



Last Sacrifice: A Vampire Academy Novel

By Richelle Mead

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The astonishing conclusion to the #1 international bestselling series...

Murder. Love. Jealousy. And the ultimate sacrifice.

The Queen is dead and the Moroi world will never be the same. Now, with Rose awaiting wrongful execution and Lissa in a deadly struggle for the royal throne, the girls find themselves forced to rely upon enemies and to question those they thought they could trust. . . .

But what if true freedom means sacrificing the most important thing of all?

Each other.

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Editorial Review

About the Author

Richelle Mead lives in Seattle and is the author of the international bestselling Vampire Academy series. When not writing, she can be found watching bad movies, inventing recipes, and buying far too many dresses.

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ONE

I DON'T LIKE CAGES.

I don't even like going to zoos. The first time I went to one, I almost had a claustrophobic attack looking at those poor animals. I couldn't imagine any creature living that way. Sometimes I even felt a little bad for criminals, condemned to life in a cell. I'd certainly never expected to spend my life in one.

But lately, life seemed to be throwing me a lot of things I'd never expected, because here I was, locked away. "Hey!" I yelled, gripping the steel bars that isolated me from the world. "How long am I going to be here? When's my trial? You can't keep me in this dungeon forever!"

Okay, it wasn't exactly a dungeon, not in the dark, rusty-chain sense. I was inside a small cell with plain walls, a plain floor, and well . . . plain everything. Spotless. Sterile. Cold. It was actually more depressing than any musty dungeon could have managed. The bars in the doorway felt cool against my skin, hard and unyielding. Fluorescent lighting made the metal gleam in a way that felt harsh and irritating to my eyes. I could see the shoulder of a man standing rigidly to the side of the cell's entrance and knew there were probably four more guardians in the hallway out of my sight. I also knew none of them were going to answer me back, but that hadn't stopped me from constantly demanding answers from them for the last two days. When the usual silence came, I sighed and slumped back on the cot in the cell's corner. Like everything else in my new home, the cot was colorless and stark. Yeah. I really was starting to wish I had a real dungeon. Rats and cobwebs would have at least given me something to watch. I stared upward and immediately had the disorienting feeling I always did in here: that the ceiling and walls were closing in around me. Like I couldn't breathe. Like the sides of the cell would keep coming toward me until no space remained, pushing out all the air . . .

I sat up abruptly, gasping. Don't stare at the walls and ceiling, Rose, I chastised myself. Instead, I looked down at my clasped hands and tried to figure out how I'd gotten into this mess.

The initial answer was obvious: someone had framed me for a crime I didn't commit. And it wasn't petty crime either. It was murder. They'd had the audacity to accuse me of the highest crime a Moroi or dhampir could commit. Now, that isn't to say I haven't killed before. I have. I've also done my fair share of rule (and even law) breaking. Cold-blooded murder, however, was not in my repertoire. Especially not the murder of a queen.

It was true Queen Tatiana hadn't been a friend of mine. She'd been the coolly calculating ruler of the Moroi—a race of living, magic-using vampires who didn't kill their victims for blood. Tatiana and I had had a rocky relationship for a number of reasons. One was me dating her great-nephew, Adrian. The other was my disapproval of her policies on how to fight off Strigoi—the evil, undead vampires who stalked us all. Tatiana had tricked me a number of times, but I'd never wanted her dead. Someone apparently had, however, and they'd left a trail of evidence leading right to me, the worst of which were my fingerprints all over the silver stake that had killed Tatiana. Of course, it was my stake, so naturally it'd have my fingerprints. No one seemed to think that was relevant.

I sighed again and pulled out a tiny crumpled piece of paper from my pocket. My only reading material. I squeezed it in my hand, having no need to look at the words. I'd long since memorized them. The note's

contents made me question what I'd known about Tatiana. It had made me question a lot of things. Frustrated with my own surroundings, I slipped out of them and into someone else's: my best friend Lissa's. Lissa was a Moroi, and we shared a psychic link, one that let me go to her mind and see the world through her eyes. All Moroi wielded some type of elemental magic. Lissa's was spirit, an element tied to psychic and healing powers. It was rare among Moroi, who usually used more physical elements, and we barely understood its abilities—which were incredible. She'd used spirit to bring me back from the dead a few years ago, and that's what had forged our bond.

Being in her mind freed me from my cage but offered little help for my problem. Lissa had been working hard to prove my innocence, ever since the hearing that had laid out all the evidence against me. My stake being used in the murder had only been the beginning. My opponents had been quick to remind everyone about my antagonism toward the queen and had also found a witness to testify about my whereabouts during the murder. That testimony had left me without an alibi. The Council had decided there was enough evidence to send me to a full-fledged trial—where I would receive my verdict.

Lissa had been trying desperately to get people's attention and convince them I'd been framed. She was having trouble finding anyone who would listen, however, because the entire Moroi Royal Court was consumed with preparations for Tatiana's elaborate funeral. A monarch's death was a big deal. Moroi and dhampirs—half-vampires like me—were coming from all over the world to see the spectacle. Food, flowers, decorations, even musicians . . . The full deal. If Tatiana had gotten married, I doubted the event would have been this elaborate. With so much activity and buzz, no one cared about me now. As far as most people were concerned, I was safely stashed away and unable to kill again. Tatiana's murderer had been found. Justice was served. Case closed.

Before I could get a clear picture of Lissa's surroundings, a commotion at the jail jerked me back into my own head. Someone had entered the area and was speaking to the guards, asking to see me. It was my first visitor in days. My heart pounded, and I leapt up to the bars, hoping it was someone who would tell me this had all been a horrible mistake.

My visitor wasn't quite who I'd expected.

"Old man," I said wearily. "What are you doing here?"

Abe Mazur stood before me. As always, he was a sight to behold. It was the middle of summer—hot and humid, seeing as we were right in the middle of rural Pennsylvania—but that didn't stop him from wearing a full suit. It was a flashy one, perfectly tailored and adorned with a brilliant purple silk tie and matching scarf that just seemed like overkill. Gold jewelry flashed against the dusky hue of his skin, and he looked like he'd recently trimmed his short black beard. Abe was a Moroi, and although he wasn't royal, he wielded enough influence to be.

He also happened to be my father.

"I'm your lawyer," he said cheerfully. "Here to give you legal counsel, of course."

"You aren't a lawyer," I reminded him. "And your last bit of advice didn't work out so well." That was mean of me. Abe—despite having no legal training whatsoever—had defended me at my hearing. Obviously, since I was locked up and headed for trial, the outcome of that hadn't been so great. But, in all my solitude, I'd come to realize that he'd been right about something. No lawyer, no matter how good, could have saved me at the hearing. I had to give him credit for stepping up to a lost cause, though considering our sketchy relationship, I still wasn't sure why he had. My biggest theories were that he didn't trust royals and that he felt paternal obligation. In that order.

"My performance was perfect," he argued. "Whereas your compelling speech in which you said 'if I was the murderer' didn't do us any favors. Putting that image in the judge's head wasn't the smartest thing you could have done."

I ignored the barb and crossed my arms. "So what are you doing here? I know it's not just a fatherly visit. You never do anything without a reason."

"Of course not. Why do anything without a reason?"

"Don't start up with your circular logic."

He winked. "No need to be jealous. If you work hard and put your mind to it, you might just inherit my brilliant logic skills someday."

"Abe," I warned. "Get on with it."

"Fine, fine," he said. "I've come to tell you that your trial might be moved up."

"W-what? That's great news!" At least, I thought it was. His expression said otherwise. Last I'd heard, my trial might be months away. The mere thought of that—of being in this cell so long—made me feel claustrophobic again.

"Rose, you do realize that your trial will be nearly identical to your hearing. Same evidence and a guilty verdict."

"Yeah, but there must be something we can do before that, right? Find proof to clear me?" Suddenly, I had a good idea of what the problem was. "When you say 'moved up,' how soon are we talking?"

"Ideally, they'd like to do it after a new king or queen is crowned. You know, part of the post-coronation festivities."

His tone was flippant, but as I held his dark gaze, I caught the full meaning. Numbers rattled in my head.

"The funeral's this week, and the elections are right after . . . You're saying I could go to trial and be convicted in, what, practically two weeks?"

Abe nodded.

I flew toward the bars again, my heart pounding in my chest. "Two weeks? Are you serious?"

When he'd said the trial had been moved up, I'd figured maybe it was a month away. Enough time to find new evidence. How would I have pulled that off? Unclear. Now, time was rushing away from me. Two weeks wasn't enough, especially with so much activity at Court. Moments ago, I'd resented the long stretch of time I might face. Now, I had too little of it, and the answer to my next question could make things worse. "How long?" I asked, trying to control the trembling in my voice. "How long after the verdict until they . . . carry out the sentence?"

I still didn't entirely know what all I'd inherited from Abe, but we seemed to clearly share one trait: an unflinching ability to deliver bad news.

"Probably immediately."

