

# LOVE Has NO Boundaries



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# UNDENIABLE

Reece McKinley

# Love Has No Boundaries

*An M/M Romance series*

## UNDENIABLE

By Reece McKinley

### Introduction

The story you are about to read celebrates love, sex and romance between men. It is a product of the *Love Has No Boundaries* promotion sponsored by the *Goodreads M/M Romance Group* and is published as a free gift to you.

### What Is Love Has No Boundaries?

The *Goodreads M/M Romance Group* invited members to choose a photo and pen a letter asking for a short M/M romance story inspired by the image; authors from the group were encouraged to select a letter and write an original tale. The result was an outpouring of creativity that shone a spotlight on the special bond between M/M romance writers and the people who love what they do.

A written description of the image that inspired this story is provided along with the original request letter. If you'd like to view the photo, please feel free to join the [Goodreads M/M Romance Group](#) and visit the discussion section: *Love Has No Boundaries*.

Whether you are an avid M/M romance reader or new to the genre, you are in for a delicious treat.

### Words of Caution

This story may contain sexually explicit content and is **intended for adult readers**. It may contain content that is disagreeable or distressing to some readers. The *M/M Romance Group* strongly recommends that each reader review the General Information section before each story for story tags as well as for content warnings.

This story is a work of fiction. Names, characters, places and incidents are the products of the author's imagination or are used fictitiously. Any resemblance to actual events, locales, or persons, living or dead, is entirely coincidental.

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## Photo Description

A black and white photo of two young men—standing in profile—naked and nearly identical. They appear to be in their mid to late twenties; short dark hair, prominent noses. The background is completely black, the only thing visible in the photo are the two men facing each other, nose to nose in a tight embrace.

## Story Letter

*Dear Author,*

*Our sire wanted two matching pretty boys at her side forever—that's why she turned us both into vampires. We had some really good years, the three of us. But now that she's gone, the pain of her death is tearing both our minds apart. I know he's been doing stupid things. Breaking the rules our sire taught us. Risking his life. What am I going to do? He's all I have left—just like I'm all he has, but am I enough?*

*Sincerely,*

*Kallysten*

## Story Info

**Genre:** contemporary paranormal

**Tags:** photographer, writer, sweet no sex, friends to lovers, hurt/comfort, vampires

**Word Count:** 17,960 words

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“He’s going to get himself staked out in the sun, Jack.”

I looked up from the pile of papers I was shuffling through to see Gentry, Regina’s personal assistant, filling the doorway of my office. “What’s he done now?” I asked, my voice rough with exhaustion. The combination of lack of sleep, not having fed in a few days, and the stress of watching Liam implode was like carrying a thousand pound boulder over my head.

I was keeping it together for now, but eventually something was going to give and it was going to knock me on my ass or kill me. I wasn’t sure at this point which one I preferred more.

“He was almost seen feeding at that dive bar downtown the three of you used to go to all the time. What’s it called... McCreedy’s? McGurrey’s...”

“McDuffy’s,” I supplied.

Apparently, Liam was feeling sentimental if he’d decided to grace that little bar with his presence; we hadn’t been there in years.

“Right. Whatever. Someone was going to call the police on him. Said he was accosting some guy out behind the bar. Luckily, the bar owner intercepted and was able to get him out of there, but *shit*, Jack... If Queen Ellis gets wind of Liam flashing his fangs around she’ll come down here and stake him herself. The only reason someone hasn’t intervened now is because of Regina.”

I closed my eyes, dropping my head back to rest on my high-back leather office chair.

Liam. What the hell was I going to do about him? It was bad enough that I was the one stuck doing everything I could to keep our little ship from sinking, but now he was off trying to get himself killed in the wake of Regina’s death.

He would probably tell you that he was fine. Every time I'd seen him and asked how he was doing, that's all I got. *Fine*.

Well, I wasn't fucking fine. I was so far from fine, I wasn't sure I would know what it would look like if it came up and bit me in the ass.

But Liam. Fucking Liam, the bane of my fucking existence, was driving me straight into the nuthouse.

I was holding on by fingertips to my sanity, gluing the broken pieces of my soul together with bubble gum and a prayer. Dealing with Regina's belongings. Following out her last wishes. Just trying to fucking make it through the darkness that lived inside my head now that my Sire, my beacon, was gone.

Five years I'd been living with her, *for* her, I didn't know any other way... and now? Now. Instead of grieving together—instead of leaning on each other, the two people who knew and loved her best—I was one small tap from shattering and Liam was out attempting to break every conceivable Vampire law he could think of.

Almost exposing himself to the public. Check.

Moving into another Vampire's territory without permission. Check.

Engaging other paranormals. Check.

That last one had been a particularly fun one. I'd had to go out to some abandoned warehouse in the middle of bumfuck nowhere and pull his ass outta the ring in the middle of fighting a Were. Apparently, Were's had their own version of "Fight Club". They'd go out there, change and then fight until they were too bloody to move. Incredibly stupid? Hell, yes. And Liam had been right in the middle of all of it.

In the two months since we'd buried Regina, Liam had been spiraling further and further out of control. The Liam prior to Regina's death—straight-laced and ever proper—was nowhere to be found.

Now I was fielding calls from people asking me to come and fetch the hot mess he'd become.



“I’ll handle it Gentry. Thank you for letting me know.” I staggered to my feet and pulled my coat from the back of my chair, slipping it on. “I’ll bring him home and do my best to rein him in.”

As I was walking past, Gentry stopped me with a hand on my shoulder. “You don’t have to do this alone. I know everyone always brings it to you because you shared a Sire, but you should let me help you too. I wasn’t just Regina’s assistant you know. I was her friend... *your* friend.”

I recoiled at the note of longing in his voice. While I appreciated the sentiment, I didn’t want to deal with anyone’s unrequited love. If it had been uncomfortable while Regina was here, keeping him at bay; it was downright disturbing now that he made no attempt to be subtle about wanting me.

It wasn’t that Gentry was a bad guy. Quite to the contrary, he was a very good guy, just not the good guy for me. Despite all the subtle ways I’d tried to rebuff the petite blond, it never seemed to stick.

I moved past him to get out of the forced proximity and turned to face him. “I appreciate what you are offering Gentry, but I just... I can’t. Liam’s... he’s dealing with this just like we all are. He just... we just need some time.”

It was hard to miss the look of disappointment on his face. My first instinct was to try to soothe the sting of my continued rejection; I hated hurting him when he’d always been close to Regina. I knew though that giving into that instinct would be a mistake. I didn’t want to lead him on, knowing I had no intention of ever following through on anything other than friendship.

Without saying another word, I turned and headed for the garage to get Liam’s car. I’d be damned if I got blood or God knows what else on my leather seats.

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Thirty minutes later I pulled up outside McDuffy’s and shut the car off. I hadn’t been here in close to two years, but it was as if I’d never stopped coming. I had intimate knowledge of every nook and cranny. Of each scar that graced the bar top. The way the hinges on the door squeaked with every arrival and departure. The fact that the second I walked through that door Lew would

smile at me, showing off a row of crooked teeth and raise a hand in greeting before fixing me a tall glass of Guinness.

