

Ambrose Heights Vampires 2

Veil of Seduction

A newborn vampire. A powerful leader. An inconsolable woman. The shaping of their eternity all lies within the eyes.

Steffan Matthews is the devastatingly handsome vampire leader of Ambrose Heights. He cultivates social order and invents concoctions that allow vampires to feel human once again.

But Steffan also has a devouring obsession that brings him to his knees. Her name is Anya. Steffan sets out to claim Anya, a mortal ripe for the taking, as his mate. But the blackness in the eyes of his newborn should've served as a warning. Anya is off-limits according to the vampire creed.

It will take the strength of the kinship, the purity of love, a hint of magic, and a subterranean guardian to shield Steffan against the wrath of Ryan Evans, protect him from the fate of the Nemesis, and bridge a passage to his rightful destiny.

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Maya DeLeina

EROTIC ROMANCE



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DEDICATION

People come into your life and make you laugh, learn, love, and grow. For me, I've met wonderful people who did exactly this and so much more.

Suzanne—your support goes beyond any scale of appreciation. Your talent and creative passions are endless and fascinating. But most of all, your friendship is a gift as valuable as life itself.

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Natalie—much can be said for overdue e-mail responses. Cheers to a great relationship.

To my editor—thank you for all that didn't make it into the book.

Dad, Chris, Jen, Mike, Mark, Big L, and Lady—your love and support is comforting and what keeps me grounded.

Mom—your praise is better than a five-star review. Thank you for all that you have done for me, taught me, and instilled in me to get me where I am today. I love you.

And finally, to M.J.—home is where you are. Dorothy had it right—there's no place like it.

VEIL OF SEDUCTION

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MAYA DELEINA

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Prologue

The evening marked the first snowfall of the season.

Ryan stepped out into the cold night air and reached deep into the pockets of his long wool coat. He wiggled his fingers against the smooth satin lining, his senses soaking in the opulence that surrounded him.

Every detail of the five-star resort was exquisite.

His gaze traveled the length of the porte cochere, then drifted upward on the ornate ceiling. The Italian Renaissance architecture boasted ornamental moldings finished in shades of gold, black, and cobalt blue. It was striking against the white marble archways that lined the entry.

He remained fixated on the lavishness until a sweet voice breached his trance.

“Sir? I am so sorry. I forgot to have you select your fortune before you left the restaurant.”

She was slightly winded but polished and expressive in her footing. Her arms outstretched toward Ryan, displaying an elegant glass bowl filled with little silver and gold foil packages. She wore a white, button-down shirt, a delicate sheen laced in the fabric. The top two buttons had been left undone, revealing her cleavage to eager eyes. The shirt tucked into a black pencil skirt that accentuated her curves. An ankle bracelet adorned one bare leg and complimented her peep-toe, black heels.

She stood shaking, inadequately attired for the frigid temperature of the evening.

Ryan looked at her curiously. “You work at the restaurant? I don’t remember seeing you.”

“Well, I definitely saw you.”

“And you ran out after me, in this cold, all because of a fortune cookie?”

She flashed the flirtiest smile. “I could never live with myself knowing I deprived you of your chosen enlightenment to fulfill your destiny, sir.”

Like a wildfire, Ryan felt his smile spread from ear to ear.

A spark flashed in her eyes.

In that moment, Ryan realized their immediate attraction to one another.

Ryan scanned her from head to toe. He estimated she was at least a decade younger than him. Delicious images danced in his head as he mentally undressed her within seconds. He fished his nestled hands out from the warmth of his coat pockets and reached for a shimmering package in the glass bowl.

“Well then, when you put it that way, how can I refuse?” Ryan selected a package with his left hand while his right shrewdly retrieved a business card from his inner chest pocket.

“Hopefully, you will not make the same mistake and deprive me of anything else in the future,” Ryan uttered slyly as he handed her his card.

Her eyes widened as she examined his card. She smiled at the personal information carefully penned on the back. Her lustful gaze fixed on Ryan as she bit her lower lip and evaluated his physique. She leaned in close and whispered in his ear, “I assure you, I never make the same mistake twice.”

She pulled back, noting the smug-laced grin that was etched on Ryan’s face. Giving him one last assessment, she parted with a flirty wink. “I’ll be seeing you...Mr. Ryan Evans.”

Ryan watched as the young woman retreated back into the lobby. He took in a deep breath, absorbing her musky perfume that suspended in the air. Instantly, his naughty imagination unleashed once again. With her pinned securely beneath him, she writhed under his control. Her perky breasts bounced with a raw intensity to the demands of his thrusts. Her lustful moans rang deliciously in his ear. She huffed and panted, begging him to fuck her harder and faster like an animal.

Ryan pulled himself from the wicked fantasy and refocused on his surroundings. Resigning effortlessly, he sighed.

Taking another lover was no longer a question of if, but when.

Once she disappeared from his sight, he tore open the elegant foil packaging, and retrieved the fortune cookie. One half of the crescent was dipped in dark chocolate and finished with a dusting of edible gold flakes.

He broke open the cookie and fished out the small piece of paper hidden inside.

Those who have love and happiness, have wealth beyond measure

“Mr. Evans, your car has arrived,” interrupted the valet as Ryan read the fortune’s message.

