because of the floor’s height.”

“Then you came up to our floor, right?”

“Right.” Chrissy hesitates but finally decides to come out with it. “And again, it must have been a trick of the light because...I thought I saw you covered in wounds and blood.”

“Really? Me?” I smile, feigning ignorance and hoping to show her that I agree with her assumption about the lights playing tricks on her eyes.

“Yes!” She pulls the scrunchie from her hair, unmaking the ponytail, and runs her fingers through her hair. “And I also thought I saw the woman disappear from thin air.”

I chuckle at her statements to agree with her assumptions even further. “Like a magician?” I ask sarcastically, remembering that *ninja* was the word she had used earlier.

“I know, I know, impossible...” Chrissy shakes her head. “I would insist that I know what I saw, and I’m not sure if I should, but one thing’s for sure now. The red-haired woman, she’s the serial killer we’re after. Right?”

My turn to take a deep breath. “Yeah. She’s the one.”

“She killed my sister,” Chrissy whispers.

“Her name’s Valerie.”

“Valerie.”

This is it. Time for the new lie. I clear my throat. “Listen, Chrissy, I—”

Two knocks suddenly come from the door, followed by one, then another two. *Shit!*

DEEPER DOWN THE RABBIT HOLE

“Get in the pantry,” I whisper as I point to the pantry’s double-swinging door.

“Why? Who is it?” Chrissy whispers back.

I grab her by the elbow and pull her to the pantry myself. “I swear I’ll explain everything. Just please, trust me on this!”

Chrissy is about to say something, but I don’t allow her to let out another word. I push her through the pantry’s double-swinging door. “This’ll only take a minute,” I say quietly right before leaving her in the pantry.

“Finally,” Jess says the moment I open the door.

“And hello to you too, Jess,” I say as I look at the three bags on the floor. *Accessories, ammo, and chems*. I take the two heavier bags and leave the accessories on the floor. “I’ll come back for that.”

“I got it,” she says and bends over to pick it up.

“No, it’s okay,” I insist, “I’ll get it. You can just leave it there and go be with Charlie.”

“Yeah, his flight’s delayed. I’ve got time.” She wraps the sling over her shoulder and proceeds to follow me in, and the best course of action I can think of is to play along and let her help me with the delivery, then convince her that I was just about to leave—it’s the excuse she’ll most probably believe—we’ll leave together, then I’ll come back to get Chrissy.

“You know, I was just about to leave, so you can leave that by the door.” I say everything as casually as I can, hoping she’ll bite.

“Is that why you took so long to open the door?” she asks, pretending to be annoyed.

“Actually, yeah.” I take a look at my watch, pretending to be in a hurry. “Don’t want to waste the daylight.”

Jess sets the bag of accessories by the door. “That’s one more thing I won’t miss.”

“What?” I ask to play along.

“Not having to check the sunset schedules every damn day,” Jess says excitedly, “along with not having to think of Watchers watching me, or vampires hunting us...” She catches herself and looks at me apologetically before flashing me a sheepish smile. “You know, this last delivery was heavy. Tip me a beer?”

“Sure thing, Jess,” I say nonchalantly and stroll over to the fridge as she walks to the door and readies herself to leave. I open the fridge door and grab a can, and I’m about to make a remark about us leaving together when I hear her tapping the kitchen counter.

“You’ve been thirsty,” she says, obviously referring to the number of cans Chrissy and I have consumed. *Crap! Just play along.*

“Yeah. Might be the transition. Metabolism and appetite and all that,” I say matter-of-factly, hoping she’d feel awkward talking about my condition and change the topic.

“Does vampirism also include improved fashion sense?” she asks, sarcasm in every word.

