

## Chapter 1

Ethan's eyes never left me. He wasn't far, as he stood in the same window every day, studying me whenever I stepped outside. There were no vampires out at this time of day in this type of weather. Not unless they were looking to become a pile of ash. A lot had happened over the past few weeks, and moments like this had to be taken advantage of. I mean, Emily almost got killed. I almost got killed. I almost got killed again. It was a vicious cycle I needed to end. Peering over my shoulder, I met his eyes. All I could do was shake my head in disbelief at his resolve to torture himself.

Today, the wintry air was harsh. It scraped against my skin, stinging me as I stood in the field with Emily. It was too bad it wasn't summer. The sunflowers that covered the grounds then brought a natural happiness to everyone who saw them. At least, that's what I'd been told. In its current state, the land looked brown and barren. The dried vegetation crunched under my feet with every slight movement. If it weren't for the sun shining, it would be quite depressing.

I squinted as I looked up at Earth's brightest star, which hung low, trying but failing to thaw my skin. The air was clean and crisp compared to New York City, where it was often stale. I missed that staleness; the city had become my home. Now we were in a small town outside of Erie, Pennsylvania. It was the kind of place where birds sang outside my window while I enjoyed my morning cup of coffee. Where geese barked in formation as they escaped the crisp weather to bask in warmer areas before returning the next year.

This hidden coven inhabited a majestic farmhouse. It looked like something out of a romance movie. An oak tree out front—leafless and mature—had a tire swing hanging from it. Its skeletal branches waved to me as the wind danced with its tendrils. I loved to sit on the wraparound porch at night, staring at the twinkling stars scattered across the midnight sky. It reminded me of when I'd climb up to the roof of my house in Maine to stare out endlessly and gather my thoughts.

Prickles on my skin told me Ethan was still watching me. I bet if I looked back, I'd see a tinge of jealousy in his eyes because I could relish in the sun and he couldn't. At least, that's what I thought it was. I craved the sun, so on these days I left him inside and soaked up the rays that pushed through the brittle air.

"I miss the city, but I think this is the kind of place I'd like to settle down in one day," I said.

"The city was a lot of fun, but I agree. It's so relaxing here." Emily looked over her shoulder at our new home. "I do wish Ethan and Lizzie could enjoy these days with us."

"Yeah, sucks for them." Glancing back to Ethan, I watched as he shook his head at me; he was listening. My lips curved into a smile. "You know, Emily. Now that you've survived the first dhampyr change, I bet we look like twins to the others when we stand with our backs to the house like this."

Emily giggled. "It's so weird not looking like my thirteen-year-old self but still actually being thirteen. If that makes sense."

"Oh, it does." When I made my change, it had been weeks before I stopped doing double takes every time I saw my reflection. The most jarring was the sudden height difference. "I'm

just glad we both survived, and you're catching up on your enhanced vampiric abilities. I was getting tired of winning all our sparring matches.”

“Hey, I won once,” Emily scoffed.

I bumped her shoulder and grinned. “You mean when I let you.”

Emily slid her hand into mine as she always had and leaned her head on my shoulder. We weren't ready to give up this brilliant day just yet. Plus, acting human for a little while longer meant I could push all my dhampyr issues to the side. It was tiring to know your blood had the power to wipe out the entire vampire race, all because your dad was one of the original vampires.

“I guess we should get back,” I said, pivoting to look at what we now called home.

Emily nodded.

The farmhouse wasn't only picturesque, it was also practical. There was a huge training barn out back with weights and a boxing ring, a small horse barn, a guest house—where my childhood friend Devin and his mother lived—and a lot of land, including some woods surrounding three sides of the property. Not to mention there were lots of guards who spent their days walking the perimeter. We were safe here.

“There was a new delivery of books today,” I said.

“Oh, yay.” Emily clapped. “I love new book day.” She may have looked the same age as me now, but inside that lithe body was still my baby sister.

“Yes, more dead ends and hopeless sessions where I realize I'm going to die in a couple years because no one has any information on the last dhampyr transition. Super awesome.”

Okay, I was quite possibly being a bit too dramatic, but rightfully so, in my opinion. I was tired of researching what I needed to do in order to make it past this last transition only to turn up empty-handed.

“Tasi, think positive.” Emily’s hand left mine as we approached the house.

“Easier said than done. Maybe if there were no Deity and no Jelena, I’d be more positive, but with them still lurking out there waiting to drain our blood, I think I’m on overload.” My fingernails bit into the soft flesh of my palms as I balled my hands into fists.

Emily knitted her eyebrows. “I still can’t fathom what went so wrong in Jelena’s life to make her want to partner with some psychotic cult of humans and commit vampire genocide. Who does that?”

I shook out my hands, wiping them on my jeans. “Don’t forget her plan to remake a new race of vampires in her image.”

“Right!” Emily threw her hands in the air.

“Crazy,” we said in unison. It was still hard for me to admit that I’d fallen for Jelena’s trickery. She wanted to be an original vampire with her own line of minions. Her God complex was next-level.

The wooden screen door clanked shut behind us as we entered the foyer. It had rooms sprouting off in all different directions. This place would’ve been awesome for playing hide-and-seek as a kid.

“Well, let’s hope there’s something, anything, that’ll help us find answers to our dhampyr issues while we wait,” Emily said as she passed Ethan, who was now sitting on a wooden bench, waiting for me. “Hi, Ethan. See you guys in the library . . . or not.” She giggled as she walked by. I playfully shoved her along as I shook my head.

“Hi, Emily,” Ethan said. Then he stood up, slid his hand around my waist, and pulled me into his arms. “Hi, Gorgeous.” My blood roared through my veins in response to his words.

Ethan stood there wearing that captivating grin of his—the one I had seen countless girls fawn over, even if he didn't return the interest.

“When are you going to stop torturing yourself? You keep watching me outside soaking in the sun you can't enjoy,” I said, interlacing my fingers around the back of his neck and pulling him closer to me.