I gave the outside one last look and smiled, locking up the Mercedes and pocketing the keys. It was as if I'd never left.

The faint sounds of music and singing got louder with every step toward the entrance. I picked up my pace wanting to get this over with as soon as possible. No telling what kind of shit Liam was getting up to inside, and at a human bar no less.

The sight that greeted me upon entering was one I could say with absolute certainty would be branded across the back of my eyelids until I died. William Andrew Levensworth III—Liam—was crowding around the microphone with the local band and singing Bon Jovi *at the top of his lungs*. Who would have thought he would even know the words to “Wanted Dead or Alive?”

The jacket of his two-thousand-dollar Tom Ford suit lay crumpled at his feet. Half of his white dress shirt had come untucked from his pants and his shirtsleeves were rolled to the elbows. His short dark hair, that he normally took such care with, was standing on end, like he'd been running his fingers through it all evening.

His eyes were scrunched shut, one hand raised in the air while he sang like he was Cher doing her farewell tour.

And shit. He could actually *sing*!

Who knew such a tight-ass could unwind enough to let loose and sing like that in this packed bar. I shoved and wound my way through the crowd over to where, sure enough, Lew was standing there holding my beer.

“You’ve missed a great show!” he yelled over the music, his barrel chest shaking in laughter. “He climbed up there about an hour ago after I pulled him in from out back, and the band’s adopted him I think.”

“How much has he had to drink?” I yelled back.

“It’s not ‘how much’ that you should be worried about, it’s what he’s planning on drinking. That, my boy, is the question.” I could see the

amusement shining in his eyes, a twinkle there as he gazed up at Liam and then back down to me.

“All right,” I drawled, playing the old man’s little game. ”What is he planning on drinking?”

Without saying another word, he shot a finger at a man standing in front of the stage just off to the left. He was good looking; big, muscular, long shaggy blond hair... and a fucking Were tattoo on his neck. What an asshole! Who the hell tattooed themselves with their pack symbol, and on their neck no less.

*Way to be inconspicuous!*

That’s when it hit me why Lew had called. It wasn’t because of the attention Liam was drawing to himself, hell, at this point he could be just another drunk guy as far as anyone else was concerned. And it hadn’t just been because he’d had to pull Liam from out back for almost getting caught feeding. No, it had been the Were he was eye-fucking from the stage. If he was planning on going home with a Were, which by the way was taboo enough, he was sure as shit planning on taking a sip while he was there. I would bet our house on it.

I looked over at Lew, sweat making his bald head shine, still smiling at me. “Clean up duty aisle nine. You better bring a mop, boy. This is sure to get messy,” Lew joked.

“Har, har, old man. You think this is funny?” I asked, the beginnings of anger stirring. Not at Lew, oh no, this was all about Liam. Maybe I’d been going about this the wrong way; letting Liam work his grief out how he wanted. I’d never had much family to speak of and was not an expert at dealing with emotion. I did know, though, that what Liam was doing to himself wasn’t going to end well. Whether Liam liked it or not, he needed to pull his head out from where he had it wedged in his ass.

Lew waved me in close so we didn’t have to yell quite so much. “Jack. You showed up here six years ago, a little runt of a thing. I gave you a job. I looked after ya. Then Regina and Liam showed up and they were your family. Regina, she was real special. She loved you a lot, anyone could see that. It’s

the only reason I didn't try to keep you away from her when you decided to..." he waved his hand at me, glancing around to make sure no one was listening.

I appreciated his discretion. He'd been a nosy old bastard back then, hovering over me as if I was his baby chick. He knew there was something different about Regina and Liam, kept on top of me to stay away from them. Regina, knowing Lew was the closest thing I had to family, had eventually explained what she and Liam were and what I was going to be. We'd come here a lot after I'd first been turned. I think I was trying to hang on to my old life a bit back then, but eventually as time went on, we'd come less and less.

"Now, I know you boys are messed up with her gone. But he's out of control, Jack. You need to get a handle on him before someone else does. I don't know much about your... situation, but I do know from what Regina told me that you aren't supposed to be waving your freak flag like he is." He waved his finger to and fro in an imitation of said flag, and I couldn't help the burst of laughter.

"Lew, you always have such a way with words." I rolled my eyes as I watched Liam do a little shimmy and start rocking his hips and shaking his ass, while Shaggy Doo stood in rapt attention next to the stage.

"Lord save me from this idiot, Lew!" I reached over the bar and drew him into a tight hug. "I'll try not to be such a stranger. Thanks for calling Gentry to let me know."

Lew nodded before waving me off and getting back to his customers.

I took a second to think over my options before finally settling on one. Quickly, I wandered around the back and along the far wall until I was standing next to the Were.

I swept my hand over the small of his back and down his ass, giving it a firm squeeze.

He turned to look at me, giving me a thorough once over. He was surprised at first; looking back and forth between Liam and I. Gauging the similarities. Trying to determine if we were brothers... twins? We both had green eyes; mine a shade or two darker. Same high cheekbones and a full mouth. We were

about the same height; I was an inch shorter, though it was hard to tell unless were standing directly next to each other.

That's where the similarities ended though; I was the grungier version of Liam. Where Liam wore three-piece suits, I wore threadbare jeans and concert T-shirts. Liam had a three-hundred-dollar haircut. I hadn't had my hair cut in months. It was a much shaggier version of Liam's—starting to grow over my ears and brush the collar of my T-shirt.

Still, I could tell he liked what he saw. He flashed me a sensual smile before sidling closer. "Hey," he said in full flirt mode.

"I was watching you from back there and I thought I'd come say hi. So hi." I shot a quick look at the stage before I turned us so that my back was to Liam. I needed to get rid of the wolf so I could deal with Liam before he wrapped up his singing debut.

I dipped my head to run the tip of my nose slowly down his neck, to the soft spot where shoulder and throat met. I gave it a quick lick, trying to conceal how repulsed I actually was by the act. It wasn't that he wasn't attractive, he absolutely was a looker—he smelled wrong to me though. Blown pupils. Rapid, shallow breaths. He was obviously high on something.

A groan rumbled through his chest at the contact. Relieved that he was going to make this so easy for me, I traced the line back up his neck until my lips were just brushing his ear. "You wanna get outta here?"

He gave a quick nod and I grabbed his hand, pulling him toward the back exit that emptied into the alley behind the bar.

The door hadn't even slammed closed before he was on me, straining to reach my mouth, his hands reaching for the button of my jeans. Knowing I needed to handle this quickly, I grabbed the arm he had wrapped around my waist, used it to spin him around and pushed him face first into the brick wall of the bar.

"Mmmmm, I love this game," he said with a throaty purr.

“Yeah? Put your fucking hands on the wall and don’t move them,” I demanded.

“You want a taste, Vampire?” He tilted his head to the side and offered me his neck. I wasn’t surprised that he knew what I was—once you knew what to look for, spotting paranormals was fairly easy.