I have no idea what the hell Jess is talking about and quickly close the fridge door to look at her, only to find her staring at Chrissy’s pink bag on the table. *Double crap! I totally forgot to hide her bag!* I scramble to think of what to say as Jess slowly

walks over to the table to examine it, when the sound of a muffled scream and something falling to the floor comes from the pantry. Jess instantly dives into the accessories bag by the door, pulls out a small pistol, and points it in the direction of my pantry. *This is going to be a shit show.*

“Wait, Jess, it’s not what you think,” I say with hands raised in surrender.

“You were thirsty?” Jess snaps at me while marching to the pantry, pistol armed and ready. “Part of your transition, my ass,” she says as she positions herself in front of the door. “You caught her but didn’t finish the damned job!”

Before I could think of anything to stop her from opening the pantry, Jess suddenly pushes the double-swinging door with her foot, just as I shout, “Don’t shoot!”

“Don’t shoot me!” Chrissy screams.

I step between Jess and the pantry door and glance behind to see Chrissy on the floor... and beside her is my blood-soaked clothes.

“Who the hell is that?” Jess asks, pointing at Chrissy with the pistol.

“Put the damn gun away, Jess!” I say firmly.

Jess resets the pistol’s safety and shoves it to my chest. I catch it, double-check the safety, and follow after her. “Hey, c’mon, relax, Jess.”

“Damn idiot,” Jess says under her breath, more to herself than to me, while marching toward the exit.

“Jess, stop!” I insist. But she doesn’t listen. I grab her elbow and spin her around so that she faces me. “Listen for a second! She’s—”

“You said vampire!” Chrissy bursts out from behind me.

Great! This is just great!

"I saw what I saw," Chrissy says with conviction. "The serial killer disappeared, vanished from thin air!"

Jess rolls her eyes as she shakes her head, then glares at me as she points at Chrissy. I glare back at Jess, take a quick deep breath, and say, "It was metaphorical," while turning around to face Chrissy...holding my blood-soaked clothes with her trembling hands.

"Chrissy, listen to me," I say calmly. "It's just a figure of speech..."

"My sister, the autopsy... It makes sense," Chrissy says almost inaudibly, and I'm unsure if she's in shock or just taking her time piecing things together.

Jess shakes her head. "This is on *you*, Damien. The Watcher's going to report her, and the Society's going to send Bishop to silence her."

"*Arthur* Bishop?" Chrissy asks. "But I thought he was part of your team?"

"Team?" Jess asks incredulously. "What *team*?"

Chrissy looks at Jess, then at me. "What I had with Jacob, it wasn't real, was it? What's real is...what I actually saw..."

I shake my head sympathetically. "All right, wait a minute, Chrissy, it's—"

"She knows Witmer?" Jess interrupts. "You set her up with Witmer? What the hell is happening here, Damien?"

"Vampires are real?" Chrissy asks, mostly to herself than me or Jess, as she slowly walks toward the living room. *She's in shock and denial. Not part of the plan. My plan's gone to hell, but I'm going to make this work, damn it!*

"All right, everyone, we're going to work this out." I know what to do. "Chrissy," I call out to her, but she's transfixed on her own thoughts. "Hey! Chrissy!"

She looks at me and snaps back to reality, and I can see in her eyes that what I'm saying is registering to her once more.

"I know this comes as a shock to you, but I'll explain everything. All right?"

Chrissy looks at me in the eyes and nods, while Jess shakes her head at me. "You *know* the Society's rules about witnesses, Damien."

"Yes, damn it, I know!" Jess is starting to piss me off. This isn't the time or place for a lecture. "Just sit down, Jess. Twenty minutes! We'll work things out!"

"The hell we will," Jess says as she glares at me once more, then walks over to the kitchen and grabs herself a beer. "Ten minutes, and I'm out of here. For good!"

I watch Jess angrily walk over to the living room and take the couch, while Chrissy sits quietly in the chair with her pink bag on her lap, looking like a deer caught in headlights. I close my eyes for a moment and take a deep breath to clear my head. *No point in lying anymore. Might as well come clean... "Clean"? The ironies just keep piling up.* I walk over to the living room, look at them both, then take the seat adjacent to Jess and opposite Chrissy. *Now, where the hell do I begin?*

"Didn't you hear a single word we said?" Jess yells as she gets off the couch and stands over Chrissy. "You have a death wish?"