"Immediately." I backed up, nearly sat on the bed, and then felt a new surge of adrenaline. "Immediately? So. Two weeks. In two weeks, I could be . . . dead."

Because that was the thing—the thing that had been hanging over my head the moment it became clear someone had planted enough evidence to frame me. People who killed queens didn't get sent to prison. They were executed. Few crimes among Moroi and dhampirs got that kind of punishment. We tried to be civilized in our justice, showing we were better than the bloodthirsty Strigoi. But certain crimes, in the eyes of the law, deserved death. Certain people deserved it, too—say, like, treasonous murderers. As the full impact of the future fell upon me, I felt myself shake and tears come dangerously close to spilling out of my eyes.

"That's not right!" I told Abe. "That's not right, and you know it!"

"Doesn't matter what I think," he said calmly. "I'm simply delivering the facts."

"Two weeks," I repeated. "What can we do in two weeks? I mean . . . you've got some lead, right? Or . . . or . . . you can find something by then? That's your specialty." I was rambling and knew I sounded hysterical and desperate. Of course, that was because I felt hysterical and desperate.

"It's going to be difficult to accomplish much," he explained. "The Court's preoccupied with the funeral and elections. Things are disorderly—which is both good and bad."

I knew about all the preparations from watching Lissa. I'd seen the chaos already brewing. Finding any sort of evidence in this mess wouldn't just be difficult. It could very well be impossible.

Two weeks. Two weeks, and I could be dead.

"I can't," I told Abe, my voice breaking. "I'm not . . . meant to die that way."

"Oh?" He arched an eyebrow. "You know how you're supposed to die?"

"In battle." One tear managed to escape, and I hastily wiped it away. I'd always lived my life with a tough image. I didn't want that shattering, not now when it mattered most of all. "In fighting. Defending those I

love. Not . . . not through some planned execution."

"This is a fight of sorts," he mused. "Just not a physical one. Two weeks is still two weeks. Is it bad? Yes. But it's better than one week. And nothing's impossible. Maybe new evidence will turn up. You simply have to wait and see."

"I hate waiting. This room . . . it's so small. I can't breathe. It'll kill me before any executioner does."

"I highly doubt it." Abe's expression was still cool, with no sign of sympathy. Tough love. "You've fearlessly fought groups of Strigoi, yet you can't handle a small room?"

"It's more than that! Now I have to wait each day in this hole, knowing there's a clock ticking down to my death and almost no way to stop it."

"Sometimes the greatest tests of our strength are situations that don't seem so obviously dangerous. Sometimes surviving is the hardest thing of all."

"Oh. No. No." I stalked away, pacing in small circles. "Do not start with all that noble crap. You sound like Dimitri when he used to give me his deep life lessons."

"He survived this very situation. He's surviving other things too."

Dimitri.

I took a deep breath, calming myself before I answered. Until this murder mess, Dimitri had been the biggest complication in my life. A year ago—though it seemed like eternity—he'd been my instructor in high school, training me to be one of the dhampir guardians who protect Moroi. He'd accomplished that—and a lot more. We'd fallen in love, something that wasn't allowed. We'd managed it as best we could, even finally coming up with a way for us to be together. That hope had disappeared when he'd been bitten and turned Strigoi. It had been a living nightmare for me. Then, through a miracle no one had believed possible, Lissa had used spirit to transform him back to a dhampir. But things unfortunately hadn't quite returned to how they'd been before the Strigoi attack.

I glared at Abe. "Dimitri survived this, but he was horribly depressed about it! He still is. About everything." The full weight of the atrocities he'd committed as a Strigoi haunted Dimitri. He couldn't forgive himself and swore he could never love anyone now. The fact that I had begun dating Adrian didn't help matters. After a number of futile efforts, I'd accepted that Dimitri and I were through. I'd moved on, hoping I could have something real with Adrian now.

"Right," Abe said dryly. "He's depressed, but you're the picture of happiness and joy."

I sighed. "Sometimes talking to you is like talking to myself: pretty damned annoying. Is there any other reason you're here? Other than to deliver the terrible news? I would have been happier living in ignorance." I'm not supposed to die this way. I'm not supposed to see it coming. My death is not some appointment penciled in on a calendar.

He shrugged. "I just wanted to see you. And your arrangements."

Yes, he had indeed, I realized. Abe's eyes had always come back to me as we spoke; there'd been no question I held his attention. There was nothing in our banter to concern my guards. But every so often, I'd see Abe's gaze flick around, taking in the hall, my cell, and whatever other details he found interesting. Abe had not earned his reputation as zmey—the serpent—for nothing. He was always calculating, always looking for an advantage. It seemed my tendency toward crazy plots ran in the family.

"I also wanted to help you pass the time." He smiled and from under his arm, he handed me a couple of magazines and a book through the bars. "Maybe this will improve things."

I doubted any entertainment was going to make my two-week death countdown more manageable. The magazines were fashion and hair oriented. The book was *The Count of Monte Cristo*. I held it up, needing to make a joke, needing to do anything to make this less real.

"I saw the movie. Your subtle symbolism isn't really all that subtle. Unless you've hidden a file inside it."

"The book's always better than the movie." He started to turn away. "Maybe we'll have a literary discussion next time."

"Wait." I tossed the reading material onto the bed. "Before you go . . . in this whole mess, no one's ever brought up who actually did kill her." When Abe didn't answer right away, I gave him a sharp look. "You do

believe I didn't do it, right?" For all I knew, he did think I was guilty and was just trying to help anyway. It wouldn't have been out of character.

"I believe my sweet daughter is capable of murder," he said at last. "But not this one."

"Then who did it?"

"That," he said before walking away, "is something I'm working on."

"But you just said we're running out of time! Abe!" I didn't want him to leave. I didn't want to be alone with my fear. "There's no way to fix this!"

"Just remember what I said in the courtroom," he called back.

He left my sight, and I sat back on the bed, thinking back to that day in court. At the end of the hearing, he'd told me—quite adamantly—that I wouldn't be executed. Or even go to trial. Abe Mazur wasn't one to make idle promises, but I was starting to think that even he had limits, especially since our timetable had just been adjusted.

I again took out the crumpled piece of paper and opened it. It too had come from the courtroom, covertly handed to me by Ambrose—Tatiana's servant and boy-toy.

Rose,

If you're reading this, then something terrible has happened. You probably hate me, and I don't blame you. I can only ask that you trust that what I did with the age decree was better for your people than what others had planned. There are some Moroi who want to force all dhampirs into service, whether they want it or not, by using compulsion. The age decree has slowed that faction down.

However, I write to you with a secret you must put right, and it is a secret you must share with as few as possible. Vasilisa needs her spot on the Council, and it can be done. She is not the last Dragomir. Another lives, the illegitimate child of Eric Dragomir. I know nothing else, but if you can find this son or daughter, you will give Vasilisa the power she deserves. No matter your faults and dangerous temperament, you are the only one I feel can take on this task. Waste no time in fulfilling it.

—Tatiana Ivashkov

The words hadn't changed since the other hundred times I'd read them, nor had the questions they always triggered. Was the note true? Had Tatiana really written it? Had she—in spite of her outwardly hostile attitude—trusted me with this dangerous knowledge? There were twelve royal families who made decisions for the Moroi, but for all intents and purposes, there might as well have only been eleven. Lissa was the last of her line, and without another member of the Dragomir family, Moroi law said she had no power to sit on and vote with the Council that made our decisions. Some pretty bad laws had already been made, and if the note was true, more would come. Lissa could fight those laws—and some people wouldn't like that, people who had already demonstrated their willingness to kill.

Another Dragomir.

Another Dragomir meant Lissa could vote. One more Council vote could change so much. It could change the Moroi world. It could change my world—say, like, whether I was found guilty or not. And certainly, it could change Lissa's world. All this time she'd believed she was alone. Yet . . . I uneasily wondered if she'd welcome a half-sibling. I accepted that my father was a scoundrel, but Lissa had always held hers up on a pedestal, believing the best of him. This news would come as a shock, and although I'd trained my entire life to keep her safe from physical threats, I was starting to think there were other things she needed to be protected from as well.

But first, I needed the truth. I had to know if this note had really come from Tatiana. I was pretty sure I could find out, but it involved something I hated doing.

Well, why not? It wasn't like I had anything else to do right now.

Rising from the bed, I turned my back to the bars and stared at the blank wall, using it as a focus point.

Bracing myself, remembering that I was strong enough to keep control, I released the mental barriers I always subconsciously kept around my mind. A great pressure lifted from me, like air escaping a balloon.

And suddenly, I was surrounded by ghosts.

TWO

AS ALWAYS, IT WAS DISORIENTING. Faces and skulls, translucent and luminescent, all hovered around me. They were drawn to me, swarming in a cloud as though they all desperately needed to say something. And really, they probably did. The ghosts that lingered in this world were restless, souls who had reasons that kept them from moving on. When Lissa had brought me back from the dead, I'd kept a connection to their world. It had taken a lot of work and self-control to learn to block out the phantoms that followed me. The magical wards that protected the Moroi Court actually kept most ghosts away from me, but this time, I wanted them here. Giving them that access, drawing them in . . . well, it was a dangerous thing. Something told me that if ever there was a restless spirit, it would be a queen who had been murdered in her own bed. I saw no familiar faces among this group but didn't give up hope.

