



BOOK TWO

SLADE

THE VENOM SERIES

FROM BESTSELLING AUTHOR
KRISTEN MIDDLETON

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PROLOGUE

“I HATE YOU,” I said, frantic for him to leave.

“Hate? That’s a pretty strong statement. I don’t believe you,” he whispered, his emerald eyes searching mine.

I took a few steps back and fortunately, he didn’t notice that I’d grabbed the dagger from the dresser. I held it behind my back. “It’s the truth.”

He smirked. “You make a terrible liar.”

My body trembled, but not from fear. It was the overwhelming desire for a man I couldn’t trust. A man who had a thirst for blood, and apparently... treachery. My reaction to him was infuriating. “That right? And you think that you know me so well?”

He reached up and gently placed his index finger on the pulse of my neck. “I know what I feel.”

I pushed his hand away. “Give me a break. You don’t know anything about what *I* feel.”

“On the contrary. Your face is flushed and your heart is racing.” He grinned darkly. “You want me as much as I want you. Admit it.”

I clenched my fist, wanting to slam it into his arrogant face. “What I *want*... is to kill you. That thought excites the hell out of me.”

His eyes moved to my nightgown and he took another step toward me. “And you excite the hell out of me, Chelsey.”

I looked down and cursed myself for allowing him into my chamber. The material was almost transparent in the soft lighting. I gripped the dagger tightly, wondering exactly what I was going to do with the damn thing anyway. “I swear to God, if you don’t step away from me, I’ll scream. I’ll scream so loud that everyone will come running.”

He touched the top button of my nightgown and smiled. “I’d rather hear you scream in pleasure.”

I stiffened up. “You’re a real prick. You know that?”

His smile faded. “So I’ve been told.” He removed his hand, but his fingertips brushed the tip of my breast, making my sex quiver in pleasure.

I nodded at the doorway. “Get out of my room. I’m not going to ask you again.”

“Good, because it’s getting annoying.” He pulled me into his arms. “And I have a much better use for your lips,” he whispered, leaning in to show me.

I touched the end of the blade to his waist. “Do you feel that?”

His eyes widened and then glittered with amusement. “A knife?”

“Move away or I swear... I’ll use it on you.”

He leaned forward and I could feel the heat of his breath caressing my earlobe. “You know what they say – some things are worth dying for.”

1

CHELSEY

Thirty-six hours earlier

“**CHELSEY, YOU HAVE** to eat something,” insisted my cousin, who was sitting in the front seat of Slade’s souped-up ‘68 Firebird. It was late, just shortly after bar hours, and we were in line at a fast-food place.

“I’m not hungry,” I repeated as we moved closer to the drive-thru menu.

She turned around and looked back at me. “You’re sure? How long has it been since you’ve eaten?”

“I don’t know, and yes, I’m sure,” I said, trying to ignore the throbbing pain in my temple. “Seriously, I’m not hungry.”

She studied my face. “You okay?” she asked, her voice softening. “You don’t look so good.”

“I have a migraine.”

“Oh, man. You still get those?”

“Not usually.”

“That’s a bummer,” she answered, turning back around. “The injury to your head must have triggered it. What did the doctor tell you?”

“That I had a slight concussion, but I’d be fine.”

“He give you any drugs for the pain?” she asked.

“There was no time. I had to bolt. Sheriff Caleb was on his way back to the room.”

“That’s right. We’ll have to get you something later.”

I nodded, thinking about how my mother used to help soothe the migraines by massaging my temples, and got a lump in my throat. Both of my parents were either missing or dead and I was currently on the run with my cousin, Melody, and Slade, the lead singer of *Venom*. On the run from real-life vampires and a creature named Faye, who could change into a flying reptile. It was an unbelievable and crazy situation.

“I still think you should eat. How about something with caffeine?” she asked. “Doesn’t that usually help?”

“I just need a place to crash,” I said as we stopped in front of the menu and a voice greeted us.

“Are you ready to order?” asked the cashier.

“Just a minute, please,” said Slade.

“Go ahead when you’re ready,” replied the girl.

“God, I’m so hungry I could order the entire menu,” said Melody, leaning closer to Slade, our rescuer. ~~He was a vampire, and although I knew I should be grateful for his help, I couldn’t quite get myself to trust him.~~ Plus, he wasn’t exactly pleasant to be around. He’d been quiet for the last few hours and it almost seemed like he was pissed off that he’d taken on the task of helping us. At least that’s what it felt like to me. Melody, on the other hand, didn’t seem to notice. She obviously still had the hots for him.

“You ready?” asked Slade, tapping his thumbs on the steering wheel as she studied the menu.

“Wait. I’m thinking. Can I order whatever I want?” she asked.

“Yeah. Be my guest,” he replied.

“Cool. Um....could you get me a bacon-cheeseburger – without mustard – fries, and a strawberry shake?” she asked.

“Sure.” He looked over his shoulder at me. “What about you?”

I stared at him in disbelief.

Had he just arrived to the conversation?

“Like I said before, I don’t want anything.”

“Why?” he asked, frowning.

“Because... I’m not hungry,” I insisted, just as my stomach growled.

He grunted. “Right.”

Gritting my teeth, I looked away. “Whatever. Don’t worry about me.”

“Is she always this stubborn?” he muttered to Melody.