Ryan popped the broken cookie pieces into his mouth, tipped the valet, and slipped into the warmth of the vehicle. He buckled his seat belt and made the necessary mirror adjustments, glancing once more at the fortune. A chuckle escaped him as he edited the fortune, discarding it out the window.

“Those with wealth beyond measure can *buy* love and happiness.”

* * * *

From the refuge of the lobby, the young woman peered out of the window, watching Ryan as he got into his vehicle. The lights of the porte cochere beamed off of the highly polished Mercedes SUV. She caught a glimpse of the vanity plate just before Ryan drove off into the darkness.

MNEM8KR.

“Money maker,” she said to herself, “I gotcha!”

Chapter One

Of the seven properties that made up Ambrose Heights, Ryan Evans purchased the smallest home in the exclusive gated community.

But what his home lacked in size, it made up for in its architectural presence.

Covered in stone and stucco, visitors were welcomed with intricate carved designs in the wooden doors at the vaulted entrance. The home was built on stilts, offering the illusion of balancing precariously on the edge of the mountain. Floor-to-ceiling windows created unobstructed views of the neighboring mountain vistas and the city below. Yet, the striking feature of the home was the portion of the mountain that protruded through the framing and the large boulder that seemingly jutted up through floor.

Careful attention to incorporate the mountain terrain translated into a truly unique home.

Ryan had first laid eyes on the property when he happened upon a copy of a local architecture magazine. Lingering in the smooth finish of a rusty nail at the lakeside bar in his favorite hotel in town, the magazine cover caught his eye. The home was the feature story. With each page turned, Ryan couldn't believe his eyes. The magnificent home was the first glimpse he ever had into Ambrose Heights.

Ambrose Heights was a bit of an enigma in the town. It sat secluded, access restricted only to residents, with very little activity seen on the only road leading to and from the mountainside neighborhood. Even the locals in the area didn't know much about the place or its residents. In fact, most would swear that the community seemed to just appear overnight. All that was known of Ambrose Heights was it loomed above picturesque Manitou Springs, vigilant of the eclectic and spirited ambiance of the town.

And it was this, the *exclusiveness* of the neighborhood, which captivated Ryan. It drew him in like a moth to a flame. He wanted to be a part of the status, seize its prominence and distinction.

He tucked the magazine in his brief case and immediately went to work, feeding his latest obsession.

No matter the price, the home would be his.

* * * *

Ryan exhausted his time in relentless research of the property. He poured through public resources for information on the owner, land zoning, builders, anything he could tie to Ambrose Heights. He even resorted to locating the author of the magazine article and was thrilled to learn that the owner was known to entertain proposals to purchase the property from time to time.

This was the fuel Ryan needed.

Soon, Ryan's persistence and determination paid off. He landed a face-to-face meeting with Vaughn, the caretaker of the property.

Ryan spent the next few weeks communicating with Vaughn at the mercy of the guard post station. When Vaughn finally agreed to present the owner with a purchase proposal, Ryan found himself making multiple visits to Ambrose Heights, more than he could count. Vaughn always insisted on daytime visits, without a single offer to enter the home for a private tour. Instead, he offered Ryan rides in a golf cart down the long street that made up the community as the negotiations played out.

On one visit, Vaughn freely shared information about Ambrose Heights residents as they stopped to admire the home that sat in the bend of the crescent-shaped road.

This home was quite different from the others in the community. This was an *estate*.

The residence had a definite old-world charm, drawing inspiration from medieval European designs. It was clad in stone and boasted ornate oriel windows and two tower steeples. Vines climbed the walls of the towers that flanked a large Juliet balcony. Perched high on the hill, the castle-like estate was surrounded by a manicured garden that created a labyrinth design on the sprawling front lawn. Two long cobblestone driveways lined each side of the lawn and led up to the circle courtyard at the staircased entrance. And while Ryan was still seated in the golf cart on the street, he could make out a stately tiered fountain in the courtyard and a four-car garage accessible by a glass, enclosed breezeway.

“This was the first home built. It is also the largest,” Vaughn stated plainly. “The owner had originally purchased all of this land and worked with a developer to create this private community. Originally, the plan called for thirteen homes. If I am correct, he finally decided to keep it a close-knit community with fewer homes but still owns most of the undeveloped land up here.”

“And am I to assume that *this* home is not for sale?” Ryan asked.

“You are correct. An offer would never be entertained for this home. *He* resides here.”

“He?” Ryan looked curiously at Vaughn.

“He.” Vaughn stated with a sense of authority in his eyes.

“Interesting. So, the residents here, are they celebrities, neurosurgeons, infamous attorneys?” Ryan asked, deciding this was his only opportunity to inquire about the wealth and status of the residents of Ambrose Heights without sounding crass.

“Old money.” Vaughn winked at Ryan. Vaughn exited the golf cart and Ryan followed suit. They leaned against the cart’s frame, admiring the grand home from the street.

“I’m not of old money. And, I know how people of that stature are. They are very *particular* of their social circle,” Ryan declared in a troubling tone.

“The residents have been briefed on your proposal to purchase a property and are quite interested in you. It is certainly not a bad deal to have a highly successfully hedge fund manager in their community.”

Vaughn stared at Ryan, waiting for him to bring up a subject they had yet to discuss. “And in case you were wondering, I do have an option to work for another family here if my owner decides to sell to you. I won’t be out of a job.”