“Is that what you think I'm doing?” He pulled back a little, his chocolate-colored eyes meeting mine.

“Of course that's what I think. Why else would you watch me out there?” I asked. I felt my eyebrows furrow at the thought of there being another reason for him to stand in the window like that. “I figured you enjoyed tormenting yourself. Like being the tortured soul.” I ran my hand through Ethan's messy hair, wafting his ever-present woody, vanilla scent into the air around us.

His laugh was melodic and it made my skin warm at the sound. Electricity buzzed around us. When we were this close, I wondered if anyone else could feel or hear the soft hum that came off our skin.

“Tasi, first, I don't have a soul.”

Here we go again. Ethan believed once you became a vampire, you lost your soul. I disagreed. There were two types of vampires in this world. There were vampires like Ethan, who lived as humanly as possible and tried not to hurt people. Then there were rogue vampires who lost all humanity, letting their thirst drive them. Those vampires often died at my stake. There was no doubt in my mind Ethan had a soul.

“Yes, you do,” I said.

He ignored me, brushing my hair out of my face. “I watch you because I love the way the sunlight illuminates your skin. The way the flecks of cherry come through in your dark hair. And when you look back at me, if the sun is just right, your eyes are like a glistening ocean on a warm summer day.” His hand slid up my back, pressing me closer to him. My face must have registered the shock of his words, because he smiled, and then we were kissing. The wave of electricity pulsed between our lips.

“Oh, gross. If I knew you guys were out here playing tongue wars, I would’ve gone to the bathroom so I could throw up first.” Lizzie followed up her words with gagging noises. Sometimes I wondered why we didn’t leave her behind in the New York coven.

Our lips disconnected from one another, breaking the current I’d come to love. I ran my finger across his bottom lip, which was shiny from my lip gloss. “Come on, let’s go see what books came in,” I said. “We can finish up our game of ‘tongue wars’ later.” My fingers interlocked with Ethan’s as we passed by Lizzie. I gave her a wink.

“Gladly,” Ethan said, biting his lower lip.

More gagging noises came from behind us. I burst into laughter.

If someone told me months ago there would be a group of vampires whom I cared about, I would’ve told that person to get their head examined. All vampires used to be evil in my eyes. Now they were family. My life was so weird.

The library, which used to be a dining room, had been turned into a workstation for research and reading. It had a long table, which Sonya—my aunt—was currently sitting at, sorting through today’s shipment. We had brought in bookshelves to line the walls and had had no issues filling them up. Sonya had reached out to her contacts across the world and asked them to send anything that might help us figure out how we should tackle this last transition. Most of

the books didn't have anything to do with dhampyrs, but in order to keep our secrets, Sonya had covered it up as a research project on whether other creatures—such as mermaids and fairies—had had success in creating half-breeds like dhampyrs. This shipment had come from Scandinavian countries like Norway and Denmark.

I picked up the first book I saw and turned to Lizzie, who thankfully had stopped making gagging noises. “Hey, Lizzie, here’s a book for you. The girl on the cover kind of looks like you. Well, she has wings, but it’s almost uncanny.”

“Look at that. Lizzie has a twin,” Ethan said, peering over my shoulder. “I bet she’s much nicer, though.”

Lizzie shoved Ethan away. “Jackass. Don’t start with me unless you want to feel my wrath.” She put out her hand toward me. “And you—” She grabbed the book from me. “You can be so . . .” She looked at the picture, her eyes widening. “*History of the Valkyries*,” she whispered.

“Told you. Eerie, right?”

Lizzie didn’t know anything about her past—maybe that book would help her find out where she descended from. She scrunched her face. “Sonya, can I take this one to read?”

“Yes. I don’t think that will help us with what we need. Just remember, they must go back when our research is complete, so treat them well,” Sonya said as she took inventory of the other books.

I continued to sift through the pile, looking for anything that might relate to the three dhampyr transitions: body, mind, and soul. With each book I picked up, I slammed the next one down a little harder. Before I knew it, I was mumbling obscenities under my breath.

“This is so frustrating,” I said as I placed the books on the shelves.

“What is frustrating you, Tasia?” Sonya asked. Her eyes reminded me of my father so much it made my chest tighten. What I wouldn’t do to have him back here safe and alive. I closed my eyes and took in a deep breath as the frustration returned.

“Well, we survived the first transition because we had an idea of what was needed to make the change from mostly human to half-dhampyr. This final transition seems so out of reach. Every week we get books, every week we end up empty-handed, every—”

“I think I found something,” Emily said. Dust filled the air around her as she wiped down the book, making her sneeze. “Look at this book—or, actually, it looks more like a journal—from twenty years ago.”

We all gathered around Emily as she thumbed through a book called *The First*. Could it really be possible that we finally found something helpful? If it turned out to be nothing special, I was calling it a day. I moved in closer.

“*The First*? Who comes up with these names? I mean, really, the first what: vampire, dhampyr, cheeseburger?” I said, trying to guess what the book was about. Ethan placed his hand on my lower back, and his touch soothed my annoyance. I leaned back into him.

“Tasi, it’s the journal of a child who was part-vampire, part-human. Written by someone with the initials of H. J.,” Emily said. She skimmed to the back of the book. “It ends at age fourteen, after this kid goes through the first transition. A boy dhampyr. The last paragraph says, ‘His body settles and there is relief. No more cracking of bones and screaming in pain. His height has increased about ten centimeters. He craves and drinks blood. Tomorrow we will begin with a new journal, as we don’t know what will become of his life.’”

“May I see the journal?” Sonya asked. Even though we’d been growing into a family, there was something in Sonya’s voice that made us do as she wished, whether we wanted to or



not. Maybe it was the whole “being the only original vampire in existence” thing, which only my small group of people knew about, but as requested, Emily handed Sonya the book. “I’ll send my contact an email and ask them to look for any other works written by H. J. If there are other books, though, having only the author’s initials won’t make them easy to track down. Hopefully, the time frame of the journal will help.” She handed Emily back the book.