“If I remember correctly... yes. She most certainly is.”

I rolled my eyes.

“Sir, are you ready to order yet?” asked a girl through the intercom, sounding a little impatient.

“Sorry, hold on,” he answered and turned back to Melody. “So, nothing for Chelsey?”

“Oh, for God’s sake, just order her the same damn thing as me,” she huffed. “I guarantee she’ll eat it once she smells the food.”

“Whatever, Melody,” I said.

“Save it for later, if you’re not hungry,” she argued. “Just get her the food, Slade. Please.”

“Okay,” he answered and then placed the order.

“Your total is seventeen dollars and six cents. Please pull ahead,” said the cashier.

“Wait, what about you, Slade? Aren’t you getting anything?” asked Melody, as he drove forward.

I snorted. “What did you expect *him* to order? I doubt they have what Slade is craving. Even White Castle wouldn’t be able to satisfy it.”

Slade’s green eyes met mine in the rearview mirror, which was surprising in itself. In books and movies it was a known fact that you couldn’t see a vampire’s reflection. Obviously, they’d gotten it all wrong. It made me wonder what other surprises were in store for us.

“You’d be surprised of what my cravings consisted of,” he answered, his eyes glittering. Something about the way he stared at me made the hair stand up on the back of my neck.

“Do you really drink blood?” asked Melody.

He sighed. “Do you really want to know?”

“I think it’s more that we *need* to know,” I answered, still irritated with him.

“Fine. Yes, I do.”

“Human?” asked Melody, who I noticed had inched closer to her door.

“When it’s available.”

“Have you killed anyone for their blood?” I asked as we moved closer to the cashier’s window.

He took longer to answer this time. "Yes. I've killed... but not for blood consumption."

~~We'd both seen the massacre in Faye's office. It had been a scene right out of a grisly horror movie. He was definitely not a stranger to death. Nor were the others in his band.~~

Melody smiled weakly. "Oh. Well, I'm sure you had good reason to do what you did."

He didn't respond. We pulled up to the window, and Slade took out his wallet. "Anything else?"

"No, I'm good," said Melody.

"You?" he asked.

"Yes," I answered, looking back outside into the darkness. "Like I've said a number of times, don't need anything."

Just my life back...

Slade paid for the food and we drove up to the next window to pick it up.

"Here," he said, handing me one of the shakes. Then he tossed Melody the bag of food. The familiar smell of salty fries filled the air and I was secretly glad they'd ordered me something, despite my protests.

"So, where are we going now?" asked Melody, dipping a fry into her shake.

Slade rolled his window down further, letting in the fresh air. "Not sure. I'm waiting to hear from Liam. He's still trying to find out if your friend, Susan, is alive."

"God, I hope she is," I said, thinking back to the terrified look on her face when the gargoyle had whisked her away. The guilt of not being able to save her was still eating at me. If she died, it would be my fault and I didn't know if I could live with that kind of guilt.

"Try not to get your hopes up," he said. "Faye is a heartless bitch. I've heard that she hates mortals, especially ones that are a threat."

"Threat? Now, how in the hell could we possibly be a threat?" said Melody, dipping another fry into her shake. "With all of her powers and crap. It doesn't make any sense."

"Sure it does. Think about it. You know what she is," he explained.

I wondered if he thought of us as a threat, too. "This is really messed up," I replied, wishing I never agreed to step foot into her club. "If what you say is true, she isn't going to stop looking for us until we're *not* a threat."

"Probably not," he said.

"Neither will those Roamers," said Melody. "They do whatever the hell she asks. It's like she's their queen or something."

"They probably fear her power so they're easy to manipulate," said Slade.

"Okay, what exactly is a Roamer? Some kind of werewolf?" I asked.

"Basically, they're vampires. It's what they call them in this country," mocked Slade. "Ridiculous."

"You don't like the Roamers very much, do you?" stated Melody, smiling.

"Not the minions working for her," he said. "I have nothing against the rest of them."

"What exactly happened between you guys in Faye's office?" I asked.

"They tried to force me into something I wasn't interested in. Then she used the Roamers to threaten me."

"What was she trying to force you into?" I asked.

He didn't reply.

"I think you owe us an explanation," I said. "After everything we've been through."

He took his time to answer. "Faye wanted full control of us. In other words, she wanted to add us to her minion collection. When I declined, she tried offering Melody to me. To sweeten the deal."

My eyes widened. "What?"

"That bitch wanted him to suck my blood," said Melody. She turned to him and her eyes narrowed. "To be honest, Slade, you looked like you were about ready to do it, too."

He looked at her. "I almost did."

"So, you actually came close to ripping my throat out?" asked Melody, now looking horrified.

"Calm down. I didn't do it. Anyway, I wouldn't have ripped out your throat," he answered smirking. "I have more control than that."

"Oh, well that makes me feel so much better," she answered sarcastically. "Speaking of eating. She turned around and handed me a burger. "Here, Chelsey. Eat this now. I doubt it's going to taste good later."

"Thanks," I said, taking it from her. It was warm and the smell of bacon made my mouth water. I opened the wrapper and took a big bite. As I chewed, I noticed Slade eyeing me in the mirror again. I wondered if eating in front of him was a bad idea. I certainly didn't want to make him hungry.