I couldn’t stop the shudder that tore through me at the thought of tasting shifter blood, despite the fact that I wasn’t attracted to the Were. This Were was offering to let me tap a vein. I hated that I was tempted—just another thing I was going to hammer Liam about.

Were blood was an aphrodisiac for Vampires, inciting a lust that was impossible to contain. You lost yourself completely to the high of it, simply fighting for your next orgasm. I had never had Were blood as it was outlawed by our Queen, and I tried to do my best to keep my nose clean. I did not ever want to shame Regina or bring trouble to her door. As my Sire, she had been just as answerable for our mistakes as we were.

I took a cursory look around, making sure we were alone before I crowded in against him. “Oh, there are so many things I want to do to you.” I rubbed my left hand down over his very obvious erection, stroking and squeezing while my right hand snaked up his hip and then up over his opposite shoulder, holding him tight against me. “You ready for me, little shifter?” I whispered in his ear.

He nodded jerkily, his hips thrusting into my hand. “Good.” And with that, I slid my arm up and pulled it taut across his neck, cutting off his air.

He immediately struggled, his hands shifting into claws, scratching up my forearm before he tried to go for my face. It was too bad for him that I was so much taller. He may have been more muscled, but I had the leverage.

He continued to resist for another few moments before he blacked out—sagging in my arms.

I saw a couple of turned-over crates the bar used for empties near the back door. I dropped his limp body down over them, propping him against the wall. I checked to make sure he still had a steady pulse and headed back inside.

The band was finishing up their set so I parked myself in Shaggy Doo's old spot. Liam spotted me immediately, rolling his eyes in annoyance. We'd been through this mothering routine enough over the last two months that he knew what was coming. I crooked my finger and pointed to the spot just in front of me.

He ignored me.

Without hesitation, I jumped up on stage.

In my Rolling Stones T-shirt, black canvas jacket, jeans and black Converse, I looked like just another member of the band. I smiled at the guy on the other side of Liam, before hooking a finger into Liam's trouser belt loops. I pulled him in tight to my body; keeping him close.

I sang along until the song finally ended, before waving to the band and pull-dragging a very drunk Liam from the stage. If he'd been completely sober I wouldn't have been able to manage it quite so easily, but his coordination was for shit and I was insistent. I didn't stop until his ass was firmly planted in the passenger seat of the car.

"Hey, asshole." I started congenially. "So, *wow*. Good times huh? Just singing with the band. Who knew you could even sing. I mean wow. All these years together and I had to learn about it with everyone else at McDuffy's? I'm hurt, Liam." I feigned disappointment.

Liam reclined his seat back until he was almost flat, his eyes closed, "Oh fuck off. I know Lew called you. I was fine."

"Well, see that's not what I heard. And it wasn't Lew who told me, it was Gentry."

Liam cracked open an eye to look at me, disgust written clearly across his face. "Gentry? What does that fuckwit know about it? What were you two doing together anyway?"

I couldn't help but smile at Liam's description. It wasn't exactly a secret that there was no love lost between those two. While Liam and I had a

somewhat strained relationship before Regina had passed, Gentry and Liam couldn't even occupy the same space without trading insults.

I couldn't pass up the chance to needle him though, call it a small bit of payback for having to pander to all his craziness. "Picture this, I'm at home, letting off some steam, balls-deep in Gentry's ass—"

Liam was on top of me before I could finish. Fangs bared. Snarling at me. A hand wrapped tight around my neck, pinning me to my seat. He took a long slow trip from my ear to my chest, sniffing as he went.

There was something heady about being the sole focus of Liam's attention. His green eyes locked with mine as he traveled down my body, nose and lips just brushing my skin and front of my T-shirt as he went; the beginnings of heat doing a slow crawl through my blood. All of that frustration, the anger, the adrenaline—all that emotion—was morphing into something else entirely.

Then as abruptly as it had started, it stopped. He was back in my face, glaring at me. "Fucking liar."

"Fine, so I was working in the office and he stopped by—doesn't change the fact that Lew had to step in and save your ass."

Liam jerked away and moved back over into his seat, still glaring at me in disgust. "I don't know why you let him linger around the house. His job is done. He needs to move on."

"Speaking of lingering around the house, why don't you give that a try? If you're there, Gentry will be sure to make himself scarce." I dangled that carrot in front of him, trying a different tactic since apparently threatening him with pain of death had not been working.

"I don't like him being in our house, Jack."

"Then stick around, Liam." I got a noncommittal noise in response. Fine. "So, should we talk about the fact that you were going to get fangy with the wolf in there?"

His head popped up from the seat to look at me, "Fangy? Really? How old are you?"



“Old enough to know better, but too young to be dealing with your shit.” I rolled my eyes. “Seriously, how much longer are we going to do this Liam? I’m exhausted. I’m hungry. I’m riding a fine fucking line of sanity myself. For fuck’s sake! I can only handle so much more and then I’m heading straight over the edge and if I go because you have no impulse control, I will drag your nappy ass with me,” I finished in a huff, dropping my head to the steering wheel—all out of steam.

“My ass is not nappy!” he said indignantly.

“That’s all you got out of what I just said?” I reached over and punched him in the arm. “You are *such* a dick!”

“Yeah, yeah.” Liam waved me off.

I cranked the car, waiting to see if he was going to offer any other explanation, instead a moment later I got snoring.

Figured.

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“You look like shit.”

“Well that’s handy because I feel like shit.” I cracked open an eye to stare up at Liam looming over the sofa where I’d fallen asleep last night after we’d come home from McDuffy’s. I’d briefly debated whether or not I felt like going out to hunt, and had decided it was entirely too much effort. Instead, I’d satisfied myself by curling up with the comforter off Regina’s bed and watching reruns of *The Walking Dead*.

The comforter still held faint traces of her perfume and when I was having a particularly hard day, I’d curl up with it and close my eyes and pretend she was there. *The Walking Dead* had been a favorite show of ours. Liam couldn’t stand it, and had made endless fun of us for making such an event of every new episode, but in the last few weeks, I’d caught him pausing in the door to the media room while I was watching. Not saying a word. Just standing there watching.

“When’s the last time you fed?” He poked at the hollows of my cheeks before sweeping my T-shirt up and staring pointedly at my protruding rib cage.

“Stop.” I swatted his hand away before smoothing my shirt down. “I haven’t much felt like it. I’ve been a little busy. Between taking care of the house, work and oh, I don’t know—bailing your ass out of suicidal situation after suicidal situation—”

“I’m not suicidal,” he said evenly.

“Oh really? Should we run through the list of shit you’ve been up to in the last two months? Because, believe me there is a list!”

Liam leapt over the back of the sofa and landed in a crouch over my lap, his arms bracketing my head, a high flush on his cheeks. “I’m doing the best I can, Jack. I’m sorry I’m not handling this in a way that is convenient for you, but it’s not up to you to clean up my messes. No one even asked you to, okay? I’m a big boy. I’ve been taking care of myself a hell of a lot longer than you’ve even been alive. So just stop.”