“Sorry, Vaughn, I didn’t even think about that.”

Truth told, although Vaughn had been nothing but amiable and receptive to his requests to visit the area, there was still something uneasy about him. Vaughn stood about five foot nine, the same height as Ryan. He was a little overweight, and Ryan determined his age to be around fifty years old from the gray in his hair and wear on his face. Still, Vaughn wielded some undefined creepiness that Ryan couldn’t quite pinpoint.

“Tell me something.” Vaughn stepped back around the cart to the driver seat as Ryan slid into the seat next to him. “Why do you want this so bad?”

My employer is not even willing to let you tour the home, yet you still pursue this. You do very well for yourself. Certainly someone of your stature would already own a magnificent home.”

“I do *very* well for myself,” Ryan said sharply. He scanned the neighborhood as he shook his head in veneration. “And, I do have a nice home. But this is Ambrose Heights. Being here would be different for me. This is the epitome of prestige and stature. To live here means recognition, distinction from everyone else out there. Just look how many homes are here, how exclusive this community is. How many people make this drive, sit up here looking over the town, and call this place home? Not many.”

“Not many,” Vaughn said, confirming Ryan’s assessment.

“I can’t get this living anywhere else *but* here. I want recognition. I want status. I *want* Ambrose Heights.”

“Well-crafted response, well crafted,” said Vaughn as he nodded. He started the engine and maneuvered the cart leisurely along the cobblestone street.

“So, why is the owner entertaining my proposal?” Ryan asked, his gaze fixated on the homes.

“For the right price, anything is negotiable.” Vaughn slowed the cart to a stop and turned to Ryan. “And, for the right individual, Ambrose Heights is negotiable, too.”

Vaughn’s last line echoed in Ryan’s head as a smile slowly materialized.

For the first time, becoming a resident of Ambrose Heights felt promising.

Ryan slid back in his seat and absorbed his surroundings. He remained silent as Vaughn steered his way back to the gated entrance.

Every visit to Ambrose Heights renewed Ryan’s desire to live there. Every detail—the entry gates, the AH-monogrammed sign, the personnel uniforms and landscaping—was always pristine and immaculate.

And the streets were always quiet.

No activity. No noise.

Perfect setting for my retreat, Ryan thought as he closed his eyes and took a deep breath, savoring the tang and sensation of the crisp mountain air.

* * * *

“Ryan, I hope you are sitting down. Vaughn called. The offer is being accepted.”

“Alan White, my attorney extraordinaire, I knew you could do it!” Ryan said with enthusiasm.

“There are conditions.”

Ryan stood up slowly from his desk and paced his office, anxious expectancy coiling throughout his body. He treaded lightly across the black concrete floors, his movement reflecting in the high, polished sheen. The walls were black, the leather furniture supple. An old-world globe cabinet tilted open, displaying a collection of glasses and expensive liquors. The intricate details etched in its antiqued shell paired nicely with the rich cherrywood. René Magritte’s *The Son of the Man* painting sat prominently above the granite fireplace as the orange flames radiated from the graphite and alpine fireplace crystals.

He’d spared no expense. The office was posh, the essence of masculine extravagance.

“What are the conditions?” Ryan asked, his eagerness firing little bits of lightning in the room as he engaged the speaker phone.

“First, the house is to be sold as is. No inspections,” Alan responded, a slight wavering ringing in his words.

“And let me guess...there is a second condition, right?”

“Yes. They also rejected our proposal option to buy the land. Apparently the Matthews family owns title to all the land and they intend on keeping it that way. This means the property would be sold as a leasehold. The bright side is they are willing to set a lease contract for twenty years.”

Ryan settled at the window and gazed at the mountain range where Ambrose Heights stood. “Meaning I just have to wait twenty years before they can fuck me over with inflated lease payments. Doesn’t get brighter than that, I guess.”

Alan sighed. Ryan could hear him shuffle through the papers on the other side of the line.

“Well, there is one more thing...a third condition.”

“What is it, Alan?”

“They want to complete the deal within forty-eight hours.”

A long pause sounded on the line, airy and unsettling. “Since you are not securing a mortgage on the property, technically, the inspection counter is not a problem. But Ryan, I would strongly advise against the deal. I know

the owner is thought to be an eccentric, but this stipulation is absurd! It's Ambrose Heights, yes, but to give up your right to an inspection? Ridiculous!" Alan waited a second before continuing. "And closing within forty-eight hours—"

Interrupting Alan, Ryan snapped in response, "Alan, do you not see that this is *my* moment? That *I* can have Ambrose Heights? I'm not going to pass on this! I have been beyond hopeful, beyond prepared for this very news! All of these months of moving money here, transferring assets there—all of the painstaking efforts, and now the funds are successfully in place. You know this, yet you are advising against it? I pay you a lot of money to take care of the legal issues, not for your opinion."

"Actually, I make a good living for exactly that...my opinion," Alan said bluntly.