"What's it like to smell food like this but be unable to eat it?" asked Melody. "Does it drive you crazy?"

"Actually, It doesn't really do anything for me," he replied.

Her eyes widened. "Really? This food doesn't do anything for you? It does something to me," she said, grinning. "I couldn't imagine living without it. Especially, pizza. I'd die if I couldn't have pizza."

"My hunger is triggered by other things. Scent is definitely one of them, but what smells good to you, doesn't always to me."

"French fries? They don't smell good?" she asked, stuffing one in her mouth.

"I smell the grease that it's cooked in and it's rather unpleasant, actually," he replied. "Our diets are different and we have extremely high metabolisms. Plus, we feed to survive, whereas many of you eat simply for the pleasure, or because you're... bored."

"So, you don't get any pleasure from consuming blood?" I asked, not believing it.

"On the contrary. There is lots of pleasure. Sometimes for the victim as well," he said. "I just don't feed unless I'm lacking nutrients."

"What do you mean by that?" I said, horrified. "I mean... how could there be pleasure for the victim?"

"We can release some kind of chemical endorphin into your bloodstream while we're doing it. Some say it's almost... orgasmic."

"Orgasmic, huh?" said Melody, winking at me. "I guess that's not so bad then."

I grimaced. I couldn't believe she found anything good about a vampire drinking someone's blood. But then, Melody enjoyed sex. Anything to do with that kind of pleasure was 'okay' in her book. I was a virgin and had no idea what orgasmic felt like, so I wouldn't be volunteering my neck anytime soon.

"I was going to ask you, Slade," said Melody. "Has anyone ever told you that your cologne smells like candy?"

"I'm not wearing cologne."

"Oh. Well, whatever it is, you smell very, very good," she said, smiling at him coyly. "And you're not too hard on the eyes, either."

He smiled. "Thanks. Our glands give off a distinctive scent which is supposed to entice mortals."

Melody moved closer and inhaled. "Well, you smell like caramel."

"Sometimes I've been told that it's vanilla or butterscotch," he said. "It depends on the person."

"You mean the victim," I replied, feeling slightly nauseated by the conversation.

His eyes hardened. "I don't take victims."

~~"Let's just be honest here. Your scent lures in your prey. Heck, everything about you is..."~~

Enticing. I stopped, unwilling to say the word out loud.

"Everything about me is... what?" he asked, his lip twitching in the mirror. Something told me I knew exactly what I was thinking.

"Smexy," purred Melody. "Right, Chelsey?"

"I was going to say 'bait'," I said dryly.

"Bait?" He chuckled.

"She's right," laughed Melody. "In fact, all the guys in your band are pretty hot. Speaking of which," Melody wiped her lips with a napkin and shoved it into the bag. "Are they going to move Montana without you?"

"What do you mean?" he asked.

"I heard Faye say that they'd agreed to move out to Shore Lake and work for her," she answered. "Aren't you pissed at them for making that kind of decision without you?"

He grunted. "That was bullshit. I talked to Liam and he said they never agreed to anything. He told her that they'd think about it... and that was only because he thought he had a chance with her."

Her eyes widened. "You mean he thought he'd get 'lucky'? With the gargoyle?"

"Liam is a horn-dog. He'll say anything if it gets him what he wants. Although, I don't think I realized that she was a shape-shifter until afterwards."

"And he's a werewolf?" I asked.

"Liam is a Lycan," he said. "There's a difference."

"What is it?" asked Melody.

"He can transform into a wolf whenever he wants to. Werewolves have to wait until the moon is full. They are a lesser species." Slade smirked. "Kind of like the Roamers."

I smirked. "So, what you're saying is that you guys from Europe are a much better breed?"

"They can't compete with our speed or strength. Obviously, their creators weren't of the same stock."

"Let's cut to the chase, are you safe to be around?" I asked, feeling better now that I'd eaten most of the burger. I was tired of skirting around the fact we were part of his food supply.

"I normally don't feed directly from humans. I have a supplier," he said.

"You have a supplier?" I repeated.

"Yes, back in Romania. She provides most of my blood."

"Is she your girlfriend or something?" asked Melody.

"It's not what you think and no, I do not have a girlfriend. She provides me with packages of blood from a blood-bank."

"When was the last time you fed?" I asked.

His eyes met mine again. "Don't concern yourself with that. I've got things under control."

"For how long, though? I mean, it's you and us. If you suddenly feel the need to feed, it is our concern," I replied. "And, what about that episode back at Club Nightshade? Didn't you just admit that you lost control and almost went after Melody?"

"I didn't though," he answered sternly. "So, don't worry about it."

"Have you fed since leaving the club?"

"No." He grunted. "Dammit, are you this tenacious with everyone?"

"She is," said Melody, grinning. "It's her nature. Used to drive me crazy when we were kids."

"If you hadn't lied so much, I wouldn't have had to ask you so many questions," I countered.

“Whatever. I did not.”

“Obviously, some things never change.”

She turned around and glared at me.

“Don’t give me that look. *You* started it.”

She sighed. “And you’re so perfect.”

“I never said I was. Look, I just want to stay alive. There’s nothing wrong with that,” I said, defending myself.

“You’re right,” said Slade. “I guess I really can’t blame you. You both witnessed some horrible shit the last couple of days. Plus, you’re dealing with whatever may have happened to your parents. It certainly doesn’t look good for them.”