“Well, you may have been around longer, but you’re wrong about the rest of it,” I replied in a clipped tone, unbelievably pissed at his little tirade. I think I preferred a drunken Liam to this one. He was so much easier to talk to without the whole holier-than-thou attitude. There was only so much shit I was willing to put up with from him.

He blinked down at me in confusion, “About what exactly?”

“Regina asked me to look after you.”

Liam looked skeptical. “When?”

“Do you remember when you were gone last Christmas for two weeks to photograph that little South African village?”

Liam nodded.

“While you were gone, Regina brought out a bunch of photo albums to show me pictures from Christmases past, some of your old work, even a picture of you in your confederate uniform—she said it was about a year

before she'd met and turned you." Liam jerked back, gaze shuttered. I paused at his reaction, not sure if I should continue. As mad as I was at him and wanted to hurt him, I didn't want to really *hurt*, hurt him.

Liam swung his leg around so he was now kneeling next to the sofa, legs tucked underneath him. He took a moment to settle before gesturing for me to continue.

"I asked her about what you were like then."

Liam looked up at me from underneath dark sooty lashes, a sad smile on his face. "What did she say?"

I sat up and scooted around so I was facing him. "She said you had confidence in spades, a swagger to your walk and never met a challenge that you didn't like." I smiled down, remembering the expression on her face as she had talked so animatedly about the Liam from one hundred and fifty years ago. "She said you were honorable above reproach, a great soldier and were loyal to your friends."

Liam shot to his feet, moving around to the other side of the coffee table, putting space between us. He refused to look at me, just ran a rough hand through his hair before he started pacing.

"Di-did you want me to continue?" I stuttered out. Liam gave me a jerky nod.

"She said you were like a lake, all smooth on the surface, but with so much going on underneath. That you had nightmares and never asked for help. That you always tried to bear everything alone." I paused, steadying myself as emotion crept into my voice. Despite all our differences, despite Liam's best effort to keep us at arm's length, I still cared deeply for him and I hated seeing the pained expression on his face. "She said you deserved more love than she alone was capable of giving to you. She wanted everything for you, Liam. She made me promise to help her love you," I finished softly.

"She had no right to ask that of you, Jack," Liam said in a tight voice.

I stood and walked around the coffee table until we were face to face. “She didn’t have to ask me. You are my family, Liam. The only family I have left. I already loved you.” Liam jerked back like I’d hit him. Staring at me, stunned. “If I didn’t, I would have thrown your ass out a few weeks ago,” I joked, in an attempt to wipe that look off his face.

Liam didn’t laugh, just stood there silently staring at me for a few moments. Then, before I knew what was happening, he grabbed me by the hand and dragged me back to the couch.

“Sit,” he ordered.

I sat down, a little wary at the now blank expression on his face. I’d just dumped a lot of emotion in his lap, and I wasn’t sure how he was going to handle it. As a rule, Liam played everything close to the vest. I could count on one hand the number of times I’d heard him tell Regina that he loved her, and it had always been in an abbreviated “love ya” sort of way. And obviously, we’d never had that sort of relationship. The conversation twenty seconds ago was the most intimate conversation we’d ever had in the five years we’d shared this house, and it had been entirely on my side.

I watched in disbelief as he tore open his wrist and held it out to me, blood welling and then dripping slowly down his arm.

“What are you doing?!”

“Drink.”

“Uhh, what?”

“Drink.” There was no indication on his face or in his voice as to what he was feeling. He just waved his bloody wrist at me. “You haven’t fed, Jack. You need to drink.”

“From you?” I was embarrassed at the way my voice pitched at the end, but excuse the fuck out of me for being completely confused.

“Let me do this for you Jack. Okay?”

I studied his face, searching for some sort of clue as to what he was feeling. When it was apparent I wasn't going to find anything there, I slowly reached forward and pulled his wrist in close, maintaining eye contact the entire time.

I shuddered at the scent of blood, licking my lips in preparation. I quirked my eyebrow in question, giving him one last chance to change his mind.

When he didn't draw back, I took his wrist to my mouth. I moaned as the first taste of fresh blood hit my tongue. I couldn't help myself. It had been so long and I was so thirsty. I lapped at the delicate droplets of blood at first, savoring the taste and the feeling of euphoria I got every time I fed. Then, when I couldn't take it any longer, I moved to taking long slow pulls and then stronger and faster, digging my fangs in deeper.

Liam was an older Vampire, his blood far richer than what I was used to in feeding from humans, and the more I drank the more I had to have. I wanted to gorge myself on it. I cradled his wrist with two hands, before turning away from his probing stare, losing myself to feeding.

Against my will I felt my body flush with arousal. Drinking was always a somewhat erotic experience, no getting around it, but there was something powerful happening here and I wasn't sure exactly what it was—I just knew I didn't want it to end. I'd never felt this flushed with power or arousal before.

Before I was ready, Liam was calling to me, "Jack." He gently tugged at his wrist. When that didn't work he tried a more firm approach. "Jack. You need to stop."

I shook my head frantically, still drinking deeply from his wrist.

The blood was delicious. The taste, the smell, the heat coursing through my veins.

"Jack, you are going to take too much. You are going to hurt me. Do you understand?"

"What's going on in here?" The shock of hearing Gentry's voice succeeded where Liam's stern voice had failed, it was like a bucket of ice water to my face. I retracted my fangs immediately.

I felt my face flush in embarrassment at being caught like this. My lips still shiny with blood. My clothes wrinkled from having slept in them. My hair in disarray.

I turned away from the door in an attempt at privacy so I could wipe my mouth and run a hand through my hair.

Liam must have sensed some of what I was feeling, because he immediately stood and stepped in front of me, blocking Gentry's view. "What in the hell are you doing here? You just walk into our house now?" Liam growled. "You didn't even do that when Regina was here and you were her assistant. The next time you walk into my home like you have the right, I'll plant my very sizable foot in your ass."

"Oh, who do you think you're talking to, Liam? I'm not here for you! As a matter of fact, I came back to check on Jack since he had to go rescue you, yet again. Why don't you try not to be such a burden to the people in your life!"

From my spot behind Liam, I could see the almost imperceptible flinch at Gentry's last barb. It spoke to just how long Gentry had been in our lives that he knew just where to hit Liam to wound him.

As much as I wanted to hide, I forced myself to stand and face Gentry. "Okay, that's enough," I said firmly. "Gentry, I appreciate you checking on me." Liam turned to stare at me with what I'd almost think was hurt if he had been anyone else. "But I'm fine."

"Why were you feeding from him?" Gentry's face looked like "him" could have been interchangeable with "horse shit".

"I—" Liam immediately cut me off with a hand to my arm.

"That's none of your fucking business," Liam fired back.

I rolled my eyes. Clearly, this was going nowhere fast. "Gentry, why don't I walk you out?" I started to take a step around the couch, but Liam still had a hold of my arm.