Ryan took a deep breath in, reining in his outburst as he leaned against the window. He closed his eyes tightly as he spoke, "Look, you said the guy is eccentric. True. But most of all, he is a control fiend." Ryan paused and opened his eyes. "Don't you see his game? These drawn-out negotiations, numerous changes to the contract, days without calls, calls in the middle of the night? They're all methodically crafted to fulfill his need for dominance. This closing stipulation of two days and no inspection...it is just his last effort, a means to dangle me by his strings one last time. I'll play his game if it means my ass will be perched on top of the mountain, in that house, sipping champagne and looking down at all of the fucking people in town. They will envy me!"

"You realize that we would have to close by Thursday?" Alan replied, making a last effort to sound his opinion carefully in the matter.

"Accept the deal with the conditions, Alan. *I want Ambrose Heights.*" Ryan firmly accentuated his last line. "Make the necessary arrangements to the property title as we planned. I'll work on her over the weekend to sign the quitclaim deed."

"And, as for the remaining matter?"

"What about it?"

"Well, have you changed your mind, or are we to proceed as planned after the title transfer is complete?" Alan questioned.

Ryan sighed. "Anya. Yes, proceed. All I want is Anise."

Chapter Two

The Mercedes G550 maneuvered through the switchbacks of the mountain pass that led to Ambrose Heights. Ryan was a little on edge as he'd never made the trip at dusk and the light snow flurry that had started earlier in the evening was now heavier and sticking to the road. A sense of relief washed over him as he finally came upon the only straightaway in the journey.

This was his perfect opportunity.

He rolled his shoulders, slid back into the seat warmers, and allowed his hands to loosen their grip on the wheel. Slowly, he glided his hands around the steering wheel, enjoying the sensation the texture created on his palms.

Ryan was consumed with absolute contentment as he reflected in the silence.

The house. The Mercedes. They are mine.

He pictured what the house would look like at night, how he would tower above the sparkle and shimmer of the city below. He wondered about the exact number of people he could pack in the house when he was ready to throw himself a housewarming party. The guest list would be long and obviously take some methodical planning. He would be strategic, inviting the right people who could spread the word about his extravagant purchase. In the right hands, the invitation could lead to more opportunities, maybe even land a feature story in the architectural magazine.

But this time, he would be on the cover.

Fulfillment washed over him as he took a deep breath. His nostrils immediately filled with the scent of leather, but through the air of masculinity, a spice-laced perfume delicately surfaced.

His gaze traveled to the passenger seat. He soaked in her beautiful features as she slept. Her olive-tone skin, her long, silky, black hair, her slender legs, he loved everything about her. He softly caressed her cheek with the back of his hand and edited his previous thought.

The house. The Mercedes. The beauty by my side. They are mine.

She was his latest acquisition.

Like a trophy on display, she glistened. Her attractiveness radiated a discernible vibrancy. He shook his head in adoration. It was the newness of her and the ability to parade her around in his new social circle for which he held a categorical anticipation. Surely the wealthy men of Ambrose Heights would be envious of his ownership. Without a doubt, they would have the most exquisite taste, a real eye for a stunning beauty.

And Anise DeVera was nothing less than stunning.

She was adventurous, animated, and so full of life. Every day was filled with anticipation, every evening sparked with passion. She made him feel fresh, young, and wild. Being with her reignited his passion and possibilities in his life.

Anise caught his hand in hers, planting a loving kiss with her full lips. Her almond-shaped eyes opened, and she looked up at him. Instantly, thoughts of the house were now replaced with random images of their passionate lovemaking. Things he wanted to do to her. Things he would do for her. They would work at christening every part of the house. A deep sense of hunger burned through him.

How much longer is the drive?

She placed his hand on the steering wheel and let her hand travel to his knee.

He took a deep breath and slowly exhaled in response to her touch.

She rubbed his knee with one hand.

Sensing her intention, Ryan parted his legs and slid forward in his seat, allowing his crotch to rise slightly. He immediately reached for a control button that sent the steering column in a receding motion, affording her more accessibility.

With some reach, he maintained control of the wheel.

Slowly, her hand glided up along his inner thigh.

Ryan's eyes darted between the road and Anise's exploratory hands. She moved with precision, leaving a trail of tormenting sparks to pierce down to his bones. With every touch, he responded with a tremble and his breath grew deeper. He parted his lips, rimming his tongue along his bottom lip.

On her last swipe up his thigh, she angled her hand so her fingers were pointing upward and delicately cupped his crotch. She ran her thumb and

middle finger up and down each side of his hardness that was clearly outlined beneath the material.

He throbbed under his trousers in anticipation of what she was planning on doing next.

Adjusting herself on the seat, Anise leaned into Ryan. Pulling on his zipper, her craving-filled eyes were focused and targeted. She found her way to his briefs and methodically tucked her fingers in the opening of the material in search for his cock. The tip was already glistening with a bead of excitement.

Ryan put his hand on the back of her head and motioned her down. Her mouth took him with authority and excitement.

Ryan let out a moan.

She moved up and down, allowing her tongue to trace every vein and contour in a wet exploration. His fingers splayed the width of her skull. Desire mounted and soon, Ryan's hands were demanding, dictating the moment and directing her pace.

Ryan tilted his head back, savoring the feeling of her warm mouth taking him in.

Suddenly, a thunderous strike echoed through the vehicle and shattered the moment. She immediately responded to the violent jerk, quickly releasing Ryan and returned to the safety of her seat. From Ryan's estimation, he had hit a deep pothole in the road. He looked in the rearview mirror instinctively but could only see darkness. Ryan nervously tucked himself back into the trousers and steadied both hands on the wheel.