Chrissy sinks back into her chair, but the look on her face tells me her mind's made up. "I heard everything," she says defiantly, "which is exactly why I want in!"

Jess sits on the table so she's face-to-face with Chrissy. "Listen, Chrissy. You're young, you have your whole life ahead of you. If we're right, if Witmer really does care about you, then ask him to turn a blind eye. It's the least he could do after putting you in danger. And you can just walk away...live your life! You have a chance here!"

"I put *him* in danger too," Chrissy says sympathetically, "and besides, you're right. I *do* have a chance here. With you, Damien, even Jacob and the Society and Bishop..."

"We're *not* a team!" Jess says as she rolls her head back and raises her hands.

"I know you're not, but you've gotten closer than the police ever did!" Chrissy looks at me for a quick second, then back at Jess.

"And what has that cost us?" Jess gets back on her feet and steps away from Chrissy. "Paranoia for myself and my son"—Jess points at herself—"in transition"—she points at me—"Witmer can't have a life, and you've seen that... Only Bishop's happy, and that's because he's a psychotic killer! You really want to join this circus? Think of your niece, your family!"

"I *am* thinking of my family!" Chrissy shoots back. "Isn't that why you joined the Society? For justice?"

Uh-oh. I knew it was a bad idea for Jess to share her past. Sure, it was to get Chrissy to believe that she could sympathize with her, but Jess hates it when others bring it up.

"Revenge. Not justice. And I wasn't thinking straight, which is why I know how you feel." Jess sits on the table once more and faces Chrissy, this time with softer eyes. "I wasn't thinking of my son. All I could think about was revenge for my husband."

“And when they finally killed it, the...*vampire*...” Chrissy says, hesitating to use the word, “you found your closure. Right?”

Jess takes a deep breath. “They would have killed it without my help. The Society would have gotten someone else to be their Supplier—there’s no shortage of vamp vics in the city—and now, several years later, I wish I never got in bed with them.”

“That’s where we’re different,” Chrissy says with clear conviction in her voice. “I *need* to make sure this creature is dead. I *need* to see it with my own eyes. And *then*, I’ll have no regrets, *especially now*, knowing what I know.”

Jess looks at me—and I just shrug at her—then sighs before turning to Chrissy one last time. “You know, that’s actually where we’re very much the same.” She gets back on her feet, then looks at me. “She’s as stubborn as you.”

I grin as I shake my head. “And you, Jess.”

Jess nods. “And me, I guess.” She turns to Chrissy once more. “You have no idea what you’re getting into. Just take a moment and look around.” Jess holds both her hands up like a liberty scale. “You’ve got a niece who needs you, and a man consumed by his obsession that he’s now in transition.”

Chrissy and I both inhale to say something, and Chrissy gets a word out about her niece being with the grandparents, but Jess interrupts her by addressing me. “Damien, after all this is done, *if* you’re still human enough to help it”—she places both her hands on her waist—“get her out before she follows in your footsteps.”

“Yeah, I’ll do what I can,” I say, trying my best to sound reassuring.

Jess looks at me one more time, then shakes her head while rolling her eyes as she turns and heads for the door.

“Thanks, Jess,” I call out to her, and she responds by simply waving me off without even turning around, not even for old times’ sake. The moment Jess closes the door behind her, both Chrissy and I take a deep breath.

“Vampires...” Chrissy says as she looks at me. “Am I crazy enough to actually believe all this?”

“Bat-shit crazy,” I say with a grin, “but not as crazy as me. I already have a plan.”

Chrissy smiles at me, then chuckles. “I’m going to need coffee for this, won’t I?”

I grin. “Or beer.”