"Tatiana," I murmured, focusing my thoughts on the dead queen's face. "Tatiana, come to me."

I had once been able to summon one ghost easily: my friend Mason, who'd been killed by Strigoi. While Tatiana and I weren't as close as Mason and I had been, we certainly had a connection. For a while, nothing happened. The same blur of faces swirled before me in the cell, and I began to despair. Then, all of a sudden, she was there.

She stood in the clothes she'd been murdered in, a long nightgown and robe covered in blood. Her colors were muted, flickering like a malfunctioning TV screen. Nonetheless, the crown on her head and regal stance gave her the same queenly air I remembered. Once she materialized, she said and did nothing. She simply stared at me, her dark gaze practically piercing my soul. A tangle of emotions tightened in my chest. That gut reaction I always got around Tatiana—anger and resentment—flared up. Then, it was muddled by a surprising wave of sympathy. No one's life should end the way hers had.

I hesitated, afraid the guards would hear me. Somehow, I had a feeling the volume of my voice didn't matter, and none of them could see what I saw. I held up the note.

"Did you write this?" I breathed. "Is it true?"

She continued to stare. Mason's ghost had behaved similarly. Summoning the dead was one thing; communicating with them was a whole other matter.

"I have to know. If there is another Dragomir, I'll find them." No point in drawing attention to the fact that I was in no position to find anything or anyone. "But you have to tell me. Did you write this letter? Is it true?" Only that maddening gaze answered me. My frustration grew, and the pressure of all those spirits began to give me a headache. Apparently, Tatiana was as annoying in death as she had been in life.

I was about to bring my walls back and push the ghosts away when Tatiana made the smallest of movements. It was a tiny nod, barely noticeable. Her hard eyes then shifted down to the note in my hand, and just like that—she was gone.

I slammed my barriers back up, using all my will to close myself off from the dead. The headache didn't disappear, but those faces did. I sank back on the bed and stared at the note without seeing it. There was my answer. The note was real. Tatiana had written it. Somehow, I doubted her ghost had any reason to lie. Stretching out, I rested my head on the pillow and waited for that terrible throbbing to go away. I closed my eyes and used the spirit bond to return and see what Lissa had been doing. Since my arrest, she'd been busy pleading and arguing on my behalf, so I expected to find more of the same. Instead she was . . . dress shopping.

I was almost offended at my best friend's frivolity until I realized she was looking for a funeral dress. She was in one of the Court's tucked away stores, one that catered to royal families. To my surprise, Adrian was with her. Seeing his familiar, handsome face eased some of the fear in me. A quick probe of her mind told me why he was here: she'd talked him into coming because she didn't want him left alone.

I could understand why. He was completely drunk. It was a wonder he could stand, and in fact, I strongly suspected the wall he leaned against was all that held him up. His brown hair was a mess—and not in the purposeful way he usually styled it. His deep green eyes were bloodshot. Like Lissa, Adrian was a spirit

user. He had an ability she didn't yet: he could visit people's dreams. I'd expected him to come to me since my imprisonment, and now it made sense why he hadn't. Alcohol stunted spirit. In some ways, that was a good thing. Excessive spirit created a darkness that drove its users insane. But spending life perpetually drunk wasn't all that healthy either.

Seeing him through Lissa's eyes triggered emotional confusion nearly as intense as what I'd experienced with Tatiana. I felt bad for him. He was obviously worried and upset about me, and the startling events this last week had blindsided him as much as the rest of us. He'd also lost his aunt whom, despite her brusque attitude, he'd cared for.

Yet, in spite of all this, I felt . . . scorn. That was unfair, perhaps, but I couldn't help it. I cared about him so much and understood him being upset, but there were better ways of dealing with his loss. His behavior was almost cowardly. He was hiding from his problems in a bottle, something that went against every piece of my nature. Me? I couldn't let my problems win without a fight.

"Velvet," the shopkeeper told Lissa with certainty. The wizened Moroi woman held up a voluminous, long-sleeved gown. "Velvet is traditional in the royal escort."

Along with the rest of the fanfare, Tatiana's funeral would have a ceremonial escort walking alongside the coffin, with a representative from each family there. Apparently, no one minded that Lissa fill that role for her family. But voting? That was another matter.

Lissa eyed the dress. It looked more like a Halloween costume than a funeral gown. "It's ninety degrees out," said Lissa. "And humid."

"Tradition demands sacrifice," the woman said melodramatically. "As does tragedy."

Adrian opened his mouth, undoubtedly ready with some inappropriate and mocking comment. Lissa gave him a sharp headshake that kept him quiet. "Aren't there any, I don't know, sleeveless options?"

The saleswoman's eyes widened. "No one has ever worn straps to a royal funeral. It wouldn't be right."

"What about shorts?" asked Adrian. "Are they okay if they're with a tie? Because that's what I was gonna go with."

The woman looked horrified. Lissa shot Adrian a look of disdain, not so much because of the remark—which she found mildly amusing—but because she too was disgusted by his constant state of intoxication.

"Well, no one treats me like a full-fledged royal," said Lissa, turning back to the dresses. "No reason to act like one now. Show me your straps and short-sleeves."

The saleswoman grimaced but complied. She had no problem advising royals on fashion but wouldn't dare order them to do or wear anything. It was part of the class stratification of our world. The woman walked across the store to find the requested dresses, just as Lissa's boyfriend and his aunt entered the shop.

Christian Ozer, I thought, was who Adrian should have been acting like. The fact that I could even think like that was startling. Times had certainly changed from when I held Christian up as a role model. But it was true. I'd watched him with Lissa this last week, and Christian had been determined and steadfast, doing whatever he could to help her in the wake of Tatiana's death and my arrest. From the look on his face now, it was obvious he had something important to relay.

His outspoken aunt, Tasha Ozer, was another study in strength and grace under pressure. She'd raised him after his parents had turned Strigoi—and had attacked her, leaving Tasha with scarring on one side of her face. Moroi had always relied on guardians for defense, but after that attack, Tasha had decided to take matters into her own hands. She'd learned to fight, training with all sorts of hand-to-hand methods and weapons. She was really quite a badass and constantly pushed for other Moroi to learn combat too.

Lissa let go of a dress she'd been examining and turned to Christian eagerly. After me, there was no one else she trusted more in the world. He'd been her rock throughout all of this.

He looked around the store, not appearing overly thrilled to be surrounded by dresses. "You guys are shopping?" he asked, glancing from Lissa to Adrian. "Getting in a little girl time?"

"Hey, you'd benefit from a wardrobe change," said Adrian. "Besides, I bet you'd look great in a halter top." Lissa ignored the guys' banter and focused on the Ozers. "What did you find out?"

"They've decided not to take action," said Christian. His lips curled in disdain. "Well, not any punishment kind of action."

Tasha nodded. "We're trying to push the idea that he just thought Rose was in danger and jumped in before he realized what was actually happening."

My heart stopped. Dimitri. They were talking about Dimitri.

For a moment, I was no longer with Lissa. I was no longer in my cell. Instead, I was back to the day of my arrest. I'd been arguing with Dimitri in a café, scolding him for his continued refusal to talk to me, let alone continue our former relationship. I'd decided then that I was done with him, that things were truly over and that I wouldn't let him keep tearing my heart apart. That was when the guardians had come for me, and no matter what Dimitri claimed about his Strigoi-time making him unable to love, he had reacted with lightning speed in my defense. We'd been hopelessly outnumbered, but he hadn't cared. The look on his face—and my own uncanny understanding of him—had told me all I needed to know. I was facing a threat. He had to defend me.

And defend me he had. He'd fought like the god he'd been back at St. Vladimir's Academy, when he'd taught me how to battle Strigoi. He incapacitated more guardians in that café than one man should have been able to. The only thing that had ended it—and I truly believe he would have fought until his last breath—had been my intervention. I hadn't known at the time what was going on or why a legion of guardians would want to arrest me. But I had realized that Dimitri was in serious danger of harming his already fragile status around Court. A Strigoi being restored was unheard of, and many still didn't trust him. I'd begged Dimitri to stop, more afraid of what would happen to him than me. Little had I known what was in store for me.

He'd come to my hearing—under guard—but neither Lissa nor I had seen him since. Lissa had been working hard to clear him of any wrongdoing, fearing they'd lock him up again. And me? I'd been trying to tell myself not to over-think what he had done. My arrest and potential execution took precedence. Yet . . . I still wondered. Why had he done it? Why had he risked his life for mine? Was it an instinctive reaction to a threat? Had he done it as a favor to Lissa, whom he'd sworn to help in return for freeing him? Or had he truly done it because he still had feelings for me?