“Maybe H. J. stands for His Junk.” Lizzie laughed at her childish joke. It made me giggle, but everyone else ignored her. There was a reason she was my best friend.

“Tasi, want to split the reading with me?” Emily asked.

“Yeah, let’s do that. Why don’t you read half and I can read the other half? We can meet up each week and review anything that might be useful.”

“Thanks. That sounds perfect.” Emily’s smile magnified. It was that trust and responsibility we shared that made her know she was my equal and no longer my little sister.

“Knock, knock. Sorry to interrupt, but Lily is looking for you guys. She’s in the kitchen.”

Standing in the doorway was the only friend I’d ever had growing up. I used to spend a lot of my time with him when I lived in Maine. He was the boy next door, literally. I was surprised when Sonya said Devin and his mother were now living at the farmhouse. Since the Deity set fire to my home in Maine—which killed my aunt Eva as well—my mother thought it best they came and stayed somewhere secure. Just in case someone found out they were helping the Vasile family.

Devin looked young for a seventeen-year-old. His chin-length blond hair was pulled back into a small ponytail, and untidy strands of it fell into his face. He had beautiful skin and lips, and light brown eyes that looked like honey when the sun lit up his face. Today, he reminded me of someone in a band, with his ripped jeans and concert tee. If Ethan could hear my thoughts,

he'd think I was crushing on him, but I wasn't. Don't get me wrong, Devin was good-looking, but Ethan was something more than a hot guy to me.

"Hey, Devin. Did she say what she wanted?" I continued rummaging through the box of new books.

"Tasi, we go to Mom and find out. It doesn't matter what she wants," Emily said.

I threw my hands up, letting her know I surrendered. She didn't need to get so snippy. "If you say so. I prefer to know what I'm walking into, that's all. Plus, she knows this is our time to do research. What could be more important than finding a way to save my life?"

"Tasi—" Emily said.

"I said I was coming. Geez."

When we got here a few weeks ago, Lily—my newly changed vampire mother—and Emily had reunited as if she never left us when we were little. I, on the other hand, stood back and watched. Our mother, who was once dainty and warm, was now hard and cold. My parents had concocted a plan for if the Deity ever came for them. My father would take his own life to ensure no one could use him to find us, and my mother was to drink the vial of my father's blood she'd worn around her neck. She would then die with his blood—the blood of an original—in her system to eventually become a vampire, but the Deity would think she was dead. If my dad wasn't an original, my mother would've had to be bitten first, then drink his blood, which wouldn't have worked.

Lily's change in attitude might have come when the Deity came, or it might have developed slowly over the twelve years she'd been gone from my life. All I knew was that Lily wasn't the mother I remembered, and the tension between us was strong.

Emily, Lizzie, and Sonya headed off to the kitchen. Sonya touched my arm in passing, a slight gesture to let me know I should relax, which was something she did often.

“Are you okay?” Ethan asked as the others left the room.

“Yeah.” I puffed out a sigh. “It’s just . . . what is Lily’s problem with me? I get that I shut people out on occasion—”

Ethan raised his brows. “On occasion?”

“Whatever. You know what I mean.” I inhaled louder than I wanted to. “It’s just frustrating. When we left New York City, I was so excited and scared to see her. It’s been twelve years since I thought she was dead. Then it was like she pushed me away. She didn’t do that with Emily. No, she embraced Emily, but me . . . nope. She didn’t respond to me in any way other than sheer disappointment. How many times does she need to tell me how I put Emily’s life at risk with my poor decisions after leaving Maine? I was a kid, taking care of another kid who didn’t even know what we were.” My fingernails dug into my temples, trying to relieve some of the annoyance.

“Tasi, talk to her. She’s your mother.” Ethan cupped my cheek, running his finger across it. “I’m sure she’ll listen.”

“No, she shut me out. She should want to talk to *me*, and not just when she wants to remind me what a letdown I’ve become.” Narrowing my eyes, I pushed his hand from my face and leaned away. “Are you taking her side?”

“No, Tasi. I’ll support you whether you want to talk to her or not. I just want you to think about it. She deserves to know how amazing you are.” His hands rested on my waist, gently nudging me toward the kitchen.

Even with Ethan by my side, I was frustrated, so I took my time and strolled to the kitchen. Making Lily wait brought me some satisfaction. I knew it was petty, but I didn't care.

Sonya, Lizzie, Emily, and Lily were sitting at the table. Lily's blonde, tousled hair was pulled back in a bun, and her eyes, which matched ours, turned to Devin. Emily watched me with squinted eyes. Those were her "stop causing trouble" eyes. But, come on now, she'd have more luck telling a zebra to remove its stripes.

"Devin, Heidi is looking for you. She's out back," Lily said. He gave me one last glance before heading out to see his mother. Ethan followed me across the room, where he rested against the counter. I leaned on him.

"Do you two want to sit over here and be part of the group?" Lily asked. The sternness in her voice never faltered. I wanted to hear the voice I remembered as a child. Not the hard, cold vampire voice without a trace of emotion.

"No, we're fine here," I said before Ethan could do or say anything. I pressed my lips into a thin line and narrowed my eyes.

The corner of Sonya's lip turned up for a quick moment. She knew oh-so-well how snarky I could be. We'd had a lot of those moments in New York, but that changed once I accepted the fact that Sonya had had no choice but to lie to us to protect Emily and me. I believed Lily had lied to protect herself. Maybe that wasn't fair of me to say, but it was fine. I didn't need her growing up, and I sure as hell didn't need her now.

Emily gave me another disapproving look—big shocker there. Sonya and I had grown close, and Emily and Lily were now close. It was hard because for a long time, it was only Emily and me, and I missed that. She had my back and I had hers. I wasn't quite used to this new dynamic of depending on others.

“We found where Jelena is staying, and it’s close by,” Lily started.