"A little help with the zipper?" he asked as he tried to regain concentration on the road.

She leaned forward to help him.

The polished, red jasper that hung from the rearview mirror swiftly sparked his attention. From the impact, the stone swayed back and forth in a rhythmic pendulum swing. He gazed at the stone, the movement hypnotic, conjuring up memories.

Memories he did not want to evoke.

At once, a sharp pain suspended in the hollow of his chest as the image of his wife flooded his mind, recalling their exchange earlier that day.

"This is for your car, honey," Anya's sultry voice echoed in his head.

She'd stood in their driveway, dangling a package in front of him as he turned over the engine. A shawl rested on her shoulders, outlining her low-

cut white embroidered tunic. Her long bohemian skirt blew gracefully in the light wind. She pulled her hair behind her ear on one side, exposing her exuberant smile as she walked to the passenger door. Anya's shapely body stirred something in him as he watched her walk in front of the SUV. She opened the door and leaned in through the passenger seat to hang her present on his rearview mirror, creating the most advantageous view of her cleavage. Ryan closed his eyes tightly and shook his head, reminding himself of the decision he had already made.

By that evening, he would be gone.

"It's red jasper. It is said to protect against harm, especially against hazards that come at night." Anya looked up at Ryan with a smile and reached to cup his jawline in her hand. "Perfect for you, Mr. Workaholic. I would feel a lot better if this was with you. "

"And, I suppose I have Michelle to thank for this as well?"

She shrugged innocently before giving him a quick peck on the lips. "My last lesson cancelled for this evening, so I can be home early. Call me when you're about to leave the office and we can hurry and start the weekend."

Ryan nodded in response, watching her make her way to her car.

From the moment he first saw Anya, he was captivated. He watched her command attention, dominate all focus in a room. He saw the way men would stop and stare, clamor for her attention. More than just an exotic beauty, she was a *treasure*, an indispensable asset that could solidify a man's worth. Without a second thought, he knew right then and there, he had to have her. When she'd taken his name, he soaked in all of the covetous eyes, relishing his possession. But he soon realized deep in his core he craved variety, novelty in the unfamiliar and adventure in the unexpected.

All things a marriage could not easily afford.

He'd waited, watching her car disappear around the bend from his rearview mirror. Ryan cut the Mercedes engine and stepped out of the vehicle, back onto the driveway. He hurried, entering their home, and retrieved the suitcase he had concealed in the coat closet. He'd worked all week to inconspicuously pack for his getaway. He reached into his coat pocket and pulled out a square envelope. He ran his fingers over the envelope one last time as he balanced the letter against a vase that sat on the foyer's entry table.

Ryan's thoughts drifted back to the present, concentrating on the last few miles of his drive. The red jasper's hypnotic swing was now reduced to a simple sway, breaking any hold it once had on him.

He glanced at the time.

Anya should be making her way home.

His plan was moving along like clockwork. Everything spilled into that letter, waiting to be revealed.

After five years of marriage, his love for her diminished. Life became too predictable, too routine, and too ordinary. There was no fire, no passion. He wished to start a new life, a life with someone new. He looked over at the passenger seat and gazed at Anise. The woman had stolen his heart. She was the unique fire that rekindled everything he'd lost.

In that moment, he settled his thoughts, confident in his decision.

The straightway ended and the last set of sharp turns in the road before reaching the gates of Ambrose Heights were coming up.

The stretch of road that had no guardrails, he mentally noted.

The snow was now heavier, quickly diminishing visibility in the darkness. Ryan readjusted himself in the seat as his foot lightened its demand on the gas pedal.

Anise reached for her seat belt. She tugged and pulled, but all she could capture was the smoothness of the fabric. Somewhere behind the seat, the belt's metal fitting had gotten tangled. She turned around in her seat, pressing her cheek against the cold window and reached behind to untangle the belt.

"What are you doing?" Ryan asked.

"My seat belt is stuck and I'm trying to..." she said.

"Do it gently!" Ryan barked. "The leather...I'd like to keep it looking new. Your long nails can do some real damage. Have you seen my back lately? I had to work at hiding it from her all week."

"All right," she said with a slight agitation in her tone. She fumbled around a little more then exclaimed, "Got it!"

* * * *

Anise lifted her cheek from the cold glass and exposed the metal fitting of the belt. As she adjusted, allowing her hand to pull the belt up and around her, she glanced out the window.

Two red orbs met her eyes.

She frowned.

Blinking curiously, she leaned in closer to see what the red objects were.

The red, fiery orbs disappeared for a brief second and reappeared again.

She closed her eyes tight and rubbed her eyelids, one with her thumb and the other with her forefinger. With fresh eyes, she settled into her stare. The window was speckled with snowflakes, some dense in their formation and some just delicate traces across the glass. Her eyes were playing tricks on her, moving in and out of focus, marring her ability to clearly see what lay beyond in the darkness. She sank deep into her gaze, relaxing her eyes as if looking at a piece of 3-D art. The bright-white patterning of the snow blurred, receding into the background, allowing the darkness to become the forefront.

Suddenly, the image was fully revealed.