I still didn't know the answer, but seeing him like that, like the fierce Dimitri from my past, had stirred up the feelings I was so desperately trying to get over. I kept trying to assure myself that recovering from a relationship took time. Lingering feelings were natural. Unfortunately, it took longer to get over a guy when he threw himself into danger for you.

Regardless, Christian and Tasha's words gave me hope about Dimitri's fate. After all, I wasn't the only one walking a tenuous line between life and death. Those convinced Dimitri was still Strigoi wanted to see a stake through his heart.

"They're keeping him confined again," said Christian. "But not in a cell. Just in his room, with a couple of guards. They don't want him out around Court until things settle down."

"That's better than jail," admitted Lissa.

"It's still absurd," snapped Tasha, more to herself than the others. She and Dimitri had been close over the years, and she'd once wanted to take that relationship to another level. She'd settled for friendship, and her outrage over the injustice done to him was as strong as ours. "They should have let him go as soon as he became a dhampir again. Once the elections are settled, I'm going to make sure he's free."

"And that's what's weird . . ." Christian's pale blue eyes narrowed thoughtfully. "We heard that Tatiana had told others before she—before she—" Christian hesitated and glanced uneasily at Adrian. The pause was uncharacteristic for Christian, who usually spoke his mind abruptly.

"Before she was murdered," said Adrian flatly, not looking at any of them. "Go on."

Christian swallowed. "Um, yeah. I guess—not in public—she'd announced that she believed Dimitri really was a dhampir again. Her plan was to help him get more acceptance once the other stuff settled down." The "other stuff" was the age law mentioned in Tatiana's note, the one saying dhampirs turning sixteen would be forced to graduate and start defending Moroi. It had infuriated me, but like so many other things now . . . well, it was kind of on hold.

Adrian made a strange sound, like he was clearing his throat. "She did not."

Christian shrugged. "Lots of her advisors said she did. That's the rumor."

"I have a hard time believing it too," Tasha told Adrian. She'd never approved of Tatiana's policies and had vehemently spoken out against them on more than one occasion. Adrian's disbelief wasn't political, though. His was simply coming from ideas he'd always had about his aunt. She'd never given any indication that she wanted to help Dimitri regain his old status.

Adrian made no further comment, but I knew this topic was kindling sparks of jealousy within him. I'd told him Dimitri was in the past and that I was ready to move on, but Adrian—like me—must have undoubtedly wondered about the motivations behind Dimitri's gallant defense.

Lissa began to speculate on how they might get Dimitri out of house arrest when the saleswoman returned with an armful of dresses she clearly disapproved of. Biting her lip, Lissa fell silent. She filed away Dimitri's situation as something to deal with later. Instead, she wearily prepared to try on clothes and play the part of a good little royal girl.

Adrian perked up at the sight of the dresses. "Any halters in there?"

I returned to my cell, mulling over the problems that just seemed to keep piling up. I was worried about both Adrian and Dimitri. I was worried about myself. I was also worried about this so-called lost Dragomir. I was starting to believe the story could be real, but there was nothing I could do about it, which frustrated me. I needed to take action when it came to helping Lissa. Tatiana had told me in her letter to be careful whom I spoke to about the matter. Should I pass this mission on to someone else? I wanted to take charge of it, but the bars and suffocating walls around me said I might not be able to take charge of anything for a while, not even my own life.

Two weeks.

Needing further distraction, I gave in and began reading Abe's book, which was exactly the tale of wrongful imprisonment I'd expected it to be. It was pretty good and taught me that faking my own death apparently wouldn't work as an escape method. The book unexpectedly stirred up old memories. A chill went down my spine as I recalled a Tarot reading that a Moroi named Rhonda had given to me. She was Ambrose's aunt, and one of the cards she'd drawn for me had shown a woman tied to swords. Wrongful imprisonment.

Accusations. Slander. Damn. I was really starting to hate those cards. I always insisted they were a scam, yet they had an annoying tendency to come true. The end of her reading had shown a journey, but to where? A real prison? My execution?

Questions with no answers. Welcome to my world. Out of options for now, I figured I might as well try to get some rest. Stretching out on the pallet, I tried to push away those constant worries. Not easy. Every time I closed my eyes, I saw a judge banging a gavel, condemning me to death. I saw my name in the history books, not as a hero, but as a traitor.

Lying there, choking on my own fear, I thought of Dimitri. I pictured his steady gaze and could practically hear him lecturing me. Don't worry now about what you can't change. Rest when you can so you'll be ready for tomorrow's battles. The imaginary advice calmed me. Sleep came at last, heavy and deep. I'd tossed and turned a lot this week, so true rest was welcome.

Then—I woke up.

I sat upright in bed, my heart pounding. Peering around, I looked for danger—any threat that might have startled me out of that sleep. There was nothing. Darkness. Silence. The faint squeak of a chair down the hall told me my guards were still around.

The bond, I realized. The bond had woken me up. I'd felt a sharp, intense flare of . . . what? Intensity.

Anxiety. A rush of adrenaline. Panic raced through me, and I dove deeper into Lissa, trying to find what had caused that surge of emotion from her.

What I found was . . . nothing.

The bond was gone.

THREE

WELL, NOT GONE EXACTLY.

Muted. Kind of like how it had felt immediately after she'd restored Dimitri back to a dhampir. The magic had been so strong then that it had "burned out" our link. There was no blast of magic now. It was almost as though the blankness was intentional on her part. Like always, I still had a sense of Lissa: she was alive; she was well. So what was keeping me from feeling more of her? She wasn't asleep, because I could feel a sense of alert consciousness on the other side of this wall. Spirit was there, hiding her from me . . . and she was making it happen.

What the hell? It was an accepted fact that our bond worked only one way. I could sense her; she couldn't sense me. Likewise, I could control when I went into her mind. Often, I tried to keep myself out (jail captivity time excluded), in an attempt to protect her privacy. Lissa had no such control, and her vulnerability infuriated her sometimes. Every once in a while, she could use her power to shield herself from me, but it was rare, difficult, and required considerable effort on her part. Today, she was pulling it off, and as the condition persisted, I could feel her strain. Keeping me out wasn't easy, but she was managing it. Of course, I didn't care about the how of it. I wanted to know the why.

It was probably my worst day of imprisonment. Fear for myself was one thing. But for her? That was agonizing. If it was my life or hers, I would have walked into execution without hesitation. I had to know what was going on. Had she learned something? Had the Council decided to skip right over a trial and execute me? Was Lissa trying to protect me from that news? The more spirit she wielded, the more she endangered her life. This mental wall required a lot of magic. But why? Why was she taking this risk?

It was astonishing in that moment to realize just how much I relied on the bond to keep track of her. True: I didn't always welcome someone else's thoughts in my head. Despite the control I'd learned, her mind still sometimes poured into mine in moments I'd rather not experience. None of that was a concern now—only her safety was. Being blocked off was like having a limb removed.

All day I tried to get inside her head. Every time, I was kept out. It was maddening. No visitors came to me either, and the book and magazines had long since lost their appeal. The caged animal feeling was getting to me again, and I spent a fair amount of time yelling at my guards—with no results. Tatiana's funeral was tomorrow, and the clock to my trial was ticking loudly.

Bedtime came, and the wall in the bond dropped at last—because Lissa went to sleep. The link between us was firm, but her mind was closed off in unconsciousness. I'd find no answers there. Left with nothing else, I went to bed as well, wondering if I'd be cut off again in the morning.

I wasn't. She and I were linked again, and I was able to see the world through her eyes once more. Lissa was up and around early, preparing for the funeral. I neither saw nor felt any sign of why I'd been blocked the day before. She was letting me back into her mind, just like normal. I almost wondered if I'd imagined being cut off from her.

No . . . there it was. Barely. Within her mind, I sensed thoughts she was still hiding from me. They were slippery. Each time I tried to grasp them, they fell out of my hands. I was amazed she could still use enough magic to pull it off, and it was also a clear indication that she'd blocked me out intentionally yesterday. What was going on? Why on earth would she need to hide something from me? What could I do about anything, locked in this hellhole? Again, my unease grew. What awful thing didn't I know about?

I watched Lissa get ready, seeing no ostensible sign of anything unusual. The dress she'd ended up selecting had cap sleeves and went to the knee. Black, of course. It was hardly a clubbing dress, but she knew it would raise some eyebrows. Under different circumstances, this would have delighted me. She chose to wear her hair down and unbound, its pale blond color showing brightly against the dress's black when she surveyed herself in a mirror.

Christian met Lissa outside. He cleaned up well, I had to admit, uncharacteristically wearing a dress shirt and tie. He'd drawn the line at a jacket, and his expression was an odd mix of nervousness, secrecy, and typical snark. When he saw Lissa, though, his face momentarily transformed, turning radiant and awestruck as he

gazed at her. He gave her a small smile and took her into his arms for a brief embrace. His touch brought her contentment and comfort, easing her anxiety. They'd gotten back together recently after a breakup, and that time apart had been agonizing for both of them.

"It's going to be okay," he murmured, his look of worry returning. "This'll work. We can do this."