My body stiffened. Ethan’s arm snaked around my waist, and I leaned back into him. He was probably fully aware this news might cause a nuclear explosion.

“So when are we going to attack?” I used the word *we* loosely. Because that bitch was mine. The memory of Jelena trying to kill Emily during her transition came to the forefront of my mind—all so she could steal her dhampyr blood, which was unusable because Emily hadn’t finished the change yet. I was so going to kill her.

“We aren’t sure. Once we do some scouting of the premises, we’ll have a better idea of how many Deity members are guarding her, and if she’s still the only vampire working with them,” Lily said.

I tried to bite my tongue, really I did. “So basically, we’re going to sit back while she gets away again instead of going straight in to get her? Figures.”

“Tasi, we can’t go in blind,” Emily said.

Heat rushed to the surface of my skin. “Of course you agree with Lily.” I tried to stop the eye roll. Okay, no, I didn’t.

“Call her Mom, Tasi.”

I don’t think I’ve ever been mad at Emily, but it was hard at this moment not to get pissed. I was glad she’d reconnected with our mother, but that didn’t make Lily right all the time. Plus, if I didn’t want to call her Mom, then Emily should back off. Pressure built within my chest. My heart started to thump.

“Why don’t we talk about next steps,” Sonya said, her interruption timed nicely.

“Sounds like a good idea.” Lily refocused her attention back on the task at hand.

“Tomorrow, Heidi will call for a crew to scope out their facility. They’re going to look for access

points and try to get a count of people there.” She paused and looked directly at me. The look said it all. Whatever she was going to say next was going to make me mad, and she knew it.

“They’ll do this over the next week. Then we can assess our next steps.”

Ethan’s grip loosened. It was as if he knew there was no stopping what happened next. I walked up to the table and slammed my hands down. The reverberation filled the room. “Why is it going to take so long to scope out the place? She could leave in a week, and then what? She gets away again. Are you waiting for her to finish Emily off?”

Emily flinched.

“Antanasia Nadia Vasile!” Lily growled.

“Let’s go for a walk, Tasi.” Ethan grabbed my hand. His voice was silky. When he looked at me, those brown eyes grabbed hold.

“You’re foolish to wait.” I turned from the table, not saying another word, and walked out of the room.

## Chapter 2

All I wanted was to be away from Lily. She didn't get it. How could she? She wasn't around for all we went through with Jelena. Waiting a week to attack was risky, because if she took off, we may never find her again. My breathing slowed the farther from the kitchen I was.

The farmhouse was rather large. My room was on the top floor, which gave me privacy, and it was a nice change. The vampires stayed in the lower level, which was refinished into an area like the New York coven's sleeping quarters. Basically, it was set up like dorm rooms. Ethan stayed with me more often than not, which was also nice. When we entered my room, I sat on the bed and stared at the pale-yellow wall.

"You know they're doing what they can to move this along," Ethan said.

There was a careful tone as he spoke. He was doing it to ensure I didn't have another outburst. I didn't blame him, based on how I usually reacted to things.

"I'm fully aware. You don't need to tread lightly or tell me I'm an ass." I gripped the side of my bed, bunching the sheets in my hand.

He shifted to the bed and put his finger under my chin, pulling my face toward his until our eyes connected. He pressed his full lips to mine. His breath was sweet and intoxicating.

When I pulled back, I grumbled, "I'll apologize later." My throwing a fit was stupid, and I knew it.

"Famous last words of Tasi," Ethan teased as he landed one more kiss on the side of my neck.

There was a knock on the door.

“Come in,” I said.

Sonya stood there in her black slacks and light gray turtleneck, looking elegant and dangerous. Her dark brown eyes scrutinized me. Now that I knew she was my aunt, it was so obvious we were related. We shared some of the same physical features, such as our espresso-colored hair and almond-shaped eyes. It took me a while to see how much we looked alike because for most of my stay in the New York coven, I’d thought she was trying to hurt Emily and me. I also thought we shared some of the same anger issues. The difference between us was she’d had over a thousand years to perfect it and learn to hold her tongue.

“Please don’t tell me how wrong I was—I’m already aware,” I blurted out.

Sonya’s face didn’t falter. “Actually, it’s time to work on your compulsion.” My cheeks burned. “I know you, Tasia. You’re riddled with guilt over your mouth running away and will find your mother later to apologize. She happens to be the new me.”

“What? No way.” Just because I ran my mouth at the New York coven and basically disagreed with everything she did doesn’t mean she was as frustrating as my mother.

Ethan laughed. “Sonya makes a valid point.”

My eyes tightened as I looked at him. His grin widened in reply. He’d pay for that later.

“So, what’s on the agenda today?” I asked.

Compulsion was a result of the second dhampyr transition. It’s not something all dhampyrs could learn, and the amount of control it took was massive. What I remembered most was my head felt like someone had sawed into it, allowing my brain to spill out onto the floor. The most interesting part was that all vampires could use compulsion on humans, but only



Sonya—an original vampire—and dhampyrs had the ability to use compulsion on vampires as well.

My goal was to eventually master compulsion like Sonya had. If I ever had the opportunity to use it on Jelena, I would, but I didn't want to fry my own brain in the process.

"I was thinking you could try to get Ethan to physically harm someone." Sonya watched me through her thick lashes.

I couldn't have heard that right. There was no way I'd agree to letting Ethan harm someone against his will.

Ethan slowly cocked his head toward Sonya. "And who will I be hurting?" He shifted his body uncomfortably.

"Me," she said.

This was *not* what I signed up for. "Um, you want me to compel Ethan . . . to hurt you? Did I hear that correctly?" I wanted to learn compulsion, but did I want to learn it at the cost of harming someone I cared about?

"Yes, we'll be specific about the task so we can stop him when needed," Sonya said.

"And what's this going to prove?" Now I found myself shifting in my seat. Making the guy I wanted to be with attack someone I respected wasn't sitting well with me. What if he couldn't control himself and hurt her fatally? Ethan wouldn't be able to live with himself.