He was right. It didn’t. After Slade and Melody had picked me up from the hospital, they’d taken me back to my house. I’d cried when I’d noticed the blood on my mother’s pillow and the broken lamp next to the bed. Other than that, there’d been no other sign of a struggle. Nor any sign of my parents. Afterwards, we’d driven to Melody’s house, which had also been deserted. Fortunately, there hadn’t been any blood. Just an empty house with a shattered patio door and some broken dining room chairs.

“We don’t know for sure if any of them are actually dead,” I said quickly. “They could still be alive. Maybe even... grandma.” The thought of seeing our grandmother getting mauled by such wickedness was enough to make me sick. She was so sweet and kind. She didn’t deserve any of this.

Melody’s head whipped around. “Grandma? Where was she?”

“At your house. The last thing I heard, she was comforting Aunt Jody.”

“Because of me?” said Melody, her eyes filling with tears.

“Yes. Aunt Jody was worried sick about you. Seriously, Melody, if you wouldn’t have snuck into Club Nightshade... we wouldn’t be in this mess.”

Melody began to cry and I suddenly felt like a royal bitch.

“Oh crap. I’m sorry,” I said.

“No. You’re right,” she sobbed. “It is my fault. Actually,” she turned to Slade and her eyes narrowed through her tears. “It’s your fault. I wanted to see you in concert.” She turned to look back at me. “Slade even took me back to his hotel. I think we may have had sex.”

I rolled my eyes. It was just like Melody to blame someone else for her actions.

“That’s bullshit. I did not take you back to my hotel room and we definitely didn’t have sex,” I said, his jaw set. “I didn’t even talk to you Friday night.”

“Actually, your band members said you took her back to your hotel,” I replied, remembering the conversation. “Are you calling them liars?”

“I don’t care *what* they said. They were obviously misled, which makes me believe that Faye was behind it,” he answered.

“What do you mean?” asked my cousin, wiping the tears from her cheeks with a napkin.

“Think about it. She’s a shape-shifter. She more than likely changed into me, and that’s probably who you were with Friday night.”

Melody gasped. “Oh, my God, I might have had sex with that lizard thing?”

I chuckled.

“It’s not funny!” she cried.

“Do you remember actually having sex with anyone?” asked Slade, who was trying to keep a straight face.

“No. I just woke up alone in a hotel room Saturday. I stuck around for a while and then decided

take off. When I walked out of the lobby to try and catch a cab, two of Faye's security guards shoved me into this dark SUV." She frowned. "To tell you the truth, I can't remember much between the time they took me and seeing you in her office."

"Well, if it makes you feel better, I doubt Faye molested you. She probably just drugged you so you'd pass out."

"I hope so, because I don't know what I'd do if I thought I'd had sex with a monster or even another woman. She is a female, isn't she?"

Slade shrugged. "I presume so. To be honest, I don't know for sure."

"Why would Faye go to all of that trouble? Why didn't she just drug Melody and bring her back to the club instead of letting her stay at the hotel?" I asked.

Slade shrugged. "Who knows? Maybe she wanted to make me look like an asshole."

"Or... maybe she was trying to trick your band members," I said. "Even Liam seemed pretty shocked when he found out that you had left with Melody."

"Again, it wasn't me and I guess that would confuse the hell out of him. Particularly since I'm always giving him hell about sleeping with fans."

"So, that's not your thing? Sleeping with fans?" I asked, knowing that he must get propositioned quite a bit. After watching him on stage, I'd gotten a little hot-and-bothered myself.

"No."

That was hard to believe. "Why? Isn't that a perk of being a rich and famous musician?"

"It's only a perk if that's what you're into. I'm not," he answered.

"Are you gay?" asked Melody, staring at him wide-eyed. "Not that there's anything wrong with it. I'm just curious."

I was too. I waited to hear his response.

He smirked. "No, but even if I was gay, I'd still not be interested in having sex with groupies."

"Why?" asked Melody. "I mean, you're single. You don't have a girlfriend. Do you... do vampires have sex?"

"Yes," he said, chuckling. "We have lots of sex. And, for the record, I'm not saying that I don't have sex. I enjoy it as much as the next guy. I just chose not to have sex with..."

"Mortals," I said.

"Exactly."

"Why? Are you not attracted to us?" I asked.

Our eyes met in the mirror again and there was a flash of something sexy and feral in his gaze. "I'm very attracted to you."

My heart skipped a beat. *Was he talking to me?* My lips suddenly felt dry and I licked them.

"Then why deny yourself?" asked Melody, trying to flirt with him.

"Maybe I shouldn't," he answered, still staring at me.

There was no mistaking his meaning that time and something went 'swoosh' in my stomach.

"Wow, is it me or should we stop talking about sex," said Melody, fanning herself. "It feels weird with Chelsey in the car."

"Why?" he asked.

"Just, because," she answered, thankfully not telling him that I was a virgin.

"Can we stop somewhere?" asked Melody, after a few seconds.

"For what?" he asked.

"A bed," she replied. "I need a bed. Now."

"To sleep?" he asked.

She grinned coyly. "Yes, unless you have something else in mind."

My jaw dropped at her directness.

"I think you both need a rest after what you've been through," he said, evading her question.