She said nothing but tightened her hold on him before stepping back. Neither of them spoke as they walked to the beginning of the funeral procession. I decided this was suspicious. She caught hold of his hand and felt strengthened by it.

The funeral procedures for Moroi monarchs had been the same for centuries, no matter if the Court was in Romania or its new home in Pennsylvania. That was the Moroi way. They mixed the traditional with the modern, magic with technology.

The queen's coffin would be carried by pallbearers out of the palace and taken with great ceremony all through the Court's grounds, until it reached the Court's imposing cathedral. There, a select group would enter for mass. After the service, Tatiana would be buried in the church's graveyard, taking her place beside other monarchs and important royals.

The coffin's route was easy to spot. Poles strung with red and black silk banners marked each side. Rose petals had been strewn on the ground the coffin would pass over. Along the sides, people crammed together, hoping to catch a glimpse of their former queen. Many Moroi had come from far off places, some to see the funeral and some to see the monarch elections that would soon follow over the next couple of weeks.

The royal family escort—most of whom wore saleswoman-approved black velvet—were already heading into the palace building. Lissa stopped outside to part ways with Christian since he certainly had never been in the running to represent his family for such an honored event. She gave him another fierce hug and a light kiss. As they stepped away, there was a knowing glint in his blue eyes—that secret that was hidden from me. Lissa pushed through the gathering crowds, trying to get to the entrance and find the procession's starting point. The building didn't look like the palaces or castles of ancient Europe. Its grand stone façade and tall windows matched the Court's other structures, but a few features—its height, wide marble steps—subtly distinguished it from other buildings. A tug at Lissa's arm stopped her progress, nearly causing her to run into an ancient Moroi man.

"Vasilisa?" It was Daniella Ivashkov, Adrian's mother. Daniella wasn't so bad as royals went, and she was actually okay with Adrian and me dating—or at least, she had been before I became an accused murderer. Most of Daniella's acceptance had come from the fact that she believed Adrian and I would split up anyways once I received my guardian assignment. Daniella had also convinced one of her cousins, Damon Tarus, to be my lawyer—an offer I'd rejected when I chose Abe to represent me instead. I still wasn't entirely sure if I'd made the best decision there, but it probably tarnished Daniella's view of me, which I regretted.

Lissa offered up a nervous smile. She was anxious to join the procession and get all of this over with. "Hi," she said.

Daniella was dressed in full black velvet and even had small diamond barrettes shining in her dark hair. Worry and agitation lined her pretty face. "Have you seen Adrian? I haven't been able to find him anywhere. We checked his room."

"Oh." Lissa averted her eyes.

"What?" Daniella nearly shook her. "What do you know?"

Lissa sighed. "I'm not sure where he is, but I saw him last night when he was coming back from some party." Lissa hesitated, like she was too embarrassed to tell the rest. "He was . . . really drunk. More than I've ever seen him. He was going off with some girls, and I don't know. I'm sorry, Lady Ivashkov. He's probably . . . well, passed out somewhere."

Daniella wrung her hands, and I shared her dismay. "I hope nobody notices. Maybe we can say . . . he was overcome with grief. There's so much going on. Surely no one will notice. You'll tell them, right? You'll say how upset he was?"

I liked Daniella, but this royal obsession with image was really starting to bug me. I knew she loved her son, but her main concern here seemed to be less about Tatiana's final rest than it was about what others would

think about a breach of protocol. "Of course," said Lissa. "I wouldn't want anyone to . . . well, I'd hate for that to get out."

"Thank you. Now go." Daniella gestured to the doors, still looking anxious. "You need to take your place." To Lissa's surprise, Daniella gave her a gentle pat on the arm. "And don't be nervous. You'll do fine. Just keep your head up."

Guardians stationed at the door recognized Lissa as someone with access and allowed her in. There, in the foyer, was Tatiana's coffin. Lissa froze, suddenly overwhelmed, and nearly forgot what she was doing there. The coffin alone was a work of art. It was made of gleaming black wood, polished to brilliance. Paintings of elaborate garden scenes in shining metallic colors of every hue adorned each side. Gold glittered everywhere, including the poles that the pallbearers would hold. Those poles were draped with strings of mauve roses. It seemed like the thorns and leaves would make it difficult for the pallbearers to get a good grip, but that was their problem to deal with.

Inside, uncovered and lying on a bed of more mauve roses, was Tatiana herself. It was strange. I saw dead bodies all the time. Hell, I created them. But seeing a body that had been preserved, lying peacefully and ornamentally . . . well, it was creepy. It was strange for Lissa, too, particularly since she didn't have to deal with death as often as I did.

Tatiana wore a gleaming silk gown that was a rich shade of purple—the traditional color for royal burial. The dress's long sleeves were decorated with an elaborate design of small pearls. I'd often seen Tatiana in red—a color associated with the Ivashkov family—and I was glad for the purple burial tradition. A red dress would have been too strong a reminder of the bloody pictures of her that I'd seen at my hearing, pictures I kept trying to block out. Strings of gemstones and more pearls hung around her neck, and a gold crown set with diamonds and amethysts rested upon her graying hair. Someone had done a good job with Tatiana's makeup, but even they couldn't hide the whiteness of her skin. Moroi were naturally pale. In death, they were like chalk—like Strigoi. The image struck Lissa so vividly that she swayed on her feet a little and had to look away. The roses' scent filled the air, but there was a hint of decay mixed in with that sweetness.

The funeral coordinator spotted Lissa and ordered her into position—after first bemoaning Lissa's fashion choice. The sharp words snapped Lissa back to reality, and she fell in line with five other royals on the right side of the coffin. She tried not to look too closely at the queen's body and directed her gaze elsewhere. The pallbearers soon showed up and lifted their burden, using the rose-draped poles to rest the coffin on their shoulders and slowly carry it out to the waiting crowd. The pallbearers were all dhampirs. They wore formal suits, which confused me at first, but then I realized they were all Court guardians—except one. Ambrose. He looked as gorgeous as always and stared straight ahead as he did his job, face blank and expressionless. I wondered if Ambrose mourned Tatiana. I was so fixated on my own problems that I kept forgetting a life had been lost here, a life that many had loved. Ambrose had defended Tatiana when I'd been angry about the age law. Watching him through Lissa's eyes, I wished I was there to speak to him in person. He had to know something more about the letter he'd slipped me in the courtroom. Surely he wasn't just the delivery boy. The procession moved forward, ending my musings about Ambrose. Before and ahead of the coffin were other ceremonial people. Royals in elaborate clothing, making a glittering display. Uniformed guardians carrying banners. Musicians with flutes walked at the very back, playing a mournful tune. For her part, Lissa was very good at public appearances and managed the slow, stately pace with elegance and grace, her gaze level and confident. I couldn't see outside her body, of course, but it was easy to imagine what the spectators saw. She was beautiful and regal, worthy to inherit the Dragomir legacy, and hopefully more and more would realize that. It would save us a lot of trouble if someone would change the voting law through standard procedures, so we didn't have to rely on a quest for a lost sibling.

Walking the funeral route took a long time. Even when the sun started sinking down toward the horizon, the day's heat still hung in the air. Lissa began to sweat but knew her discomfort was nothing compared to the pallbearers'. If the watching crowd felt the heat, they didn't show it. They craned their necks to get their one glimpse of the spectacle passing before them. Lissa didn't process the onlookers so much, but in their faces, I saw that the coffin wasn't their only focus. They were also watching Lissa. Word of what she'd done for

Dimitri had blazed around the Moroi world, and while many were skeptical of her ability to heal, there were just as many who believed. I saw expressions of wonder and awe in the crowd, and for a second, I wondered who they'd really come to see: Lissa or Tatiana?

Finally, the cathedral came into view, which was good news for Lissa. The sun didn't kill Moroi like it did Strigoi, but the heat and sunlight were still uncomfortable for any vampire. The procession was nearly finished, and she, being one of those allowed into the church service, would soon get to enjoy air conditioning.

As I studied the surroundings, I couldn't help but think what a circle of irony my life was. Off to the sides of the church's extensive grounds were two giant statues showing ancient Moroi monarchs of legend, a king and queen who had helped the Moroi prosper. Even though they were a fair distance from the church, the statues loomed ominously, like they were scrutinizing everything. Near the queen's statue was a garden that I knew well. I'd been forced to landscape it as punishment for running off to Las Vegas. My true purpose on that trip—which no one knew—had been to free Victor Dashkov from prison. Victor had been a longtime enemy of ours, but he and his brother Robert, a spirit user, had held the knowledge we needed to save Dimitri. If any guardians had found out that I'd freed Victor—then later lost him—my punishment would have been a lot worse than filing and landscaping. At least I'd done a good job with the garden, I thought bitterly. If I was executed, I'd leave a lasting mark at Court.

Lissa's eyes lingered on one of the statues for a long time before she turned back to the church. She was sweating heavily now, and I realized some of it wasn't just the heat. She was anxious too. But why? Why was she so nervous? This was just ceremony. All she had to do was go through the motions here. Yet . . . there it was again. Something else was bothering her. She was still keeping a cluster of thoughts from me, but a few leaked out as she worried.