SHARED Trauma

*T*here's every possibility that he'll break. I close my eyes and retrace my steps, every plan and event that has led up to this point. Three days ago, I had brought Chrissy to my place to get her to cooperate with me. But Jess arrived and made a delivery, and we ended up spilling the beans. The Orphan Maker, the Society, vampires, Killers, Watchers...my transition... Everything. Chrissy understood that I had no team, and the Society will send Bishop to silence her if Witmer gives a report about her to the higher-ups. And even if he doesn't, Bishop could make the report himself just for kicks. She took it all in, almost unfazed. Almost.

That same night, around midnight, I paid Chrissy a visit in her apartment. She let me in to talk. When the conversation went south, she told me to get out. Things got heated, she threatened to call the cops, and I smashed her phone—threw it clear across the room. When she tried to escape, I grabbed her by the neck just as she slipped out the door, and slammed her to the ground. She scratched my forearm, forcing me to let go for a second, and quickly got to her feet, but I was faster and punched her in the stomach just hard enough to knock the wind out of her. And the moment she fell to the ground, I picked her up by her blouse and shoved her back into her apartment.

She tried to put up a fight, but her size and lack of training made it easy for me to knock her around the room. I felt bad about hurting her, but it had to be done. Still, she said nothing about who else she was talking to. So I seized her, put a knife to her waist, and walked her out the door, all the way to my car.

Three days ago, I woke up to the sound of her phone. Thirteen messages and six missed calls, all from Witmer, mostly apologies for snapping at her back at Pierre's and a few about the importance of communication in relationships. *He still had no idea I had his girlfriend locked up in my safe house.*

Yesterday, I finally gave Witmer a call using Chrissy's phone. And based on how he picked up, I knew he had already watched the surveillance tapes. Not sure if he saw me and Chrissy talking in the hotel. I hope he did. But I'm confident he had seen me follow Valerie after Pierre's, and Chrissy follow after us both—which means he traced *my* steps—and saw Chrissy at least enter my building, followed by Jess. And if he continued to watch, then he would have seen me leave the same night. I wonder how he must have felt after watching me enter his girlfriend's home, hurt her, then take her away at knifepoint.

I made sure to make him think that I just found out about him being the Watcher—*can't get Jess in any more trouble with the Society*—and made him believe that I thought of him as nothing more than the boyfriend until I put two and two together, regrettably, *after* Chrissy had to endure my frustration. And I made it clear to him that blood and tears was *not* a good look on her. And for people like Witmer, for Watchers, it's what they *don't* know that gets them; their imagination is their worst enemy.

He sounded terrified over the phone, which was perfect. Asking help from the Society would mean he'd have to ad-

mit breaking protocol, which would get him fired and Chrissy killed. He already knows that Jess supplies me with everything, and Bishop's always going to be a wild card. Witmer has no choice but to deal with me directly. *This is going to be easy.*

Five consecutive knocks come from the door, just as I had instructed. "It's open," I say with a hint of glee in my voice, without getting up from the chair in Chrissy's living room.

The moment the door opens, Witmer barges in and points a gun in my face. *This is going to be interesting.*

"Where's Chrissy?" the Watcher asks, his voice trembling slightly.

I grin. "Not very good at your job, Jacob."

"I won't ask again. Where is Chrissy?" Witmer closes the door behind him and takes a step closer to me.

I shake my head and look at him straight in the eyes. "Go ahead, shoot me. You'll never find her, and she'll starve to death." I notice Witmer's gun hand shake for a brief moment. I'm sure a part of him knew this was the wrong move, but desperation and urgency are the ingredients for bad decisions. *I should know.*

"How do I even know she's still alive?" Witmer walks forward without taking his aim off me, but the gun isn't what I'm interested in. I eye him from head to foot. He hasn't shaved in a few days, has obvious eye bags, and is wearing a long coat over a sweater. Probably hasn't slept much, and if he's sleep-deprived, he's not thinking straight.