Sulking, Melody stared up at the moon. "So, what about you? Do you need to find a casket something? To rest?"

He looked over at her. "A casket? Really?"

"Yeah, to protect your skin from the bright light of the sun," she said. "Or maybe we can just find you a really dark room?"

He grunted. "I don't need protection."

"So the sun isn't your enemy?" she asked. "I thought vampires had to stay away from it."

"No," he said. "Well, some of us do."

"Why only some?" I asked.

"Recently 'turned' vampires need to wear dark sunglasses and keep out of direct sunlight, or it can be quite uncomfortable."

"But not you?" she asked.

"No. I've become immune to its side effects over the years. I can even hang out at the beach if I want to."

"Because you're that much older?" I asked.

He smirked. "I'm ancient."

"How old are you?" asked Melody.

Slade was silent for several seconds and then rubbed the back of his neck. "Let's just say I've been around long enough to witness plenty of unnecessary bloodshed. Most of it through wars that you've read about in history books."

Melody chuckled. "Wow, you really must be old."

"Like I said before. Ancient."

"Well, you don't look much older than us," I said.

"That's because I can't age physically."

"That would be awesome," sighed Melody. "To never grow old."

"It's a curse. Hell, I'd gladly go back to being mortal if I could. You can't imagine how exhausting and depressing it is to live this long and watch others around you... die."

"So, you weren't born a vampire?" I asked, surprised.

"No."

"Were you forced into it?" asked Melody.

He didn't reply and there was a tense silence.

"Slade, how did it happen?" I pressed, intrigued.

"To be honest, it's something I'd rather not talk about," he answered gruffly. He turned on the radio. "Let's find a hotel so you girls can sleep, and I can find out what's happening with Liam and the others."

"Great idea," said Melody. "I'd love a shower, too. Find a place that has those soft, fluffy robes. Will you?"

"I'll do my best. Is there anything else?" he replied.

"A room with a Jacuzzi would be totally awesome, and ... a mini bar? But, don't go out of your way to make it happen, Slade," she said, fluttering her eyelashes a little. "I mean, unless you don't mind going out of your way? I would assume you're used to staying at places that offer those kinds of amenities."

He glanced at her. "A mini bar? How old are you?"

"Old enough," she said, grinning mischievously.

"I doubt it."

Her smile fell. "Hey, after everything I've been through, I could use a stiff drink."

"She's eighteen," I said. "Barely."

Melody turned around and smiled coldly. "He wasn't asking you."

"I know and that's why I told him the truth," I replied, smiling back.

She sighed and turned around. "You're such a buzzkill."

"To be honest, Melody, drinking alcohol isn't going to help the situation and, in fact, you need to stay focused," he answered. "So I suggest both of you get some sleep so you're on your game tomorrow."

"On our game?" repeated Melody. "What do you mean?"

"Think about it – the danger isn't over and you're going to need all of your wits about you. Faye wants you dead. We've left Shore Lake, but they could find us."

"You're going to protect us, right?" asked Melody, wide-eyed.

"I'll take you somewhere safe and help you locate your family, if they're still alive. After that you're on your own," he answered.

"What do you mean, we're on our own?" she balked. "You can't be serious!"

"We're going back to Europe," he said. "The band, that is."

"What do we do once you're gone?" she replied, looking back at me and then over to him again. "Neither Chelsey or I have any money. We don't know where to go. We'll be screwed."

I reached forward and touched her shoulder. "Hey, Melody, don't worry about it. We'll figure it out."

"Figure it out? Are you kidding?!" she replied shrilly. "What do you think we're going to do once he abandons us? It's not like we can protect ourselves against something like Faye and those Roamers."

"We'll go to the FBI," I said. "They've got to help us. We'll tell them everything and make them help us."

"I wouldn't. I'm sure the FBI is aware of what's been happening. Hell, they'll more than likely lock you away to keep you from talking, or worse..." said Slade.

"Worse? You mean they'd kill us?" I asked.

"That's very possible. We *are* classified information. Hell, the majority of the people running the government now are immortals or linked to one of us. They'll definitely want to keep their real identities from going public."

"I guess that doesn't surprise me," I mumbled, feeling hopeless. "Having that kind of power and strength, of course they'd be the ones running things."

"Yes, so the best thing you can do is not talk about any of this and just... start over," he said.

"Easy for you to say," replied Melody. "You're rich, you know people. You don't even have to hide. But us... we're probably going to have to live on the streets until we figure out what to do."

He was silent for a few minutes and then gave us another option. "You're welcome to fly to Europe with us. I'm sure we can find you a place to stay. Maybe even a job."

"Really?" Her face lit up. "You'd let us come with you?"

"If it keeps you off the streets, yes. I'm not *that* much of an asshole."

She turned back to me, her eyes twinkling. "Did you hear that, Chelsey? We're going to Europe!" I stared at her in alarm.

Had she already given up on our family?

~~“Not me. Thanks for the offer, Slade, but there is no way in hell I’m flying out of the country.”~~

“Chelsey, think about it,” argued my cousin. “We really don’t have a choice.”

“Yes, we do. Look, Slade, if you really want to help us, you’ll find our parents. After that, we’ll be out of your hair.”

“My boys are already working on it.”

“Good,” I replied. “Thank you.”