"You sit and rest, while the blood kicks in. I'll see the little parasite out."

"If you aren't feeling well Jack, I can—" Gentry began to offer.

“Oh, hell no. You aren’t staying. And as soon as you leave, I’m calling to have the locks changed because there are one too many people who have access to this house.”

The ever-dignified Gentry gave Liam the one finger salute before turning his focus back to me. “I’ll call you later Jack.” And then he was gone, just as quickly as he’d come.

It wasn’t until we both heard the click of the front door that we moved. I slumped down onto the sofa. Liam still stared at the spot in the door where Gentry had been, a look of disgust on his face.

“I swear, he’s worse than a case of hemorrhoids. Such a pain in my ass!!”

I snorted at the image of Gentry as a butt irritant. While I whole-heartedly agreed, I felt badly speaking ill of him when he’d always been perfectly nice to me.

Overeager, perhaps... but nice.

“So about—” I was cut off by a knock at the door.

“If that’s the little barnacle, I’ll—”

“Why don’t I get it?” I jumped up to get the door, not waiting for Liam. There was another series of knocks on the door.

“Coming,” I called, my socked feet sliding on the marble floor of the foyer as I hurried. I winced as I caught a look at myself in the mirror hanging in the hall. I looked like road kill.

I pulled the door open just as a series of knocks started again.

“You ever seen *Hunt for the Red October*? One ping will do. I heard you the first ti—” I snapped my mouth shut at the two gigantic Vampires standing on the porch.

This probably wasn’t good.

“Uhh, can I help you?”

Gigantor on the left stepped forward, “We are here for William Levensworth.”

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“Pardon?” I wasn’t sure I heard correctly.

“We need to deliver a message. He’s been summoned. Queen Ellis would like an audience with him. We’ve had reports that he’s been in violation of several Vampire laws.”

“In Chicago?” They were here for Liam. The Queen wanted him. Maybe wanted him dead. The Queen summoning Liam had always been a possibility. Still, I couldn’t help the mixed feelings of surprise and dread. This was the absolute worst-case scenario.

“She’s decided to come down and pay her respects to Regina, and will see him directly after.”

“When is this supposed to happen?”

My mind reeled at the case that needed to be built. Vampires weren’t given lawyers in these disputes. You were simply called in front of the Queen. The Vampire in question was responsible for gathering any information, witnesses, et cetera, that were needed. Then the Queen made her decision and her Guard carried out the sentencing. Wham, bam, please don’t end in Liam being staked out in the sun.

“One week from today,” the Guard answered. “We’ll send over the particulars a few days before.” Without another word they turned in unison and stalked away.

*Shit!* That wasn’t much time, but I could work with it. I already had a couple of ideas of what we needed.

“You gonna stand in the open door all night? Who was that?” Liam’s voice behind me made me jump.

I closed the door and turned to face him. In an uncharacteristic choice, he was dressed in jeans, a white pull over shirt and bare feet. I smiled at the picture he made standing there. Even casual was still dressy with Liam.

“So, the good news is that wasn’t Gentry. The bad news is that Queen Ellis will be here a week from today to question you about several accusations she’s



received regarding your recent behavior.” I’d briefly entertained the idea of trying to soften the news, but there really isn’t any way to soften the news that you may only have a week to live.

I waited for a reaction. Anything really. An eye twitch, gnashing of teeth, clenched fists... uncontrollable sobbing. The last one was highly unlikely as Liam wasn’t a crier, but I’d really been expecting something. What I got was a quick nod of his head in acceptance before, he turned and walked upstairs.

Shit.

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Silence.

That’s all I had been getting from Liam for the last two days. It had become a little more than obvious that he was going to make no effort whatsoever to try to defend himself. As far as he was concerned, he’d bent, and in some cases broken, several Vampire laws—knowingly. Maybe he thought it was right that he be held accountable.

“So you’re just going to roll over and take it?” I couldn’t believe what I was hearing from him. It was one of the rare occasions we happened to be home at the same time and were eating dinner together. “Liam, you were—are—grief-stricken. Obviously, Regina’s passing hasn’t been easy for you. It hasn’t been easy for anyone. Queen Ellis is reasonable. Just tell her the truth,” I pleaded.

“She knows the truth, Jack.” He didn’t even look up from cutting his very rare steak.

“How do you even know that? You don’t know what she’s been told. You don’t know if things have been skewed or someone lied. We need to prepare, Liam. I’m begging you. Please.” I reached across the table for his hand.

The second my fingers brushed the tips of his, his head shot up and he pulled his hand into his lap. “Don’t, Jack.”

“I keep telling you and you don’t seem to hear me. I need you, Liam.” My stare was hard and direct. I wanted him to see that I was earnest; that I had an

emotional stake in what happened to him. When it had been the three of us, our lives had revolved around Regina—like the Earth revolved around the Sun. That constant. That critical. Now our Sun was gone, and without that huge burning presence holding all my attention, I could look around. I could see Liam, and not just who he had been as a part of the Regina-Liam dynamic.

Had I cared for Liam when it had been the three of us? Absolutely. Had I loved him? Of course. Now though—now there was some spark that I hadn't seen before. And despite the fact that Liam kept a wall between us, it didn't stop me from seeing the kind of man he was—loyal, self-sacrificing, arrogant but in the best possible way.

Losing Regina was the hardest thing I'd ever had to deal with, but now, losing Liam—it was more than I knew I could bear. When I'd been human, I'd been really good at being alone. Then Regina and Liam had come along and changed all that for me. Being alone now would be torturous after living and loving them these past five years. And this is what Liam was sentencing me to.

I didn't care if it was pity that finally brought Liam back from the brink. I didn't care if I had to use emotional blackmail. I was willing to do whatever I had to do to save Liam.

I just didn't know how to make him see that. “Does that mean anything to you?” I asked in a whisper.

“You have no idea what that means to me.” And with that he got up from the table and left the room, his food untouched.

I threw myself back in my chair with a sigh, rubbing at my tired eyes. I'd thought after the whole feeding thing that maybe we were over being cordial roommates, but he was back to icing me out. I hated how alone I felt right then. After Regina's death, I'd thought Liam would eventually recover and we'd move on.

After Liam feeding me, I'd thought maybe we'd not just recover and move on, but that we could move on *together*. Like maybe Regina's death wasn't in vain. Here we were again though, right back to Liam keeping his distance.

As I saw it, I only really had two choices; wait and see what happened with the Queen, or fight for Liam.

I stared at the empty chair across the table. If Liam wasn't going to fight for himself—then it was left to me.

I picked up the phone.

“Lew? I need your help.”

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I had two days until our meeting with the Queen and I'd been busier than a one-legged man in an ass kicking contest. My problems were twofold. First, Liam was even more of a recluse than I had originally suspected. He had plenty of acquaintances; plenty of people who he saw on the wine and cheese circuit, but no one who really spent time with him outside of those functions. For someone so at ease with the whole social scene, he had surprisingly little to do with anyone outside of it.