In an instant, she pulled back. The harsh realization that the objects were two eyes blinking back at her was crushing. Anise froze in fear, focusing in on the eyes. They were sinister and chilling. She evaluated further, her eyes now fine-tuned, rendering defined features one by one. Gray-toned skin, an eerie chalkiness in its texture, deep-seated wrinkles, and sharp, elongated teeth came into focus.

It wasn't human. It wasn't an animal. She couldn't say for sure what she was looking at. It was a creature. The eyes were familiar in their penetration, exuding wickedness and reveling in malicious intent.

Of that, she was sure.

Her frozen state of shock wore off, and fear gripped her beyond control. She let out a high-pitched scream and pushed back into Ryan's lap, her left elbow hitting the steering wheel, sending the car into a sharp turn in the opposite direction of the path of the road ahead.

"What the fuck! What are you doing?" Ryan screamed.

He slammed on the brakes and tried to regain control of the vehicle.

She was wild, screaming and clutching at Ryan.

"What the—? Get off! What's wrong? Stop!" Ryan screeched crazily in incomplete sentences.

He overcorrected the turn and clipped the side of the mountain, sending them into a spin.

* * * *

The chain of events played out in slow motion, fuzzy in its detail and muted in its sound.

Ryan looked at Anise, feverishly working to place the metal fitting into the buckle of her seat belt without success. Her long, black hair suspended in the air around her, the ends whipping across her face. Her eyes wielded sheer panic and fear, her expression frozen in terror. The red jasper swung aberrantly, slow in its viscous circle pattern. Ryan reached for the stone, ripping it off of the mirror, clutching it in his hand, and bringing it to his chest.

Real time burst back into reality, unleashing all the recklessness and haste of the scene, amplifying the sounds of crunching metal, breaking glass, howling wind, and stabbing screams laced with unrestrained adrenaline and fright.

The SUV slammed into the side of the mountain.

Once, bang. Twice, bang.

The metal frame crushed and ripped against the granite rock before flipping over, sending it sliding on the icy road along its passenger side.

The window shattered with the force.

Ryan watched in horror as Anise's arm got caught between the road and the spinning SUV, breaking it instantly.

Her scream in agony pierced Ryan down to his bones.

In the momentum of slide, Ryan watched helplessly as Anise's flesh mangled against the pebbled asphalt. Inch by inch, her body was being pulled out slowly through the window and under the spin of the vehicle.

Ryan moved the jasper to his left hand and caught Anise's wrist with his right. He was white-knuckled, trying desperately to pull her back in the vehicle's cabin. Luggage and shopping bags that had been placed neatly in the backseat hurled at them, becoming projectiles. With force, a bag came crashing into Ryan's hand and he lost his grip on Anise.

In the heart-wrenching moment, Ryan caught Anise's gaze, imploring for rescue. They held their stare on each other for a brief moment, knowing and silent in the final parting. Violently, she was fully ejected out of the vehicle through the window, her exposed body crushed under the weight of the SUV.

Ryan closed his eyes.

As he feared, the vehicle started its slide closer and closer to edge, teetering right at the brink. Bags and other belongings projected out of the vehicle, scattering all along the road. He had lost all control of the situation. She was gone. There was nothing he could do. He whispered a silent prayer as his tears rolled down his cheek.

In an instant, Ryan's eyes ignited, opening with intensity. He took a quick breath and held it.

This was it.

The SUV fell abruptly from the road, plunging to the bottom of the forested valley, no guard rail to stop it.

Chapter Three

Anise lay sprawled out on the snow-covered road as snowflakes gathered on her face.

She opened her eyes and quickly pushed herself up to a sitting position to examine her body. Running her hand across her face, head, arm, abdomen, chest, and thigh, she was in complete awe of how quickly her injuries healed. Each break, tear, and puncture was excruciatingly painful, and while she knew her injuries would be healed, a recovery from the extent of the damage was not anticipated.

Trepidation washed over her.

Surely, her body exceeded its limit to complete the speedy repair. This could mean weeks of rest to replenish her healing mechanisms due to her infancy.

She'd hoped she would at least have some residual energy left to repair Ryan.

Anise stood up and brushed off the snow that collected on her clothing. She examined her surroundings and what was left of the accident.

The SUV was nowhere to be found.

All that remained were shattered pieces of glass, a taillight, a side mirror, and a few pieces of her and Ryan's belongings scattered along the road.

Anise ran to the edge of the road and looked over the cliff.

The headlights of the Mercedes pierced through the darkness like spotlights. Running her eyes frantically along the landscape, Anise examined the formation of the trees to determine her next move.

The SUV had fallen to a depth that would require more energy than she had for manifestation. This also made the option of flight absolutely out of the question. Decisively, Anise made the only decision she could.

She was going to climb her way down to Ryan.

Anise ran to her personal belongings that scattered the road. She desperately searched for her duffel bag and purse.

“Where are they? I need the serums!” she said in a panicked voice. With a sigh of relief, she picked up the duffel bag, throwing it over her shoulder. And as she hooked her arm through the handles of her purse, she heard heavy breathing behind her.

With breath held, her body went rigid in fright. In an instant, Anise sensed it was him.

“Dominic?”

She turned around and shuddered at the sight of his wretched shell.

“So, it was you! I didn’t expect you to be still alive!” she said as she took a closer look at him. “My god! Look at you!”