Too close, too close. We're moving too fast.

Fast? Not by my estimation. I could have never handled this slow, stately pace. I felt especially bad for the pallbearers. If I were one, I would've said to hell with propriety and started jogging toward my final destination. Of course, that might jostle the body. If the funeral coordinator had been upset over Lissa's dress, there was no telling how she'd react if Tatiana fell out of the coffin.

Our view of the cathedral was getting clearer, its domes shining amber and orange in the setting sun. Lissa was still several yards away, but the priest standing out front was clearly visible. His robes were almost blinding. They were made of heavy, glittering gold brocade, long and full. A rounded hat with a cross, also gold, sat on his head. I thought it was in poor taste for him to outshine the queen's clothing, but maybe that was just what priests did on formal occasions. Maybe it got God's attention. He lifted his arms in welcome, showing off more of that rich fabric. The rest of the crowd and I couldn't help but stare at the dazzling display.

So, you can imagine our surprise when the statues blew up.

FOUR

AND WHEN I SAY THEY blew up, I mean they blew up.

Flames and smoke unfurled like petals from a newly opened flower as those poor monarchs exploded into pieces of rock. For a moment, I was stunned. It was like watching an action movie, the explosion cracking the air and shaking the ground. Then, guardian training kicked in. Critical observation and calculation took over. I immediately noticed that the bulk of the statue's material blew toward the outer sides of the garden. Small stone pieces and dust rained down on the funeral procession, but no large chunks of rock hit Lissa or anyone standing nearby. Assuming the statues had not spontaneously combusted, whoever had blown them up had done so in a precise way.

The logistics aside, huge billowing pillars of flame are still pretty scary. Chaos broke loose as everyone tried to get away. Only, they all took different routes, so collisions and entanglements occurred. Even the pallbearers set down their precious burden and took off. Ambrose was the last to do so, his mouth agape and eyes wide as he stared at Tatiana, but another look at the statues sent him off into the mob. A few guardians

tried to keep order, herding people back down the funeral path, but it didn't do a lot of good. Everyone was out for themselves, too terrified and panicked to think reasonably.

Well, everyone except for Lissa.

To my surprise, she wasn't surprised.

She had been expecting the explosion.

She didn't run right away, despite people pushing past and shoving her aside. She stood rooted where she'd been when the statues blew up, studying them and the wreckage they'd caused. In particular, she seemed concerned about anyone in the crowd who might have been hurt by the blasts. But, no. As I'd already observed, there seemed to be no injuries. And if there were, it was going to be because of the stampede. Satisfied, Lissa turned and began walking away with the others. (Well, she was walking; they were running). She'd only gone a little distance when she saw a huge group of guardians hurrying toward the church, faces grim. Some of them stopped to aid those escaping the destruction, but most of the guardians were on their way to the blast site to see what had happened.

Lissa paused again, causing the guy behind her to slam into her back, but she barely felt the impact. She intently watched the guardians, taking note of how many there were, and then moved on once more. Her hidden thoughts were starting to unravel. Finally, I began to see pieces of the plan she'd kept hidden from me. She was pleased. Nervous, too. But overall, she felt—

A commotion back at the jail snapped me into my own mind. The usual quiet of the holding area had shattered and was now filled with grunts and exclamations. I leapt up from where I'd been sitting and pressed against the bars, straining to see what was happening. Was this building about to explode too? My cell only faced a wall in the hallway, with no view of the rest of the corridor or its entrance. I did, however, see the guardians who usually stood at the hall's far end come tearing past me, toward whatever altercation was occurring.

I didn't know what this meant for me and braced for anything, friend or foe. For all I knew, there could be some political fringe group launching attacks on the Court to make a statement against the Moroi government. Peering around the cell, I swore silently, wishing I had anything to defend myself. The closest I had was Abe's book, which was no good at all. If he was the badass he pretended to be, he really would have slipped a file into it. Or gotten me something bigger, like *War and Peace*.

The scuffling died down and footsteps thundered toward me. Clenching my fists, I took a few steps back, ready to defend myself against anyone.

"Anyone" turned out to be Eddie Castile. And Mikhail Tanner.

Friendly faces were not what I had expected. Eddie was a longtime friend from St. Vladimir's, another new guardian like me and someone who'd stuck by me through a lot of misadventures, including the Victor Dashkov prison break. Mikhail was older than us, mid-twenties, and had helped us restore Dimitri in the hopes that Sonya Karp—a woman Mikhail had loved who had turned Strigoi—might be saved as well. I glanced back and forth between the two guys' faces.

"What's going on?" I demanded.

"Nice to see you too," said Eddie. He was sweating and keyed up with battle fervor, a few purple marks on his face showing he'd met someone's fist tonight. In his hand was a weapon I'd seen in the guardians' arsenal: a baton-type thing used to incapacitate people without killing them. But Mikhail held something much more valuable: the keycard and mechanical key to open my cell.

My friends were staging a prison break. Unbelievable. Crazy was usually my specialty.

"Did you guys . . ." I frowned. The thought of escape filled me with joy, but the logistics were sobering.

Clearly, they'd been responsible for the fight with my guards that I'd just heard. Getting down here in the first place wasn't that easy either. "Did you two just take on every guardian in this building?"

Mikhail finished unlocking the door, and I didn't waste any time in hurrying out. After feeling so oppressed and smothered for days, it was like stepping onto a mountain ledge, wind and space all around me.

"Rose, there are no guardians in this building. Well, maybe one. And these guys." Eddie gestured in the direction of the earlier fight, where I assumed my guards lay unconscious. Surely my friends hadn't killed

anyone.

"The rest of the guardians are all checking out the explosion," I realized. Pieces began coming together—including Lissa's lack of surprise over the commotion. "Oh no. You had Christian blow up ancient Moroi artifacts."

"Of course not," said Eddie. He seemed shocked that I would have suggested such an atrocity. "Other fire users would be able to tell if he did."

"Well, that's something," I said. I should have had more faith in their sanity.

Or maybe not.

"We used C4," explained Mikhail.

"Where on earth did you—"

My tongue locked up when I saw who was standing at the end of the hallway. Dimitri.

Not knowing how he was during my imprisonment had been frustrating. Christian and Tasha's report had been only a tease. Well, here was the answer. Dimitri stood near the hall's entrance in all his six-foot-seven glory, as imperious and intimidating as any god. His sharp brown eyes assessed everything in an instant, and his strong, lean body was tensed and ready for any threat. The look on his face was so focused, so filled with passion, that I couldn't believe anyone ever could have thought he was a Strigoi. Dimitri burned with life and energy. In fact, looking at him now, I was again reminded of how he'd stood up for me at my arrest. He wore that same expression. Really, it was the same one I'd seen countless times. It was the one people feared and admired. It was the one I had loved.

"You're here too?" I tried reminding myself that my muddled romantic history wasn't the most important thing in the world for a change. "Aren't you under house arrest?"

"He escaped," said Eddie slyly. I caught the real meaning: he and Mikhail had helped Dimitri escape. "It's what people would expect some violent probably-still-a-Strigoi guy to do, right?"

"You'd also expect him to come bust you out," added Mikhail, playing along with the game. "Especially considering how he fought for you last week. Really, everyone is going to think he busted you out alone. Not with us."

Dimitri said nothing. His eyes, while still carefully watching our surroundings, were also assessing me. He was making sure I was okay and uninjured. He looked relieved that I was.

"Come on," Dimitri finally said. "We don't have much time." That was an understatement, but there was one thing bugging me about my friends' "brilliant" plan.

"There's no way they'll think he did it alone!" I exclaimed, realizing what Mikhail was getting at. They were setting Dimitri up as the culprit in this escape. I gestured to the unconscious guardians at our feet. "They saw your faces."

"Not really," a new voice said. "Not after a little spirit-induced amnesia. By the time they wake up, the only person they'll remember seeing will be that unstable Russian guy. No offense."

"None taken," said Dimitri, as Adrian stepped through the doorway.

I stared, trying not to gape. There they were together, the two men in my life. Adrian hardly looked like he could jump into a fistfight, but he was as alert and serious as the other fighters here. His lovely eyes were clear and full of the cunning I knew they could possess when he really tried. That's when it hit me: he showed no sign of intoxication whatsoever. Had what I'd seen the other day been a ruse? Or had he forced himself to take control? Either way, I felt a slow grin creeping over my face.

"Lissa lied to your mom earlier," I said. "You're supposed to be passed out drunk somewhere."

He rewarded me with one of his cynical smiles. "Well, yes, that would probably be the smarter—and more enjoyable—thing to be doing right now. And hopefully, that's what everyone thinks I'm doing."

"We need to go," said Dimitri, growing agitated.