"Let's think about it," she said. "You have compelled him to pick up a book, clean your room"—that one made me giggle—"and brush your hair. What do all three things have in common?"

As I inspected her eyes, I could tell she had a point. I needed to know what that point was. "Um, those tasks didn't hurt anyone?"

“No, Tasia. They’re all things Ethan would do for you even if you didn’t compel him.”

“Hey. I would *not* clean her room,” Ethan said. After a moment, he tilted his head, looking toward me with a smile. “Well, maybe with the right reward.” He winked. I could stare at his russet-brown hair and eyes all night long.

Sonya tapped her fingernail on the tall dresser in my room. “Concentrate, you two.”

“Sorry,” we said in unison, pulling our eyes off each other.

“Ethan, do you want to hurt me?” Her question seemed so stupid. Of course he didn’t want to hurt Sonya. He’d lived in the New York City coven with her for over a hundred years. She’d chosen him as the person to find and bring Emily and me to the coven so she could protect us. Remembering how troublesome I was when Ethan and Lizzie first showed up made me glad they didn’t give up on us

“No.” That’s when I saw something had clicked with Ethan. “You’re going to have Tasi compel me to do something I don’t want to do to see if she can force me into it.”

My palms were sweaty, and my chest tightened. This idea made me want to call off today’s lesson. The thought of making Ethan do something he didn’t want to do, which felt like a violation on top of hurting Sonya, put me on edge.

“Exactly. Until now, your subconscious would have been a willing participant. Now we’re going to test to see if you’ll do something you don’t want to do.”

What she said made sense. Then I thought about Clover, the redheaded neophyte vampire who’d thought she loved Ethan. “Wait, your theory has a hole in it. I almost compelled Clover, and that had to be against her will—”

Ethan interrupted, “But you never finished compelling her. Emily stopped you. You don’t know if she’d have followed orders or broken out of the spell.”

“Fine.” I let out a sigh. “Is this really a good idea? Can’t I try this on someone else?”

Sonya stood in front of me, radiating elegance as usual. She reached out and placed my hands in hers, pulling me out of my seat. “What if someone had Ethan and was about to kill him? Wouldn’t you want to know that you could compel that person, whether human or vampire, to do what you wanted and not what they wanted?”

This made me wince. Anytime I thought of my life without Ethan, I cringed. “Point taken.”

It was important that I learn from Sonya. She knew how to control the pain that came with compulsion, and since we’d started these training sessions, it had worked. The key wasn’t to open the floodgates, so to speak, but crack the window and let out just a sliver of my ability. That small piece would be enough to control someone without slamming me with a broken mind.

“So, how do we do this?” Ethan asked.

“You’re not allowed to know or mentally prepare with the specifics. Stand over by the window.” Sonya leaned in, whispering the next steps into my ear so Ethan wouldn’t be able to hear. “Tell Ethan to pick up your stake. He’ll heal from it, and he won’t be expecting it. Right now, he’s mentally preparing to attack me. This will be a genuine test to see if you can force him to do something he wouldn’t want to do.”

As I listened, I knew she had a point about the surprise, but part of me still couldn’t stop worrying that something would go horribly wrong. My skin felt clammy as I tried to prepare myself for what I was going to do to him. I needed to make sure if he didn’t let go of the stake, I’d be able to yank it away from him. But what if I couldn’t?

“Sonya, I can’t. What if he accidentally kills himself? I’d literally die.” And even if he didn’t die, he might lose his trust in me. Taking over someone’s mind was a big deal to me.

She studied me for a long moment. Her eyes softened. “Tasia, do you trust me?”

That was a silly question—of course I trusted her. Sonya and I had become closer than I thought possible. She was my family.

“Okay, fine. Yes, I trust you, and I’ll do it.”

The hard exterior she always wore faltered for a moment with emotion.

Ethan looked out the window onto the field I’d stood in a little while ago. If I knew him, he was concentrating on not hurting Sonya. I stepped over and intertwined my fingers with his so he’d refocus on me.

“Ready?” I asked.

He nodded as I led him over to the bed, where we typically did all our training, among other things, like kissing and . . . *Concentrate, Tasi. And remember, you aren’t hurting him permanently.* This was a test to see if I could control the unwilling to save the people I loved if they were ever in trouble.

Taking in a deep breath, I sought the features in his face I loved so much. His coffee-colored eyes, warm smile, and gorgeous, thick brown hair. When he ran his fingers through his hair, he had a habit of tugging at it, and it was sexy. He took in my features in return as our eyes found each other.

“Ethan, I need you to do something for me. Will you obey?”

“Will I obey?” he repeated, his voice monotone.

We were locked. “Yes, will you obey?”

“Yes,” he said.

If there was a hell, I was so going there for doing this to him.

“Ethan, walk over to my nightstand and pick up my wooden stake with your left hand.”

His pupils became enlarged and small again. He hesitated.

“Tasia, let a bit more out.” Sonya watched from across the room.

I nodded. With a steadying breath, I focused on opening my mind and reaching for his. There was a pulse of pain as I pressed my mind forward. “Ethan, walk over to my nightstand and pick up my stake with your left hand. Hold it there for five seconds. Then put it back down.”

There it was. The iridescence that coated the eyes when someone was one hundred percent ready to comply. Ethan stood up. He headed over to the nightstand and picked up the stake. His hand sizzled, and sulfur filled the air around us as he counted. My heart thrummed, and those five seconds felt like five hours. He placed the stake back down and snapped out of his trance.

“What was that?” Ethan asked, shaking and blowing on his hand, trying to put out the flames. “This wasn’t part of the plan.”

“But it worked. Tasia was able to compel you to do something you would’ve never agreed to do in your normal state of mind.” Sonya’s voice sounded like an echo in my head.

“Guys?”

“Yes, but I could’ve turned to ash if I held on too long. That’s a stake doused with holy water.” Ethan blew on his palm again. “You know, the type of water that kills vampires.”