"Here," I say as I reach for my pocket, "but before I show you these pictures, sit down." I make sure my voice is relaxed, almost friendly. Almost.

"Just show me," he insists as he takes another step closer, refusing to sit in the chair across me. He points at the table with

his left hand while holding the gun in his right. The safety's off, and his finger's on the trigger, but he's holding it too loosely. *Zero training, but I have to avoid accidents.*

I calmly take out Chrissy's phone from my pocket and place it on the table. "Scroll it," I say while leaning forward and placing my elbows on the table.

Witmer leans forward and snatches her phone from the table. He opens the app and gasps. I know the first picture he'll see. It's Chrissy lying on the ground, and her eyes are dazed as she bleeds from her forehead, ruining her white blouse. There's a broken vase close to her face, giving Witmer an idea of what happened. He swipes the phone and gasps again. He's looking at Chrissy sitting in a chair, with blood all over her face and blouse. Witmer shakes his head and curses as he swipes to see the next picture. It's of Chrissy lying on a cement floor inside a padded room. Her hands are cuffed behind her, and her feet are bound with tape. And I made sure the photo shows her black eye and swelling lip. Witmer whispers curses and expletives while staring at his girlfriend.

"Bleeding, starving, and alone," I say nonchalantly, "and barely conscious."

"You're a monster!" Witmer snaps. "Take me to her!"

"Or you'll shoot me?" I stand up and stretch my back and neck, more out of habit this time, and sigh. "You know, Jacob, she doesn't even know anything. You know how I know that?" Witmer remains quiet, waiting for me to answer my own question. But I can already see in his eyes that he's about to break. "Untrained civilians, especially women, give up information within the first few minutes of waterboarding."

"I'll kill you!" Witmer screams as his gun hand shakes, and his eyes fill with resolve.

“Then you’ll kill her too,” I quickly add while slowly and casually walking around him. “You won’t find her. At least not fast enough. Know what she said when I figured that you were the Watcher?” Witmer’s quiet again, waiting for me to continue. He’s becoming more submissive. “She begged me not to hurt you... insisted that you don’t know anything.”

I see the anger in his eyes disappear, replaced by guilt and horror. Then, tears. Time to seal the deal.

“*You* got her involved, Jacob.” I make sure not to break eye contact. “*You’re* the reason she’s bleeding and starving, all alone.”

“No... You did all that to her...” Witmer’s resolve is almost completely gone, I can hear it in his voice.

“I did.” I nod my head emphatically. “And *you knew* about me all this time. *You knew* my desperation in hunting the Orphan Maker. *You knew* she returned and that I would be right on her tail. *You knew* all of this, and you *still* got your girlfriend involved. For what? Because you were *lonely*? Because you wanted something *different* for a change?” I hurl my accusations at him, the same accusations I had swallowed every night since the damned vampire killed my family. And just like me, I begin to see the guilt in Witmer’s eyes, the same guilt I see whenever I look in the mirror.

“But it’s not too late, Jacob,” I say more sympathetically as I approach him. “I called you here to make a deal. *You* can still *fix* this.”

Witmer looks at me with distrust and firmly points the gun at me again, as if he’s suddenly enlightened about what to do. “No deals! You’re going to take me to her!”

I grin at him for a split second before accessing all of my newly gained senses, and move myself out of the gun’s trajectory

with vampiric speed, leaving Witmer almost frozen in place. His hand fastened on the gun looks soft compared to the strength I feel in mine, and I yank it from him too quickly, unintentionally breaking his finger. *Whoops. Have to learn to really control this.*

Witmer screams as he clutches his broken finger and jumps back. “You’re...you’re a vampire!” He quickly scrambles to the corner of the living room, frantically looking for an escape path.

“Not yet, but soon. I’m assuming you now know how little time I have left, and what desperation does to a man,” I say coldly while casually approaching him, “so let’s try this one more time. A trade. You get your girlfriend. I get the Orphan Maker. Yes?”