We turned toward him. Our jokes vanished. That attitude I'd noticed about Dimitri, the one that said he could do anything and would always lead you to victory, made people want to follow him unconditionally. The expressions on Mikhail and Eddie's faces—as they grew serious—showed that was exactly how they felt. It seemed natural to me too. Even Adrian looked like he believed in Dimitri, and in that moment, I admired

Adrian for putting aside any jealousy—and also for risking himself like this. Especially since Adrian had made it clear on more than one occasion he didn't want to be involved with any dangerous adventures or use his spirit in a covert way. In Las Vegas, for example, he'd simply accompanied us in an observer's role. Of course, he'd also been drunk most of the time, but that probably made no difference.

I took a few steps forward, but Adrian suddenly held out a hand to stop me. "Wait—before you go with us, you need to know something." Dimitri started to protest, eyes glinting with impatience. "She does," argued Adrian, meeting Dimitri's gaze squarely. "Rose, if you escape . . . you're more or less confirming your guilt. You'll be a fugitive. If the guardians find you, they aren't going to need a trial or sentence to kill you on sight."

Four sets of eyes rested on me as the full meaning sank in. If I ran now and was caught, I was dead for sure. If I stayed, I had the slim chance that in my short time before trial, we might find evidence to save me. It wasn't impossible. But if nothing turned up, I was also most certainly dead. Either option was a gamble. Either one had the strong possibility of me not surviving.

Adrian looked as conflicted as I felt. We both knew I didn't have any good choices. He was simply worried and wanted me to know what I was risking. Dimitri, however . . . for him, there was no debate. I could see it all over his face. He was an advocate of rules and doing the proper thing. But in this case? With such bad odds? It was better to risk living as a fugitive, and if death came, better to face it fighting.

My death will not be penciled in on someone's calendar.

"Let's go," I said.

We hurried out of the building, anxious to get moving with the plan. I couldn't help but comment to Adrian, "You've got to be using a lot of spirit to pull off all those illusions on the guards."

"I am," he agreed. "And I don't really have the power to do it for very long. Lissa could probably make a dozen guardians think they'd seen ghosts. Me? I can barely make a few forget Eddie and Mikhail. That's why there had to be someone they remembered to attract the attention, and Dimitri's the ideal scapegoat."

"Well, thank you." I gave his hand a gentle squeeze. As warmth flowed between us, I didn't bother telling him I was a long way from being free yet. It would diminish his heroics. We had a lot of obstacles ahead, but I still appreciated him stepping up like this and respecting my decision to go along with the escape plan.

Adrian shot me a sidelong glance. "Yeah, well, I'm supposed to be crazy, right?" A flash of affection shone in his eyes. "And there isn't much I wouldn't do for you. The stupider, the better."

We emerged to the main floor, and I saw that Eddie had been right about guardian security. The halls and rooms were virtually deserted. Without a second glance, we hurried outdoors, and the fresh air seemed to renew my energy.

"Now what?" I asked my rescuers.

"Now we take you to the getaway car," said Eddie.

The garages weren't far, but they weren't close either. "That's a lot of open ground to cover," I said. I didn't bring up the obvious problem: me being killed if spotted.

"I'm using spirit to keep us all vague and nondescript," said Adrian. More testing of his magic. He couldn't handle much more. "People won't recognize us unless they stop and stare directly at us."

"Which they probably won't," said Mikhail. "If anyone even notices us at all. Everyone's too worried about themselves to pay much attention to others in all this chaos."

Looking around outside, I could see he was right. The jail building was far from the church, but by now, people who'd been near the blast had made their way to this part of Court. Some were running into their residences. Some were seeking guardians, hoping for protection. And some . . . some were going the same direction we were, toward the garages.

"People are freaked out enough to actually try to leave Court," I realized. Our group was moving as fast as we could with Adrian, who wasn't in the same shape as dhampirs. "The garages will be crowded." Both official Court vehicles and visiting guests parked in the same area.

"That could help us," said Mikhail. "More chaos."

With so many distractions in my own reality, I couldn't plunge completely into Lissa's. A light brush of the

bond found her safe, over in the palace.

"What's Lissa doing during all of this?" I asked.

Believe me, I was glad she wasn't involved with this busting-me-out-of-jail madness. But, as Adrian had noted, her ability with spirit could have gone much farther than his here. And now, looking back on it all, it was obvious she had known about this plan. That had been her secret.

"Lissa needs to stay innocent. She can't be linked to any part of the escape or explosion," replied Dimitri, eyes fixed ahead on his goal. His tone was firm. He still regarded her as his savior. "She has to keep herself visible with the other royals. So does Christian." He almost smiled. Almost. "Those two would certainly be my first suspects if something exploded."

"But the guardians won't suspect them once they realize the blast wasn't caused by magic," I mused.

Mikhail's earlier words returned to me. "And hey, where did you guys get a hold of C4? Military grade explosives are kind of extreme, even for you."

No one answered me because three guardians suddenly leapt out into our path. Apparently, they weren't all out at the church. Dimitri and I surged ahead of our group, moving as one, just as we always had in battle together. Adrian had said the illusion he'd stretched over our group wouldn't hold if anyone was facing us directly. I wanted to make sure Dimitri and I were the first line of contact with these guardians, in the hopes they wouldn't recognize the others behind us. I threw myself into the fight without hesitation, defensive instincts kicking in. But in those milliseconds, the reality of what I was doing truly sank in.

I'd fought guardians before and always felt guilty about it. I'd taken on the ones at Tarasov Prison, as well as the queen's guard during my arrest. I hadn't really known any of them, though. Just realizing they were my colleagues had been bad enough . . . but now? Now I was facing one of the most difficult challenges in my life, as small as it seemed. After all, three guardians were an easy match for me and Dimitri. The problem was—I knew these guardians. Two of them I'd run into quite a bit after graduation. They worked at Court and had always been kind to me.

The third guardian wasn't just someone I knew—she was a friend. Meredith, one of the few girls in my class at St. Vladimir's. I saw the flash of uneasiness in her eyes, a sentiment mirroring my own. This felt wrong to her too. But, she was a guardian now, and like me, she had had duty drilled into her throughout her life. She believed I was a criminal. She could see I was free and in attack mode. Procedure dictated she take me down, and honestly, I wouldn't have expected anything less. It's what I would have done had our roles been reversed. This was life and death.

Dimitri was on the other two guys, as fast and badass as ever. Meredith and I went for each other. At first, she tried to knock me down by virtue of her weight, probably in the hopes of pinning me down until backup could help grab me. Only, I was stronger. She should have known that. How many times had we sparred in the school's gym? I'd almost always won. And this was no game, no practice drill. I pushed back at her attack, punching her on the side of her jaw and desperately praying I didn't break anything. She kept moving through the pain, but—again—I was superior. I caught a hold of her shoulders and threw her down. Her head hit hard, but she remained conscious. I didn't know whether to be grateful or not. Maintaining my grip, I put her in a chokehold, waiting until her eyes closed. I released as soon as I was sure she was out, my heart twisting in my chest.

Glancing over, I saw Dimitri had also taken down his opponents. Our group kept moving as though nothing had happened, but I glanced at Eddie, knowing there was grief on my face. He looked pained too but sought to reassure me as we hurried along.

"You did what you had to," he said. "She'll be okay. Banged up, but okay."

"I hit her hard."

"The medics can deal with concussions. Hell, how many did we get in practice?"

I hoped he was right. The lines between right and wrong were getting confusing. The one good thing, I supposed, was that Meredith had been so occupied by the sight of me that she probably hadn't noticed Eddie and the others. They'd held back from the fight, hopefully keeping on Adrian's veil of spirit while Dimitri and I took the attention.

We finally reached the garages, which were indeed more crowded than usual. Some Moroi had already driven off. One royal was hysterical because her driver had her car's keys, and she didn't know where he was. She was shouting to passers-by to see if anyone could hotwire the car for her.

Dimitri led us purposefully forward, never wavering. He knew exactly where we were going. There had been a lot of planning, I realized. Most of which had probably happened yesterday. Why had Lissa obscured it from me? Wouldn't it have been better for me to have a heads-up on the plan?

We scurried through the people, heading toward the garage on the very farthest side. There, sitting just outside of it and seemingly ready to go, was a drab gray Honda Civic. A man stood near it, arms crossed as he examined the windshield. Hearing our approach, he turned around.

"Abe!" I exclaimed.

My illustrious father turned and gave me one of those charming smiles that could lure the unwary to their doom.

"What are you doing here?" demanded Dimitri. "You'll be on the list of suspects too! You were supposed to stay back with the others."

Abe shrugged. He looked remarkably unconcerned at Dimitri's angry expression. I wouldn't have wanted that fury directed at me. "Vasilisa will make sure a few people at the palace swear they saw me there during suspicious times." He turned his dark eyes toward me. "Besides, I couldn't leave without telling you goodbye, could I?"

I shook my head in exasperation. "Was this all part of your plan as my lawyer? I don't recall explosive escapes being part of legal training."

"Well, I'm sure it wasn't part of Damon Tarus's legal training." Abe's smile never wavered. "I told you, Rose. You will never face execution—or even a trial, if I can help it." He paused. "Which, of course, I can."