“Hello?” I said louder.

“There was not enough holy water on that stake to permanently damage you. I was sure of it before we started,” Sonya argued.

Their voices sounded distant as they stood there bickering about the deception. My head spun. I sat down and took in a deep breath. “Hey!” They both looked at me. “That may have been my limit. My head feels like it’s playing tug-of-war with my brain.”

Ethan sat down next to me, watching me carefully. He lifted my chin to look into my eyes. “You seem okay.”

“I feel okay, just a little woozy.” I widened my eyes, forcing them open as I caressed my temples.

“That’s it for training today,” Sonya said, lips pursed. “Remember, Tasia, this is your limit today, but we’re building your tolerance so you can let more compulsion out without harming yourself. We’ll need to practice something similar again. But we’ll find something less painful,” she said, heading toward the door.

“I’d appreciate that,” Ethan said. Sonya shut the door behind her. It was Ethan and me once again. Alone. Which always made me happy.

“How’s your hand? I’m really sorry. I didn’t want to hurt you.” His arm, which had bubbled up with blisters, was healing.

“It’s fine,” he said. “I get it. Element of surprise and all. I think it just freaked me out when the pain broke the compulsion and there was a flame dancing along my hand. Especially since I thought I’d be doing something completely different.”

His eyes softened, and he didn’t waste any time after that. He leaned in, his fingers pushing my stray hairs behind my ear.

“Is your head feeling better?” He cupped my cheek.

“Getting there,” I said. “I hope one day I can control it like Sonya. She has nothing more than a dull ache.”

I barely answered before his mouth met mine, pressing hard against my lips. His tongue danced against mine like a carefully choreographed ballet. My hands wrapped around the back of

his neck, drawing him into me. I wanted to taste every bit of him. The scent that followed him curled around me, bringing all my senses to life. It left me breathless.

He pulled back, nipping at my lip. With his forehead rested against mine, he spoke, “I have a surprise for you.” He brushed his lips against mine again, which sent another cool wave of air against my skin with each word he spoke.

“Oh yeah?” I pulled back, raising an eyebrow. I didn’t want to bring up that the last guy who gave me surprises tried to kill me, making me wholeheartedly hate them. “Will you tell me what it is?”

“Well, since we’re waiting on the Jelena news, I thought we could sneak away, down to the lake for the night. I have a tent and sleeping bag that will keep us warm.”

“Because, as a vampire, you get cold.” I let out a soft giggle.

The corner of his lips turned up as he looked at me with obvious amusement. “No, but you do, and what better way to keep you warm than us, together, clothing optional?” The thought of what he was saying left my blood pounding in the most unexpected places. I let out my breath slowly, trying to calm the way I was feeling. When he smiled, I couldn’t help myself anymore. I pulled him in for one last kiss as I straddled his lap, trying to get closer to him.

“When do we leave?”

“Right after sunset,” he said. “I’m going to go shower and get ready. Then we meet at the river’s edge where you like to read sometimes.”

The river’s edge was Ethan’s and my secret location, and I loved the thought of us spending the night alone, away from this organized madness.

There was another knock on the door, and I slid off Ethan’s lap. I was feeling more relaxed, but I still hoped it wasn’t Lily coming to yell at me. I wasn’t ready.

“Tasi? Is Ethan in there with you?” It was Emily.

“Yes. Come on in.” She opened the door and walked over to where we were sitting. I gripped the edge of the bed, waiting to see if she was still mad at me for the way I spoke to Lily.

“What’s up, Em?” Ethan asked.

“I brought you the newspaper. I know how much you like to read it and I thought it might disappear. One of the guards was eyeing it with today’s mail.” She giggled.

“Thanks, Em. I appreciate it.” Ethan took the newspaper and tucked it under his arm. With his other hand, Emily and he fist-bumped.

Seeing Ethan and Emily together always tugged at my heart. I knew he treated her the same way he would’ve treated his dhampyr sister, Alice, who died because no one had any information on dhampyr transitions back then. It was just an unfortunate sickness to them.

“I don’t get it. Isn’t technology best for reading the news? Why don’t you use a laptop or tablet?” I asked Ethan. I looked to Emily. “Don’t you think it’s weird?”

“No weirder than me preferring an actual book to a tablet to read from,” Emily said. “I like the smell of books, and until I find a book-scented candle that *really* smells like a book, give me the paper version any day.”

“See, Emily gets it.” Ethan put out another fist-bump to Emily, and this time they did their special move at the end. “Tasi, I’m old, and I’ve had to change and grow in a new world where technology is taking over. Don’t deny me the one thing that has remained steady since I was human by making it weird.” His lip tugged upward in the corner.

“Yeah, Tasi. Stop picking on the elderly.” Emily giggled again.

“You two are insufferable together.”

This made them both laugh.



“I did come find you for one other bit of information.” She shifted uneasily. “But don’t kill the messenger.”

“Oh no, what now?” I crossed my legs into a pretzel on the bed as I braced for what was next. “If you’re here to yell at me about Mom, maybe we should table that conversation.”

“No, I’m not stupid enough to start that argument. Give me some credit.”

“Then what is it?”

“Do you want me to step out of the room?” Ethan asked. “If that will make this easier.”

“No, you need to hear this also,” Emily said. She put up her pointer finger and walked over to shut the door.

Ethan arched an eyebrow. He was just as curious as me. We looked at each other quickly and then back at Emily, who pulled up my desk chair and settled in.

“So, there’s a call happening tomorrow night at ten in the planning room. I don’t know if Mom was going to tell us, because you know how she feels about us getting involved with ‘adult’ matters.” Emily actually rolled her eyes at that. She may have bonded with our mom, but she was like me when it came to getting revenge on the Deity—don’t leave us in the dark because we will act out.

“Right, which is ridiculous, but whatever,” I said.

“Did you hear what the call was about?” Ethan asked.