Second, the thought of facing the Vampire Queen made people a little twitchy. I had contacted some of the regulars from the club we frequented—nothing. Past and current customers of Liam's—nothing. Old Vampire friends from before I'd been Sired—nothing. I knew that last one had been a stretch. They didn't know me and were instantly distrustful of some newly-turned Vampire calling on them. The only way I ever even made it in to speak with them was mentioning that Regina was my Sire, and that only got me into the entryway. As soon as I brought up Queen Ellis, I was promptly shown the door.

I was rapidly reaching the point of desperation.

Liam had been making himself scarce since our last dinner. I had no idea where he was going or what he was doing, but I knew he came home every morning based on the empty coffee cup in the dishwasher.

I sifted through the mountainous stack of books on my desk, looking for something I'd missed. I had dug through Regina's library looking for any books on Vampire law; pulled all of them and scoured through them. I'd

learned very little from them. It wasn't because they were ambiguous or difficult to read, but because the law was written so exactly that there wasn't any room for interpretation.

You expose yourself to humans—execution.

It was that cut and dry.

The only thing Liam had going for him was that he'd been close to outing himself but not exactly caught... unless you counted Lew. And Lew had known about us prior to Liam's unraveling so I wasn't sure where that left Liam. The fact that Lew knew what we were was due to Regina—not Liam.

The issue with the Werewolves' cage-fight had been resolved and to be honest, I couldn't see the Weres contacting the Queen with their grievances. No one wanted to mix species.

Moving into another Vampire's territory to feed was a serious offense, but that too had been resolved by me when it had happened. Once I'd explained about our Sire dying recently, he'd grudgingly understood and simply told us not to come back again without permission.

I still had no idea who had spoken with the Queen, and I wasn't sure that it mattered at this point because the proverbial cat was already out of the bag.

The shrill ring of my cellphone broke the quiet of the study. I looked down where it was lying on the desk and saw it was Lew.

“Hey, you have good news for me?”

“Nothing yet, but I'm still looking.”

Tension coiled tightly inside me. Another dead end. Perfect.

“I just wanted to call and give you an update,” he finished.

I pulled roughly at my hair in frustration. “Thanks anyway, Lew.”

“Don't give up kid. You'll figure something out.”

I grunted in response. I didn't want platitudes; I wanted a solution to my problem.

“Hey,” a voice came from behind me. I spun my chair around to see Liam dressed in a black pin-striped three-piece suit. “What is all this shit?” he asked.

“Hey, Lew? I’ll call you back.” I disconnected the call and dropped my phone back on the desk.

“Well,” I drawled, “I’m trying to find something usable in all this mess.”

“For what?”

It was a toss-up what I wanted to do more; punch him in the face or hug him. “I’m trying to find something in these old books of Regina’s to try and help us on Saturday.”

His face twisted with a look close to pain before it was gone again, “Why?”

“*Why? Whyyyyyyyy?*” Decision made. I was going to punch him in the face for being such a dumbass. “Are you fucking kidding me, Liam?”

He crossed his arms in a defensive gesture and gave me a hard stare. “There is no point in this, Jack.”

“Fuck you, Liam! Fuck, fuck, fuckfuck, fuck you!” I jumped out of my chair and stormed out of the office, grabbing my phone and keys as I went. I needed to get out of the house and take a break from all of this.

He made me insane. Totally. Effortlessly. Insane.

“Jack. Jack, wait.” I could hear him calling after me, but I didn’t stop.

If I stopped I doubted I’d be able to start again. In the months since Regina’s death I’d learned that the key to surviving was to just keep moving forward. I’d become an expert at keeping myself busy.

I pulled out of the driveway on autopilot. I wasn’t sure where I was going, but I needed to be away from the house for a while.

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For the second time in a week I was walking into McDuffy’s. It was Wednesday night, so there weren’t many cars in the parking lot and the blaring music was missing from last Friday.

I pulled open the squeaky front door and waved when Lew saw me. Dropping into an empty bar stool, I took a long drink from the Guinness Lew slid in front of me.

“It’s feast or famine with you boys,” Lew teased. “I don’t see you for years and now you’re back again already. We need to work on your consistency.”

I gave Lew a half-hearted smile. “What can I say? I like to keep you guessing, old man.”

“So, we going to dance around that bug up your ass all night or you wanna talk about it?” Lew leaned forward, resting his forearms on the bar—settling in for the come-to-Jesus that I was due.

“No luck finding Shaggy Doo huh?”

“In the last hour since I talked you? No.”

I knew I wasn’t fooling Lew, but he was patient—just waiting on me to start.

“He isn’t going to fight, Lew.” I said simply. It was the thing that kept running through my mind; like the ticker tape on the news channel.

“So?” Lew stood up, crossing his arms across his chest.

“So? So, what? He’s probably going to die, Lew! How dare he just give up and leave me here alone.”

“Ahhh, so this isn’t about him. This is about you.”

“What? No. *No*. Well, yes, but no—”

“You ever think that all his running around isn’t about working things out, but about trying to find an end to it?”

“But why?” I cried out. “I know better than anyone how much he loved Regina, but killing himself isn’t going to bring her back.” I shoved my empty glass away. “Besides, he still has me. I know it’s hard and that it hurts, but he has *me*. I’m not nothing, damn it!”

“No, no you aren’t,” he said in that straightforward way he had.

“So what do I do?” I asked, pleading for direction.

“You’ve got to make him see that living is the better choice—that he has something to live for.”

“What if I can’t?” I whispered, scared to death of failing Liam. Scared of having to start over. Scared that the best parts of my life were already behind me and I was staring down the barrel of an eternity dealing with that.

“You will,” he answered with a confidence that I knew was completely undeserved. “But first, you’ve got to get past this whole death-by-Queen thing,” Lew teased.

“Lew!” I couldn’t believe him.

“Too soon?” he asked, smiling.

“Uhm, yeah!”

“Fine, so here’s what you do,” he said, leaning forward as if to whisper some big secret. I leaned forward until we were practically nose to nose. “Whatever the fuck you have to do.”

I sat back on the bar stool, just staring at him. He gave me a slow nod as if to say, *you can do it*.

I dug in my back pocket for cash before sliding a twenty across the bar, amid protests from Lew.

I reached over and grabbed him—pulling him into a hard hug. We said our goodbyes and I left with my resolve renewed.

Lew was right. I’d been complicating something that was at its base, simple. I would do whatever I had to do to hold on to Liam.

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“Good evening. My name is Jack Miller, and I’d like to request an audience with Alpha Merrick, please.” The tall Were at the gate eyed me with distrust, a sneer on his lips. I didn’t blame him. It was highly unusual—read: never happened—for a Vampire to be visiting a Werewolf pack. Still,

proprieties had to be observed. He couldn't just throw me out on my ass. It would reflect poorly on his pack.

He radioed in.