Dominic was feeble. His skin hung from his bones, dull gray, almost chalklike. Even as she examined him, he continued to deteriorate in front of her eyes. His bottom jaw caved in, exposing his stained, triangular teeth. Two teeth fell from his gums and turned to dust as they hit the ground. A clump of hair fell from his head and disintegrated in the wind.

“Dominic, you officially lost the only part of you that I ever truly loved...your good looks,” she said. “I hope this death will be as painful as the time you made me spend with you.”

She turned her back on Dominic, intent to make her way to the aspen grove to save Ryan. In any other scenario, Dominic’s presence would have struck absolute fright and panic. But he had been reduced to a pathetic creature, and she quickly seized the opportunity and positioned herself with the upper hand.

Suddenly, Dominic manifested in front of her. His sunken eyes reignited to a fiery, red glow that startled her. He reached for her chin and delicately held it in his hand.

“My love, you agreed to become my mate. You wanted to be my mate. And so, you drank from me and I claimed you. Don’t you remember what I told you about the claim? Our blood bonds us together for eternity.”

Dominic released her chin and began to circle her trembling body. Tears rolled down her cheek. She was suddenly aware that he still held residual power and energy even through the depletion process. As he made his way behind her, he clutched her long hair firmly in his fist and pulled her head back with force.

“You started this process. And since you were just a newborn, you’ve graced me with very little time before depletion takes me!” he whispered forebodingly in her ear.

He released her hair and threw her head forward.

“You know you are the only one who can save me, so I will ask. Do you wish to return as my mate?”

She shook her head in a response. “I—I didn’t know what I was agreeing to, Dominic. Forgive me. But I can’t. I can’t be yours!”

Her tears intensified as she tried to reason with Dominic.

“I realized that I was in love with Ryan. After you turned me, I still remembered him. I still had feelings for him. I carried him through to my immortality. Please understand. I can’t love you!”

Sighing, Dominic responded, “And where was this love for Ryan during those nights of the claim? You came freely to my bed. You burned with need and desire for me, for my body, all those nights. You wanted me to take you. You begged me to take you.”

“I didn’t know! I didn’t know this is what I was agreeing to!” she cried, pleading for his forgiveness. “Please, Dominic. Please, I can’t do this. I didn’t fully understand what I had done.”

“Our kind mates for life. There is no going back.” Dominic’s tone was chillingly even. He turned his back to her and whispered, “Remember, I go, you go.”

“I go?” She grabbed Dominic’s shoulders and turned him around to look at her. “My heart was never true to you! I never belonged to you! Look at me, I haven’t depleted at all!”

“My sweet love, I chose you as my mate for life, and you failed me. Yes, it is true. You have not depleted, and you will not deplete. You are as beautiful as ever and you will continue on in your perfect form for eternity.”

Dominic leaned into her ear and whispered. “But, surely you don’t think I would ever let *that* happen.”

Dominic pulled back and searched her eyes. “I’ve planned this very moment, to see your face, to see the same intense fear and anguish that you have caused me. I want to see it burn in your eyes. It’s all I could think about since you left.”

He leaned in closer to her face,

She watched him watch her. An evil fury burned in his eyes. Horror gripped her like never before.

“Ahh! There’s the fear I craved. I saved enough energy so we could share in the rest of *my* life...together as mates. ”

In one sweeping motion, they were gone.

* * * *

Ryan felt the cold surrounding him, the sensation collecting on the left side of his body. He slowly opened his eyes. The Mercedes came to rest on its passenger side. A layer of powder from the deployed airbags covered his face. The passenger seat was filled with a mixture of blood and powder, but it was empty. He remained pinned in the driver seat, suspended by the seat belt with all the pressure on the right side of his body. Pain consumed him, and he realized the extent of his injuries. A bone protruded through his left thigh. His right wrist was broken. Blood streamed from the top of his head and down his face. The mix of the powder and blood burned as it ran freely into his eyes. He felt light-headed. His vision blurred. Ryan closed his eyes.

The faint sound of crunching snow renewed his senses, and he forced his eyes open. The crunching became louder, and Ryan didn't know whether he should be elated at the thought of being rescued or terrified.

Why would someone be out here? Oh my god, maybe it's her, she's okay! Did she climb down in the dark? Maybe I didn't fall that far down the mountain.

His mind was a frenzy, questions darting from every direction. He was about to call out to her when a hand came through his driver's side window and rested on his chest. The hand probed his body, searching and evaluating. There was power behind the touch.

Somehow, Ryan knew it was not her.

"You only have a few moments left," a deep male voice spoke as he hovered over the window. "You must decide quickly."

"Help me," whispered Ryan. He tried to turn to see his rescuer, but all he saw was a dark shadow from the corner of his eye.

"Listen to me carefully. You're lucky that I am here first. If the others would've found you...you may not have had a choice." The shadow leaned in closer to Ryan. "Tell me what you wish for yourself. I can leave you here untouched, allowing your injuries to consume you, or I can quickly rid you of your pain, allowing you immediate peace and serenity in death."

The shadow paused, leaning even closer to whisper in Ryan's ear. "Or I can repair your body. But with this choice, you will forever be a black ink darkness, walking this earth as something *unnatural*." His voice was calm, unhurried, and melodic.

Ryan noted a rhythmic accent in his speech.