I hesitated, glancing toward the car. Dimitri stood by it with a set of keys, looking impatient. Adrian's words echoed in my memory.

"If I run, it's just going to make me seem that much more guilty."

"They already think you're guilty," said Abe. "You wasting away in that cell won't change that. This just ensures we now have more time to do what we need to without your execution looming over us."

"And what are you going to do exactly?"

"Prove you're innocent," said Adrian. "Or, well, that you didn't kill my aunt. I've known for a while you aren't all that innocent."

"What, are you guys going to destroy the evidence?" I asked, ignoring the dig.

"No," said Eddie. "We have to find who really did kill her."

"You guys shouldn't be involved with that, now that I'm free. It's my problem. Isn't that why you got me out?"

"It's a problem you can't solve while you're at Court," said Abe. "We need you gone and safe."

"Yeah, but I—"

"We're wasting time arguing," said Dimitri. His gaze fell on the other garages. The crowds were still chaotic, too busy with their own fears to notice us yet. That didn't affect Dimitri's concern. He handed me a silver stake, and I didn't question the reasons. It was a weapon, something I couldn't turn down. "I know everything looks disorganized, but you'll be amazed at how quickly the guardians will restore order. And when they do, they're going to lock this place down."

"They don't need to," I said slowly, my mind spinning. "We're already going to have trouble going out of Court. We'll be stopped—if we can even get to the gate. There are going to be cars lined up for miles!"

"Ah, well," said Abe, idly studying his fingertips. "I have it on good authority there's going to be a new 'gate' opening up soon over on the south side of the wall."

The truth dawned on me. "Oh lord. You're the one who's been doling out C4."

"You make it sound so easy," he said with a frown. "That stuff's hard to get a hold of."

Dimitri's patience was at an end. "All of you: Rose needs to leave now. She's in danger. I'll drag her out if I have to."

"You don't have to go with me," I shot back, kind of offended at the presumption. Memories of our recent arguments emerged, of Dimitri saying he couldn't love me and didn't even want to be friends. "I'll take care of myself. No one else needs to get in trouble. Give me the keys."

Instead, Dimitri gave me one of those rueful looks that said he thought I was being utterly ridiculous. We could have been back in class at St. Vladimir's Academy.

"Rose, I can't really get in any more trouble. Someone has to be responsible for helping you, and I'm the best choice." I wasn't so sure of that. If Tatiana really had made progress in convincing people Dimitri wasn't a threat, this escapade would ruin it all.

"Go," said Eddie, surprising me with a quick hug. "We'll be in touch through Lissa." I realized then that I was fighting a losing battle with this group. It really was time to leave.

I hugged Mikhail too, murmuring in his ear, "Thank you. Thank you so much for your help. I swear, we'll find her. We'll find Sonya." He gave me that sad smile of his and didn't reply.

Adrian was the hardest to leave behind. I could tell it was difficult for him too, no matter how relaxed his grin seemed. He couldn't be happy about me going off with Dimitri. Our hug lasted a little bit longer than the others, and he gave me a soft, brief kiss on the lips. I almost felt like crying after how brave he'd been tonight. I wished he could go with me but knew he'd be safer here.

"Adrian, thank you for—"

He held up his hand. "It's not goodbye, little dhampir. I'll see you in your dreams."

"If you stay sober enough."

He winked. "For you I just might."

A loud booming noise interrupted us, and we saw a flash of light off to my right. People near the other garages screamed.

"There, you see?" asked Abe, quite pleased with himself. "A new gate. Perfect timing."

I gave him a reluctant hug too and was surprised when he didn't pull back right away. He smiled at me . . . fondly. "Ah, my daughter," he said. "Eighteen, and already you've been accused of murder, aided felons, and acquired a death count higher than most guardians will ever see." He paused. "I couldn't be prouder."

I rolled my eyes. "Goodbye, old man. And thanks." I didn't bother asking him about the "felons" part. Abe wasn't stupid. After I'd asked him about a prison that had later been breeched, he'd probably figured out who was behind Victor Dashkov's escape.

And like that, Dimitri and I were in the car, speeding off toward Abe's "new gate." I regretted not being able to say goodbye to Lissa. We were never truly apart with the bond, but it couldn't take the place of face-to-face communication. Still, it was worth it to know she would be safe and free of any connection to my escape. I hoped.

Like always, Dimitri drove, which I still thought was totally unfair. It had been one thing when I was his student, but now? Wouldn't he ever give up that wheel? This didn't seem like the time to discuss it, though—particularly since I didn't plan on us staying together much longer.

A few people had come out to see where the wall had blown up, but no one official had surfaced yet. Dimitri raced through the gap as impressively as Eddie had when he'd driven through Tarasov Prison's gate, only the Civic didn't handle the bumpy, grassy terrain as well as the SUV in Alaska. The problem with making your own exit was that it didn't come with an actual road. Even that was beyond Abe.

"Why is our getaway car a Civic?" I asked. "It's not really great for off-roading."

Dimitri didn't look at me but continued navigating over the rough ground toward a more drivable area.

"Because Civics are one of the most common cars out there and don't attract attention. And this should be the only off-roading we do. Once we hit a freeway, we're putting as much distance between us and Court as we can—before abandoning the car, of course."

"Abandon—" I shook my head, letting it go. We reached a dirt road that felt like the smoothest surface on earth after that jolting start. "Look, now that we're out of there, I want you to know that I mean it: you don't have to come with me. I appreciate your help in the escape. Really. But hanging out with me won't do you any favors. They'll be hunting for me more than you. If you take off, you can live somewhere around humans

and not be treated like a lab animal. You might even be able to slink back to Court. Tasha would put up a fight for you."

Dimitri didn't answer for a long time. It drove me crazy. I wasn't the kind of person who handled silence well. It made me want to chatter and fill the void. Plus, the longer I sat there, the more it hit me that I was alone with Dimitri. Like, really and truly alone for the first time since he'd become a dhampir. I felt like a fool, but in spite of the dangers we still risked . . . well, I was still overwhelmed by him. There was something so powerful about his presence. Even when he made me angry, I still found him attractive. Maybe the adrenaline pounding through me was addling my brain.

Whatever it was, I was consumed by more than just his physical aspects—though they were certainly distracting. The hair, the face, his closeness to me, his scent . . . I felt it all, and it made my blood burn. But the inner Dimitri—the Dimitri who'd just led a small army through a prison break—captivated me just as much. It took me a moment to realize why this was so powerful: I was seeing the old Dimitri again, the one I'd worried was gone forever. He wasn't. He was back.

At long last, Dimitri replied, "I'm not leaving you. None of your Rose-logic arguments are going to work. And if you try to get away from me, I'll just find you."

I didn't doubt he could, which just made the situation more confusing. "But why? I don't want you with me." I still felt a lingering attraction for him, yes, but that didn't change the fact that he had hurt me in breaking things off between us. He had rejected me, and I needed to harden my heart, particularly if I wanted to move on with Adrian. Clearing my name and leading a normal life seemed far away right now, but if it happened, I wanted to be able to return to Adrian with open arms.

"It doesn't matter what you want," he said. "Or what I want." Ouch. "Lissa asked me to protect you."

"Hey, I don't need anyone to—"

"And," he continued, "I meant what I said to her. I swore I'd serve her and help her for the rest of my life, anything she asks. If she wants me to be your bodyguard, then that's what I'll be." He gave me a dangerous look. "There's no way you're getting rid of me anytime soon."

FIVE

GETTING AWAY FROM DIMITRI WASN'T just about our rocky romantic past. I'd meant it when I said I didn't want him getting in trouble because of me. If the guardians found me, my fate wouldn't be that much different from what I'd already been facing. But Dimitri? He'd been making baby steps toward acceptance. Sure, that was pretty much destroyed now, but his chance for a life wasn't over. If he didn't want to live at Court or with humans, he could go back to Siberia and return to his family. Out there in the middle of nowhere, he'd be hard to find. And with how close that community was, they'd go to a lot of trouble to hide him if someone ever did try to hunt him down. Staying with me was definitely the wrong option. I just needed to convince him.

"I know what you're thinking," Dimitri said, after we'd been on the road for about an hour.

We hadn't spoken much, both of us lost in our own thoughts. After a few more country roads, we'd finally made it to an interstate and were making good time toward . . . well, I had no idea. I'd been staring out the window, pondering all the disasters around me and how I alone could fix them.

"Huh?" I glanced over at him.

I thought there might be the smallest hint of a smile on his lips, which seemed absurd considering this was probably the worst situation he'd been in since being restored from his Strigoi state.

"And it won't work," he added. "You're planning how to get away from me, probably when we eventually stop for gas. You're thinking maybe you'll have a chance to run off then."

The crazy thing was, I had been thinking very much along those lines. The old Dimitri was a good partner on the road, but I wasn't so sure I liked having his old ability to guess my thoughts back as well.

"This is a waste of time," I said, gesturing around the car.

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