“No, but it’s with some special ops team that has been tracking the Deity, so maybe it has to do with Jelena’s whereabouts,” she said.

“That’s a definite possibility,” Ethan said.

“So tomorrow night at ten, we may have the information we need to take these fools down,” I said. Emily nodded. “That’s a little more than twenty-four hours from now. That makes this waiting game a lot better. Did you tell Lizzie yet?”

“Nope, that’s my next stop.” She smiled.

“Nice job, Em. Let’s keep this information between us and Lizzie, just in case.” Ethan rubbed his chin as he spoke. I could tell the wheels were turning. “We can show up in the planning room, and even if they tell us to leave, Sonya won’t allow it,” he said. He held my hand and kissed it. “Time to go on the offensive.”

### Chapter 3

There was a lot to think about as I lay on my bed waiting for sunset. With the secret phone call happening tomorrow night, I'd thought maybe Ethan and I should postpone our getaway, but Ethan made a great point about enjoying a quiet night away before the chaos began. Then I thought about Lily. Yes, I was harsh on her, but I couldn't lose track of Jelena again. She wouldn't stop coming after us. If it were only me, I wouldn't care as much, but if she hurt Emily, I'd probably burn the entire state of Pennsylvania down until I found her. It didn't matter if Emily and I disagreed about Lily and had our other sisterly bickers. She was my number one. My life.

There was a knock at my door. I didn't move. I wasn't sure I was ready for who it might be. Maybe it'd be Devin. I could live with that.

"I'm coming in. If you're dancing around your room naked or doing things I shouldn't see, stop them now."

The air in my lungs filtered out of my chest, causing a sigh to escape my lips. "Come on in, Lizzie." I propped myself up on my elbows.

"How did you know it was me? Can you smell me or something?" She walked in, tying her hair in a ponytail while sniffing her armpits. She wore a crop top and leggings.

"Really?" I shook my head. "Who else would ask me if I was dancing naked in my room in a singsong voice?"

“Good point.” Lizzie pranced over, plopping onto my bed. “Are you busy? I wanted to get a workout in, and I’d rather fight someone than run on a treadmill.” She stuck out her tongue in disgust.

“Yes, yes, and yes. I need to get some of this pent-up frustration out.”

She cleared her throat and tightened her lips for a long moment. “Is Ethan not satisfying your every need these days? They say relationships get stagnant after a while. Maybe you should spice things up. You know, like some sexy lingerie, or maybe oysters. I hear oysters are a natural aphrodisiac.” After another pause, she started laughing, and I pushed her over.

“Oh, I’m so going to have fun kicking your ass.” I stood up and squinted at her once more. “Oysters and lingerie? Really?” I ran my hand down the front of my face.

Ethan and I didn’t need any help in the relationship department. He was my person. The one who not only knew me like we had been lovers for ages, but who could feel me and share in my emotions. Lizzie harassing me was going to lead to her getting an ass whooping in that ring. She was so lucky I liked her.

We headed out to the barn after I changed. There was enough overcast now to make it safe for Lizzie to sprint from one place to the other. A few human guards were working out on the weights as we entered the open room. I was happy to see no one training or fighting in the ring. We checked the schedule to make sure no one was listed to use it. Luckily, it was free for the day.

We both jumped gracefully over the ropes and started stretching. It was a human activity that I was used to doing before a workout. I didn’t think I needed it physically, maybe just mentally. Lizzie followed suit because, well, she had to wait for me anyway.

“So, I started reading that book,” Lizzie said.

“What book?” I asked. “The one that was in today’s delivery?”

“Yes, *History of the Valkyries*. Did you know a Valkyrie was a female who basically flew around battlefields and chose which of the dead went into Valhalla? Do you know how badass that sounds?”

It was as if Lizzie were talking about a new species I’d never heard of. There was passion in her words, which made me curious. Still straddling the mat, I pulled at my toes. “What’s a Valhalla?”

She rolled her eyes as she continued to stretch out her legs. “It’s like the afterlife for Vikings. I think when all this is over, I’d like to travel abroad and do more research. Maybe start in Norway or Sweden.” I’d never seen Lizzie so focused on something. She looked spellbound.

“You’re really starting to think about your past, aren’t you?” I asked. When I’d first met Lizzie, she told me she couldn’t remember farther back than a couple hundred years, so she wasn’t sure how old she was.

Lizzie, who was leaning forward on her elbows in a straddle position, relaxed and sat with her legs crossed. “Okay, I didn’t say anything when we were in the library, but when you handed me that book, I somehow felt a connection to it. Almost as if it was bringing me home. I know that sounds super weird, but I decided I’m going to figure out my past. Maybe I can learn who my parents were, where I descended from, or maybe, just maybe, my entire memory will unblock itself.” Her face lit up, and she gave me a brilliant smile. “Who knows? Maybe I can steal your crown and become Queen Freak for a bit.”

“Queen Freak?” I glared at her.

“Yeah, you can be one of my subjects and we can be freaky together. Wait. You know what I mean. Well, I mean, if you want to get freaky . . .” She waggled her brows at me.

“Yeah, okay, okay. I get it, you can be Queen Freak and I can be your freaky peon.” This was a moment I wished I could be more like Lizzie. It was also one of the reasons I think we had become best friends. She was always extreme with her moods. If she was happy, she was ecstatic, but when she was angry, she was a complete witch. She knew something was different or “wrong” with her, but it didn’t eat at her endlessly like my own issues did with me. I envied this about her. I also envied the fact that she’d be able to explore her past one day because she didn’t have a timer running on her life.

“My freaky peon. I like the sound of that.” She looked up while tapping her chin.

“I do like the idea of you taking a trip. You know, if you wanted to take that trip now, I’d never stop you. If it will help you find answers to where you come from or your human life—”

“And that’s where I’ll stop you. I’m seeing this through. There’s absolutely no way I’m leaving before Jelena is stopped and vampires are safe. All kidding aside, what she is doing with the Deity is awful and I’m staying to fight, even if it costs me my life. I couldn’t enjoy looking into my past while she’s out there trying to destroy the future of innocents.” She moved back into a yoga-like position.