“You’re welcome.”

We drove for miles in silence. After a while, Slade turned up the stereo just as the song, *She Will Be Loved* began to play, by Maroon Five. I closed my eyes and listened to the lyrics, my eyelids growing heavy. Then Slade’s phone began to ring.

“Yeah,” he said, answering it. Someone spoke on the other end and a few seconds later, he swore under his breath.

Melody looked at me.

“Okay. Yeah, I guess I’ll have to,” said Slade, not sounding happy. “See you soon.”

“Was that Liam?” I asked after he hung up.

He tossed his phone on the dashboard. “Yep.”

“Did he have news?” I asked, holding my breath.

“I’m not going to beat around the bush. He found out what happened to your family, Chelsey,” he said in a somber tone.

My stomach clenched into a tight fist. I could barely breathe. I didn’t want him to say the words. The ones that would make it real.

“Well?” asked Melody, not yet getting it. “What did he say?”

He let out a ragged sigh. “I guess there’s no easy way to say it... They are all dead.”

2

SLADE

MELODY SUCKED IN her breath. “No,” she answered. “Are they absolutely positive?”

I nodded. “Yeah. Liam found...” I stopped myself from saying ‘their remains’. “He found them. It was too late.”

“He saw their bodies?” asked Chelsey.

I turned back to look at her. “Yes. I’m... sorry for your loss,” I replied gravely, although it sounded inadequate, even to me.

Her jaw tightened and Chelsey looked away. She looked so utterly beautiful and vulnerable, her full lips trembling in the darkness.

“What about my mother?” asked Melody, fighting tears. “Or our grandmother? Do they know for sure if they were also killed?”

“Unfortunately, it sounds like the Roamers may have murdered them all.”

“How in the hell did they find out where we even lived?” cried Chelsey. “I just don’t get it. How could they have worked so fast?”

“Maybe from your friend Susan,” I answered, resisting the urge to pull over and offer some kind of comfort to the girls. Not just a pathetic – “I’m sorry your parents were ripped to pieces. Where are they now?” But, I needed to keep my distance. Even now I had to ignore the tantalizing smell of the youthful bodies, which wasn’t easy. I hungered for Melody’s blood, but I ached for Chelsey in ways that I’d denied myself for decades.

“Actually, I lost my purse after they kidnapped me,” said Melody, grabbing a napkin. She wiped the dampness from her cheeks. “My driver’s license was in there. Along with my fake one.”

“That and Caleb knew my address, too,” muttered Chelsey.

“Susan spoke to him after we left the club,” said Melody. “I’m sure he called Faye right away. He’s definitely involved.”

“He’s a Roamer,” I replied. “And, he works for Faye. Of course he’s involved.”

“What do we do now?” asked Melody, staring ahead at the road.

“We find you a place to rest. Somewhere safe,” I answered. “We’ll talk about what to do afterwards.”

Neither of them answered. I turned up the stereo again and we drove in silence.



THIRTY MINUTES LATER, we arrived in a small town two hours east of Shore Lake. I made the girls wait in the car as I reserved adjoining rooms at a motel.

“Really? Why this dump?” asked Melody, looking pissed off as I got back into the vehicle. “This place looks like something out of a horror movie.”

Chelsey snorted. “And after everything... you’re surprised?”

“It may not be much, but it’s inconspicuous and available,” I answered, irritated. Melody had just whined that she was broke and was now complaining about a free place to stay. The girl was obviously spoiled and used to getting her way.

“I can see *why* it’s available,” she replied, shaking her head in disgust.

Even I had to admit, it was kind of a dump, but we couldn’t afford to be choosy. Plus, hiding out at a luxury hotel would be far too risky. Liam had informed me that Faye was now aware that I was helping out the girls, and we all needed to keep a low profile.

“Chill out, Mel. Beggars can’t be choosers,” said Chelsey, as I parked in front our room. “Frankly, I’m just exhausted and could use a shower. As long as it has a bed and a bathroom...”

“I’m sure it does. Along with giant roaches that are waiting for our arrival with open arms,” I answered Melody.

Chelsey grimaced. “Nice. Thanks for that disturbing image.”

“It’s probably true,” she said.

“The room will be fine,” I assured them. “It’s not that bad of a place. I’ve stayed in much worse.”

“We haven’t even seen the inside of the rooms yet. They could be much worse than *your* much worse,” said Melody.

“I’m sure it will be fine,” said Chelsey, yawning. “Let’s just get inside.”

“Oh crap... we don’t have any clean clothes,” said Melody, staring down at her outfit. “I’ve been wearing this for over two days. I doubt this place will have those fluffy, white robes either.”

“None of us are in any position to be choosy,” I answered, getting out. “Considering the time and our location.”

“Speaking of. Where are we?” asked Chelsey.

“Jaynesville,” I replied, staring up at the dark sky, looking for shadows. I couldn’t imagine the Roamers finding us this quickly, but I wasn’t about to let my guard down.

“Never heard of it,” replied Melody. “From the looks of this hick town, the population must be under five-hundred.”

“It was thirteen-hundred and four,” I said, recalling the sign as we passed it.

“Jeez, there has to be something better than this place,” said Melody, getting out of the car. She swung her blond hair over her shoulder and fluttered her eyelashes at me. “Slade... seriously. Maybe we could drive a little further out? Find a Holiday Inn or something?”