I'd gone home after my talk with Lew, changed my clothes and grabbed the Were Alpha's address I'd found yesterday. I stood patiently in front of him, trying to look as non-threatening as possible. I'd actually dressed up for the occasion. I'd traded in my usual slim leg jeans for a pair of khaki pants that I'd had to borrow from Liam's closet. I'd topped it with a white button-down shirt, but in a nod to my more casual style, I'd rolled the sleeves to mid forearm.

I wanted to look presentable, but not formal. This was my compromise.

"He says he'll see you." The Were gestured with a nod to a smaller female who had been tucked inside the small building located just outside the front gate. "Serena will escort you in." I nodded my thanks before turning to greet the dark-haired woman.

"I'm Jack, it's nice to meet you." I offered her my hand, which she stared at and then ignored.

"Don't care," she replied flatly. "Get in the truck; it's a good fifteen minute drive up to the Alpha's house."

Five minutes later we were tucked inside a white Suburban, bumping our way down a long winding road. If you could even call it a road—it was pitted with holes and tree roots and surrounded by tall grass and trees.

"So you get many visitors?" I asked as the truck bounced over a particularly large rut. I'd long since given up my nonchalant act of simply resting my arms on the armrests and was now actively gripping the oh-shit handle located directly over my head while bracing my legs on the floorboard.

"Nope."

"You guys just stay out here alone?"

"Yep."



“Not much of a talker, are you?” I tried again.

“Nope.”

I turned to look out the window to hide my smile.

“I can see that,” she said drolly, her eyes never leaving the road.

We were just rounding a large copse of trees when a white plantation house came into view. It was beautiful with its tall white columns and dark grey roof. Rocking chairs were tucked in perfect symmetry on either side of the front porch. There were neatly trimmed shrubs and flowers edging the front walk and flower boxes at the windows.

I’m not sure what exactly I’d been expecting to find, but it hadn’t been a scene out of *Gone with the Wind*, that was for sure.

We rocked to a stop at the end of the walkway up to the house. “Get out.”

“Is this it?” I asked, unbuckling myself and climbing down from the truck.

“Yep.” And before the door had finished closing, I was left to choke on a cloud of dust as the Suburban U-turned and headed back out the way we had come.

“Werewolves,” I muttered before walking up to the front door and giving a firm knock.

Here went nothing.

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The Queen arrived at sunset, a full complement of Guard surrounding her. I didn’t like to think of myself as weak, but the sight of all the Guard sent shivers of apprehension down my spine. They were the biggest, fastest, meanest sons of bitches the Vampire race had to offer. While most Vampires were in peak physical condition with a little bit extra of everything thrown in on the side, these men were more.

The Queen gave me a warm smile as she exited the black Hummer she’d arrived in. I found no small amount of amusement in the fact that a woman

who absolutely exuded class, poise, and elegance arrived in what amounted to a tank.

I rushed forward to kneel in front of her, extending my hand up in greeting. “My Queen, we are honored to have you here in our home.”

She made a small *tsking* sound, pulling me up and into a warm hug. “Jack, how many times must we go through this? You need not be so formal when I’m not here in an official capacity, *begotten* of my sister. Well... at least not yet I’m not,” she teased, and I couldn’t stop myself from hugging her just a little tighter for the briefest of moments before releasing her.

Queen Ellis and Regina were so similar in face and form that I allowed myself just for a second to pretend that it was my Sire there, hugging me close to her heart.

I stepped back, but she reached for my hands, holding them in her own. “So tell me, how have you been?”

I debated how to answer her question. I wanted to be honest, but I needed to protect Liam and Regina. “I’ve been better, my Queen.” Honest... but vague.

“Of course, the loss of one’s Sire is not such an easy thing to bear, is it young one?” With one last squeeze to my hands, she released them before tucking an arm through mine, allowing me to escort her around to the back of the house to Regina’s garden, the Guard trailing along behind and beside us.

As we rounded the corner of the house, the first thing I saw was the pergola Liam and I had spent hours putting up for Regina for her two hundred and fiftieth birthday. It was black to complement our large colonial-style house that was trimmed in black as well.

Regina had loved being outside and built her own night-blooming garden. It had been the place that made her happiest, so it had been an easy decision on what to get for such a monumental birthday. Liam and I were no carpenters, and despite the fact that the trellis listed a bit to the left no matter what we did, she had loved it. She’d glowed with happiness every time she’d come out and sit under it, claiming it was the best gift she’d ever gotten.

So when it was time to lay our sweet Regina to rest, we spread her ashes over her garden, knowing this was what she would have wanted.

“I can’t—I just can’t believe she’s gone,” the Queen whispered softly, hugging my arm tightly to her chest. Her eyes were shiny with unshed tears, her bottom lip starting to quiver. “It was just so senseless, Jack. It was her own stupid fault for being so careless.”

I wanted to defend my Sire, but I understood the sentiment. We lived forty-five minutes outside the city on fifty acres of land, our house smack dab in the middle of it. The roads leading out of town were fine, but as you got closer to the turnoff to our house, the roads turned winding and narrow, crossing a few wooden bridges along the way.

Regina had always said the best part of coming home was the drive getting there. Under a full moon, the hills and winding turns, the shine off the small rivers... it was gorgeous.

No one knows exactly what caused Regina to lose control of her Porsche 911, but she’d clipped the side rail and spun across and then off the bridge into the shallow water below.

The fall alone wouldn’t have killed her. The impact of her car hitting the pebbled river bottom wouldn’t have killed her. She might have even made it despite the fact that water had half-filled her car. However, all of those combined with the fact that she was probably knocked unconscious just before sunrise...

There had been no hiding from the sun.

When we’d finally been able to search for her, after hours of waiting and being trapped inside as the sun made its way slowly across the sky, we’d spent an hour searching along the route home... and we’d found her car. And a pile of ashes. That had been all that was left of our sweet Sire.

So I understood the Queen’s anger. I knew she wasn’t really angry with Regina. It had obviously been an accident. A horrible, tragic accident, but nonetheless she’d left us all.

“I miss her,” I whispered.

“Me too.”

She gave one last look out over the garden, squeezed me tight, and then nodded at her Guard. “Let’s get on with this business about Liam, shall we?”

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“Bring the accused forward.” The Queen’s voice echoed loudly through our formal living room. Most Vampires would have been brought to the Queen’s court, but being that we were Regina’s, the Queen was making what small concession she could to take care of this quickly and quietly.

I had no doubt that every other rule and tradition would be observed however. We might have a closer relationship than most with our Queen, but she was still the Queen and could not afford to be accused of favoritism by letting accusations against Liam go unanswered. She was wildly respected and popular because she was fair and upheld the laws that had been governing our race for centuries.

Liam was led into the room by two of the Guard. He’d been in the study until now. I had no idea what he was doing in there, but it was customary for the accused to be sequestered until just before the trial.

He was dressed formally in another of his seemingly endless supply of designer suits, his hair styled perfectly, his face without expression, his hands relaxed at his sides.

The second he came around the sofa, he knelt in front of the Queen, extending his hand in greeting. “My Queen.”