Lizzie—in all her immaturity—was someone I respected. She always put other people first, even when she barely knew them. That was how Ethan and she became friends. She found him wandering New York and knew what he was. She brought him to the coven and helped him live again.

“Then maybe I can tag along, if you want the company. Ethan and Emily might want to come along too. It would be fun to get away.” The idea seemed like a lifetime away, but I’d love to travel and not worry about being captured by a psycho vampire and drained of blood by a fervent cult.

She uncurled from her stretch. “Oh, I don’t know. You *and* Ethan? You guys are kind of gross, and I’m afraid by then you two will be wearing matching outfits and finishing each other’s sentences.” She laughed.

With one last grab of my toes and an exaggerated sigh, I sprang up. I couldn’t wait for Lizzie to be in a relationship. I was going to torment her worse than she did me. “Forget it. Stand up so we can fight,” I said.

Continuing to laugh, she hopped up. “Fun fact, we’ve never actually sparred before. I guess I’ll have to go easy on you.”

I stopped bouncing around and jabbing my fists through the air. I thought back to all my training sessions at the New York coven and realized that while I’d sparred with many people, I never had with Lizzie. “You’re right. I don’t think I’ve ever seen you spar with anyone other than Emily before her first transition.”

She stretched her arms, interweaving her fingers one last time, and grinned. “Well, then, this will definitely be fun.”

There was no “go.” No asking if I was ready. She attacked and landed the first kick. I stumbled back, the sheer pressure from her foot colliding against my chest. I gasped for a breath. She swung and I blocked it. She smiled. With each move, Lizzie’s wavy curls bounced around in her ponytail. I let her strike over and over, watching her moves as I ducked out of the way. She shook her head and smirked every few blocks.

“Are you waiting for a written invitation to fight? Or maybe you’re scared of me.” Lizzie mimicked my movements, acting like a clown. Then she extended her fist once again, and once again I blocked it. She was trying to get me to make a mistake.

“I’m still debating which route I want to take.”

Another block. Lizzie put her fists in front of her face. She pulled out a series of jabs, which was when I struck. I clipped her feet and watched her fall to the mat. She returned the favor, knocking me down beside her and hopping back to her feet. It was time for me to strike hard.

I lunged and released a sizable blow on Lizzie's face. Blood splattered everywhere, and there were gasps from the onlookers who had gathered around the ring.

"Nice one, Tasi." She wiped her nose and flung the blood off her finger.

Lizzie leaped, kneeing me in the gut before throwing me across the ring. My back crashed into the corner post. Something had sparked in her. She yanked me toward her by my feet as her eyes crystallized like ice. She then hammered into me, and I couldn't move under her grip. Cool liquid from her nose dripped onto my face. I pushed her off. We switched positions.

I pressed onto Lizzie for a few moments to catch my breath. Shoving off her, I jumped back far enough so she couldn't knock me back to the floor. Or so I thought. It didn't work. She was right there, grabbing me by the throat, slamming me down. As my back hit the pad, the air left me. I panted, trying to pull it back into my lungs. The fight was starting to feel more and more like my sparring match with that horrible excuse for a vampire who had tried to make me fall in love with him. I flinched a bit at the thought.

When I got to my feet, I let out a small gasp. Lizzie's eyes had a glimmer that blazed. It was there one moment and gone the next. It was something I'd never seen in any other vampire before. I shook what I just saw out of my head and refocused my attention, then tried to slam into her with my shoulder, but she blocked me. I tripped, and she landed on top of me, pinning me down once again.

"Are you two okay? Like, are you really angry at each other?" one onlooker asked.



Lizzie and I paused, staring at him, and then at each other before collapsing to our sides and full-belly laughing. I snorted, and Lizzie lost it right when I'd thought she was regaining her composure.

"We're fine. We fight hard, but it's all for fun," I said.

"Miss, if you hit me that hard, I think my skull would have flown out the back of my head," the guard said, shaking his head.

That was a bit of an exaggeration, but a funny image. We continued lying there as we caught our breath, both from the fight and all the laughter.

"That really was fun." Lizzie wiped her nose, which was now crusted with blood. "I don't know why we haven't done this before."

"Totally. Let's promise to work out together more often. I think it'll do us both some good," I said. "Plus, you're a lot stronger than I thought you would be." It was moments like this that I was so thankful for Lizzie. I'd never had a best friend who was a girl. I'd always had Emily, but that didn't count, because she was also my sister and a lot younger than me.

"You know what was really weird? As I was fighting, there was this energy pulsing through my veins, like it could break me wide open and I'd become indestructible." Lizzie looked at her hands as if they were unrecognizable. "I've never felt that before. I wonder if it's because you're stronger than most vampires and, well, I never sparred with the jackass, Austin. Actually, now that I think about it, he never sparred with anyone other than you. Probably scared of getting dirty." My body had recoiled at his name. "Sorry, I know he's not something we talk about."

"It's okay." I bit my lip, needing to change the subject. "So, we have a plan—an added quest. Once all this is over, we'll figure out what you need to do to remember your past. Could

you imagine if you're closer to Sonya's age? I think that would make you stronger than me for sure." With vampires, typically the older you were, the stronger you were, and maybe Lizzie was a lot older than she thought.

Lizzie's grin was huge. "I can't believe you would do this for me. I know we're friends and all, but you have so much going on—"

"Lizzie, now it's my turn to shut you up. Get a clue. I'd do anything for you, the same way I'd do anything for Emily."

"Aww. You love me. You really, really love me," she said, fluttering her eyelashes.

I rolled my eyes at her. "Don't push it. I have to go shower. I'm meeting Ethan in a little while." I stood up and put my hand out to pull Lizzie to her feet.

"Hey, Tasi," Lizzie said, grinning widely as she bounced up to her feet, "don't forget the oysters."