“No. It’s late,” I answered, tired of her bitching. I pulled the seat back so Chelsey could get out. “And I’ve already checked us in.”

Chelsey climbed out and looked up at me. “So, do you really believe that Faye is still searching for us?”

My eyes moved from her greenish-blue ones to the light splash of freckles that ran across her nose. I sensed that she had no idea of the kind of beauty she possessed. She literally took my breath away. “I’m pretty sure she’s not going to want to leave any loose ends. She went after your parents. She’ll keep looking for you.”

“Until when?” she asked.

I stared at her dark red hair that shined under the moonlight. My fingers twitched, as I imagined running my hands through those silky strands. “Until one of you is dead.”

She laughed coldly. “That’s reassuring.”

Her sarcasm actually made her more intriguing. I fought the idea of charming her into desiring me in the same way that I hungered for her. ~~Make her sneak out after Melody fell asleep. Just the thought of undressing her gave me wood.~~ I quickly turned away and began moving toward the motel. "It's the truth."

"Did he just say that Faye would keep searching for us until one of us was dead?" whispered Melody in the darkness.

"What do you think?" Chelsey answered.

"Shit. We're screwed."

"Tell me about it," she answered.

I walked to room *ten*, which was on the end, and unlocked it. Pushing the door open, I turned on the light and glanced inside. There were two queen-sized beds, covered in outdated floral comforters, a small bathroom, and an old pine dresser with a television resting on it. It was shabby but relatively clean, despite the musty air.

"It smells bad in here," complained Melody as she stepped around me and walked toward the nearest bed. "Like... mothballs."

"It could be worse," said Chelsey, following her inside. "To be honest, I expected much worse than this when we pulled up."

Melody's nose wrinkled. "Well, I'd almost rather sleep in the car." She pointed at the bed. "God, I hope this place isn't infested with bed-bugs."

Chelsey walked to the other mattress and raised the linen. She leaned closer and inspected under the sheet. "It looks safe enough. Nothing crawling around with legs."

"You can't always see them," replied Melody.

Chelsey stood back up. "Honestly, I think we have more to worry about than bed-bugs at this point."

"Speak for yourself." Melody shuddered. "I'd rather deal with Faye than get lice or bed-bugs. Besides, we have Slade." She smiled at me and fluttered her lashes. "He can handle Faye. Right?"

"Hopefully we won't have to find out," replied Chelsey.

I silently agreed. I was weak from hunger and not thinking too clearly. I wasn't sure how much help I'd be against Faye, or her Roamers, should they find us before Liam and the others arrived.

Chelsey stared at me curiously. "Are you okay?"

Nodding, I stepped backwards until I was in the darkness and fresh air. "You'll be fine. I'll let your girls get some sleep," I said. "I'll be right next door if you need anything. Room Nine."

"Wait," said Melody, moving toward me. I knew what she wanted from the look in her eyes.

I forced a smile. "What is it?"

She placed her hand on my chest and began stroking it. "Are you sure you wouldn't like some company?" she whispered.

"Are you offering dinner?" I replied, showing a hint of fang.

"I guess I'm open to whatever you'd like," she answered, surprising me. "Especially if it involves something 'orgasmic'."

My smile fell. Me and my big mouth. "You need to get some sleep."

"Don't you like me?" she whispered.

"Of course I do. But, not like that."

"Are you sure?" she said, placing my hand on her breast. "I'll do whatever you want."

"I'm very flattered, Melody," I said, snaking my hand back. "But, you shouldn't offer yourself so freely. Especially, to someone like me."

“But, that’s just it. I really, really like you,” she answered. “And I don’t care if you’re a vampire.”
It turns me on.”

“Go inside, Melody,” I ordered, staring into her eyes. “You need to sleep.”

The smile fell from her face. “I’m going inside. To get some sleep.”

I sighed in relief. “Keep your door locked. Your world, right now, is a very dangerous place.”

Her eyes widened. “Are we... are we really safe here, Slade?”

She looked more like a lost child than the sex-kitten from ten seconds ago. It reminded me of how young she really was. How naïve. “Melody, there are no guarantees. Just don’t let your guard down. Not for anyone.”

“That’s good advice,” said Chelsey sharply, now standing in the doorway. She grabbed Melody’s arm, pulled her inside, and slammed the door in my face.

I could hear Melody gasp. “Chelsey, that was rude!”

The wind picked up, blowing my hair, as I stared at the gold-plated number ten in silence. The redhead was definitely feisty, which made her even more appealing. Smiling to myself, I turned around and walked to my room.

3

CHELSEY

“**HOW IN THE** hell can you flirt with *him*?” I asked, walking away from the door, frustrated. “You of all people, know what he is.”

“Of course I *know*. It’s just that he’s been so... nice and you have to admit, he’s totally hot.”

“So what if he’s hot? I’m sure he uses his looks to coerce girls into giving him blood among other things.” I still wasn’t a believer that he hadn’t had sex with any groupies or hadn’t taken blood from humans to survive. Not after the way I’d seen the rest of his band attack the Roamers. They ripped them to shreds, gorging on their blood like starving animals.

She sighed. “He isn’t like that. You heard what he said.”