“Save me. Save my life, please!” pleaded Ryan as tears started to mix in with the blood.

A low growl came from the shadow’s chest. “You are not listening carefully. I am not giving you the option of life, but rather...”

“I need her. I have nothing without her!” Ryan blurted out. He feared she would be dead, but he clung to hope that she’d somehow survived. Amidst the pain, his mind raced.

What am I going to do? She needs to sign the deed papers, he thought to himself in a panic.

In an instant, Ryan felt the shadow pull back. And while he couldn’t see them, he could feel evaluating eyes transfix on him.

The shadow broke the stillness of the moment. Through Ryan’s cloudy vision he watched the shadow lift his head and scan the grove of Aspen trees and large boulders that surrounded them.

“What? What is it? Is someone else out there?” Ryan asked.

The shadow looked back down at Ryan and reached for his clutched fist. Cold fingers explored Ryan’s bare ring finger.

“What are you doing?” Ryan screeched in panic.

The shadow moved in close to Ryan’s ear. For the first time, the words spoken took on a humanlike character.

“You are choosing, not based on the pain you are in but rather the love you have in your heart for another? I can’t take that away from you. If your human bond is strong, you will remember her and carry it with you through the turning. You will reunite again. I will do this for you.”

“Thank you,” whispered Ryan in response without fully understanding what he had agreed to.

In an instant, Ryan passed out from the pain.

* * * *

The jasper dropped from the injured man’s clutched fist into the hands of Steffan.

Steffan tugged frantically on the hood of his black coat, pulling it down and exposing his face. His silver eyes focused on his clutched fist.

Cautiously, he opened it and revealed the jasper resting in the palm of his hand. Suddenly, electric currents shot through his body and he once again clutched the stone in his hand.

A sweet scent of a woman penetrated his senses.

Fragmented, undulating visions projected in his mind—silky, black hair, sun-kissed skin, a strand of pearls, a sweeping instrument bow and a partial view of a symbol, one that he could not readily identify. He'd never felt anything like that before. Someone of great importance to him, someone whom he had yet to meet, had a connection to that stone.

“Could it be?”

Steffan contemplated as his heart pounded both in excitement and trepidation. Whoever it was and whatever it meant, it would have to wait to be sorted out.

He had a promise to fulfill to the man who lay dying in front of him.

Carefully, Steffan placed the stone in his coat jacket. He pushed up the sleeve of his jacket and bit out a chunk of flesh from his wrist. The gaping wound pumped out thick, black blood. He situated the wound over the man and poured the blood into his mouth.

The man choked and gagged.

“Drink!” Steffan screamed. He squeezed his face and leaned in. “Drink, please,” he said slowly this time.

The man's eyes were wide with fear as he swallowed as instructed.

Instantly, his body shook uncontrollably. He broke free from the seat belt and fell against the passenger doorframe of the SUV. Steffan lifted the vehicle upright, dragging the man out through the shattered window, and laid him down in the snow. The man's eyes flew open and rolled back over and over again into his head. Steffan crouched over him as he watched the violent eye rolls continue.

Then suddenly, they stopped.

The man's eyes froze in an open gaze. His pupils clouded over.

Like clockwork, sparks of color danced along the outer edge of his eyes, signaling the beginning of the eye inversion.

Steffan leaned in closer and waited for it.

From the outer edges inward, the whites of his eyes slowly turned black.

“Black!” yelled Steffan. He slammed his fists into the ground and shook his head in disappointment. “You deceived me!”

Completing their transformation, the man's eyes began to violently roll again and Steffan backed off.

The veins throughout the man's face were engorged and pulsing, turning black under his skin. He tried to scream out in pain, but nothing came out.

With haste, Steffan leaned in and ripped the wool coat and shirt that covered the man's chest and arms to shreds. Thin, black veins crept from his heart, through his shoulder, and down his arm to settle at his wrist. The delicate webbing of veins covered his wound and seemed to *sew* the wrist back in place.

The man slowly lifted his wrist. He moved it back and forth, a look of disbelief plastered on his face. He turned his attention to Steffan. And while he didn't speak one word, his eyes seemed to beg for answers.

And as fast as they appeared, the webs faded, completely absorbing into the man's skin.

Suddenly, the man jerked and looked down at his leg.

Steffan ripped the man's trousers from his body, exposing the stringy black webs that congregated on the exposed bone in his thigh, mending the injury.

Steffan sighed.

The repair mechanism and eye inversion were complete. There was no mistaking it. The man was now a vampire.

And he was Steffan's newborn.

Slowly rising over his newborn's body, Steffan brushed his tongue over his self-inflicted wound, instantly healing his arm. He closed his eyes and tilted his head back. He raised a hand to his chest and rubbed against the jasper through his long black coat.

Even through the material, shards of energy penetrated his body.

Steffan stood still in the moonlight, basking in the sensation. Snowflakes shimmered all around him, collecting in his hair and settling onto the blackness that cloaked him from head to toe

Steffan brought his head forward and caught his newborn's evaluating stare. He slowly raised one eyebrow. "Black or not, it cannot be undone. You have already begun. You are my responsibility. You are my newborn."

Steffan reached for his vampire, lifting him from the ground.

In one sweeping motion, Steffan took to the sky with his newborn safely tucked in his arms.

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