“I don’t care what he *said*,” I replied, rubbing my forehead. My headache was definitely coming back. “He’s a vampire and *we* are his food supply. You jump in bed with him and you may never jump back out.”

“You’re just jealous,” she huffed, stepping into the bathroom.

I grunted and followed her inside. “Jealous? Are you crazy? Did you forget what in the hell has been happening these last couple of days?”

“Of course I didn’t forget,” she said. “I’m just saying that he’s been extra attentive toward me and it drives you crazy.”

I folded my arms across my chest. “What are you talking about?”

“I saw the way you were looking at him earlier. Like you wanted to tear his shirt off and lick him from head to toe. Although, I don’t blame you.” She grinned. “He *is* totally lickable.”

I stared at her in horror. “Are you really that oblivious to everything? Our parents have been killed by his kind and you’re talking about jumping his bones?”

Her smile fell. “He’s not like them, and of course, I know that our parents are dead,” she said, her eyes filling with pain. “But... we’re alive, and like it or not, it’s because of *him*. He saved our lives, vampire or not... and don’t forget... he was once just like us.”

“I know, but —”

“Chelsey! He didn’t ask to be a vampire. He’s a victim. Just like we are. If anything, I feel sad for him and so should you.”

I stared at her in disbelief. “Why should I feel sad for *him*? He’s rich. He never grows old. He can basically do whatever he wants.”

“Maybe, but he has to hide who he truly is from the world. Like he’s some kind of freak.”

I laughed. “I’m sorry but he *is* some kind of freak. One that we can’t turn our backs on. He basically warned us not to trust him before I slammed the door in his face.”

“He wasn’t talking about himself.”

“You’re just blinded by his looks,” I said.

~~She didn’t say anything for a few seconds, and I knew that I was right.~~

“Look, Chels, if he wanted to kill us, he would have done it already. He’s been nothing but kind and you... you don’t even appreciate what he’s done for us. He could have just stayed behind with the rest of the band. But, he didn’t. He risked his own life by helping us.”

I knew she was right, but it was hard to let my guard down when it came to Slade. For more reasons than I cared to admit. I smiled sadly. “I just don’t want to die.”

“Me neither. And we won’t. Not if we stick with him.”

“You really think we can trust him?”

“He rescued us, fed us, and now we have a place to sleep. He even offered to fly us to Europe. How can we not at least try to trust him?”

I didn’t reply. Even though she had a point, I just couldn’t put my guard down around a man who was also a vampire. Especially, since there was some kind of crazy chemistry going on between us.

“Just try to be nice to him,” she said. “And... be happy for me.”

I raised my eyebrows. “What do you mean?”

“Slade and I were meant to be together,” she said, turning on the shower. “I knew it the moment I first set eyes on him at Club Nightshade, and now... fate has brought us together.”

“You’re not serious.”

“Why wouldn’t I be?” she asked, pulling off her shirt.

I looked away as she continued undressing. “You honestly think that Slade and you were destined to be together? That he’s going to carry you off into the sunset? Or should I say... the moonlight?”

“Of course,” she said, getting into the shower. “And deep down, he knows it, too. Why do you think he’s been so helpful? He doesn’t want to lose me.”

I stared at the closed curtain in disbelief.

She was delusional.

The Roamers had obviously drugged her and the effects hadn’t worn off. At least, I hoped that was the case.

4

SLADE

I **PACED AROUND** in my room, trying to fight both the hunger and desire that was now consuming me. It didn't help that I could hear the shower running in the room next to me. Images of Chelsea lathering herself with suds as water ran down her naked body, raced through my mind.

I had to get out.

Get some fresh air.

Grabbing my cell phone, I sent Liam a text, telling him where we were staying, and then informed him that I was going to hunt.

He texted me back right away.

You? I thought that was against your principles?

Not humans, I texted back, grimacing. I'm going after animals.

I didn't particularly like the taste, but it would help sustain me until we were back in Europe, and my stocked supply of human blood. Unfortunately, my other stash was somewhere on the tour bus, Montana. The one that was now missing.

LOL. Sounds tasty. We should be there soon. I might have to meet up w u.

Sounds good.

Liam enjoyed hunting any kind of game. There were times when I envied his species. His diet was easy and consisted of typical human food, as well as fresh, raw meat. Both were so much easier to acquire.

Leaving the motel door unlocked, I flew into the early morning sky, heading for the woods we passed by in the car earlier. Fortunately, it didn't take long before I had my hands on a large buck. Charming the creature with my eyes, I slowly placed my hands on his neck and began petting him. He relaxed and then, as I continued to stroke his fur, resumed eating the nuts he'd been nibbling on. As he continued eating, I grasped him firmly with both hands and sank my fangs into his fur-lined flesh. Panicking, the deer made a bawling noise and tried to pull away. I held it firm and took only enough blood to quell the hunger pangs in my stomach. When I was finished, I released the buck and he trotted off through the trees.

Sighing, I reached into my jeans and pulled out the white towel I'd taken from the motel. As I wiped my lips with the rag, I felt eyes upon me.

"I know you're there," I called out, recognizing the scent of my watcher.

Liam leaped through the brush and landed next to me in his lycan form. He changed back to human and stood up, naked and proud as usual.

"The leaves must have given me away," he replied, his blue eyes dancing. "They tremble in my presence."

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