“Stand William Levensworth, and we shall begin.” My gut clenched at the hard tone of the Queen’s voice. The sweet woman of just a half hour ago who was mourning her dead sister was gone. The woman I was looking at now was the Queen of Vampires.

She motioned to one of her Guard to bring forward a folder. She pulled out a sheet of paper and began to read. “William Levensworth, you have been accused of the following: making yourself known to humans, feeding out in

the open with no thought given to discretion, entering a Vampire's territory without permission, engaging a Were in a situation that was *not* in defense of your life, and finally feeding from other paranormals outside our race. How do you answer these accusations?"

I didn't give Liam time to answer anything. I could tell just by the way he was holding his shoulders that he was prepared to accept everything the Queen had offered up, suicidal bastard.

"My Queen, if I may?" I stood from my spot behind Liam, ignoring the sharp look he shot at me.

I waited for her permission before I moved forward and gave her my own folder that I'd been compiling over the last week. "What is this, Jack?" she asked without looking inside.

"First, may I know the accuser?"

"Why?"

"Queen Ellis, it is no secret that Liam and I have had a hard time coping with the loss of our Sire." I hesitated to see if she would acknowledge the fact, hoping she would as a large portion of my defense was built on the fact that breaking Vampire laws was something completely out of character for Liam. When she didn't indicate one way or the other, I continued on. "Here I have provided character witnesses that will attest to the sort of Vampire Liam was before Regina died—"

"We are not here to discuss what sort of Vampire he *used* to be, Jack. We are here to address whether Vampire laws have been broken." She gave me a hard look. "If that is quite all then—"

"No my Queen, it is not." I hurried on, "Every instance that you have called into question I have been witness to."

She waved a hand at me to proceed.

"Queen Ellis, I don't think—" Liam interrupted.

“I would like to hear what he has to say, Liam. Wouldn’t you?” It was obvious in the way she didn’t allow him time to reply that she didn’t much care whether he would or wouldn’t.

Liam wisely kept his mouth closed.

“As I was saying, I was called to each of these instances.” I waved at her list of offenses. “On the accusation of making himself known to humans—while Liam may have been a little cavalier while hunting, to my knowledge he has not made our presence known to anyone outside of other paranormals.”

The Queen turned to Liam. “Liam, is this true?”

He stared at me for a beat before nodding.

“Continue, Jack. You apparently have quite a lot to say...” The subtle softening of her tone when addressing me was the first hint of my Sire’s sister that I’d seen since we’d entered this room. While I knew it wasn’t much, it helped me to relax a bit.

“On feeding out in the open. He did feed at a couple of human bars, *but* it was always in secluded sp—”

“According to the accuser, they were not so secluded.”

I looked to Liam, hoping he would explain. While it was true I’d shown up at most of his shenanigans, I couldn’t swear on *every* single feeding for the last two months.

“I wasn’t seen,” he replied simply.

“Do you have any proof?”

“Does this accuser have any proof that he was? Or simply the accusation?” I countered.

“Jack, I’m doing you the favor of humoring you. You will do me the courtesy of not being disrespectful. Are we clear?”

I was instantly contrite. “Yes, my Queen.”

“Entering a master Vampire’s territory? Engaging and feeding from a Were? What about those?” She focused her full attention on Liam now, completely ignoring me.

“Everything is true, but feeding from the Were.”

“I see.” She tapped her blood-red fingernails against the folder in her lap. “You were aware of the punishment for such actions, Liam?”

“Yes, my Queen.”

“And this changed nothing for you? Were you not afraid of the repercussions?”

It was a question I myself wanted the answer to.

“It’s a bit more complicated than a simple action-consequence.”

“Uncomplicate it for me, Liam. As it stands now, I’ve only one option open to me.”

“Forgive me, again, for interrupting, but I’ve asked the people in question to come and speak to you. If you permit it, my Queen.”

I couldn’t tell who was more surprised—Liam or the Queen.

“You have missed your calling, Jack,” she replied dryly.

I turned to the Guard standing at the door. “Would you please bring the guests from the sun room in?” As soon as the guard left the room, Liam strode over to me; shoulders back, hands clenched into fists, tension evident in every jerky step.

“What do you think you are doing, Jack?” he whispered angrily

“What does it look like I’m doing? Saving your dumb ass,” I whispered back. It was useless whispering as every Vampire in the room could clearly hear our conversation, but some habits die hard.

“Why can’t you let this go gracefully? I broke the law, Jack. Vampire law is black and white. Why are you dragging this out?”

“Why *aren't* you?” I volleyed back. “I’ve never seen someone willing to just throw his life away without a fight.”

“You don’t even need to be here.”

“The hell I don’t—” The door clicked open and five people walked into the room, followed by the Guard.

The Alpha Werewolf was the last to enter the room and the moment he did, the two Guard posted behind the Queen moved in to surround her, flashing their fangs in warning at the Were.

“What is the meaning of this, Jack?” The fact that I was hosting the Alpha in my home wasn’t just unusual... it was unheard of. There had to be a lot of trust on both sides to make it possible—I was exposing where I was laid to rest during the day and the Alpha had conceded to only bring one of his own guard, in the form of Serena.

Despite the circumstances, I couldn’t help myself when I saw Serena—the Werewolf who’d driven me to Alpha Merrick’s house—I smiled and waved. She refused to acknowledge me, eyes straight forward.

She and I were going to be good friends someday. I could tell. Not really.

The Queen stood and moved forward. “I am Queen Ellis. It is a pleasure to meet you Alpha...”

“Merrick. It is a pleasure to meet you as well.” The man dwarfed the Queen, he was easily as tall, and a bit wider than the Queen’s Guard. “I must say, Jack here is quite persuasive.” He nodded his head at me in acknowledgment, a smile on his face.

“I’m coming to see that for myself.” She shot me her own small smile before turning to focus on Alpha Merrick. “Please, let us all begin.”

One by one, each went before the Queen to explain their part in Liam’s story. Alpha Merrick from the Were fight, the Were from the bar—who thankfully Lew had been able to find for me—the Vampire elder and Serena, who coincidentally had been in the bar with the Were who Liam had fought in



their little cage match. Then Lew, who was in fact the only human as far as anyone knew that was aware of what Liam and I were.

With each testimony I studied the Queen's every expression hoping this was going to be enough for her. Liam, for his part, interjected nothing. I don't know what frustrated me more—my inability to read the Queen's reaction to each witness or the fact that Liam sat in his seat, resigned.

An hour and a half passed and the Queen thanked everyone for coming before excusing them.

The Queen then turned her attention to me. "You have been quite the busy boy, Jack. It's admirable the way you took care of everything. Smoothing everything over, taking care of Liam. Liam, you have had surprisingly little to say during this process."

"I've had little opportunity." He shot me a pointed look.

"Be that as it may, I'd like to hear what you have to say." She turned to me, making a shooing motion with her hands, "Jack, be a good boy and run to the kitchen and bring some tea, will you?"

I wanted to refuse. I was scared to leave Liam and the Queen alone together. Scared of what he would say. But you didn't tell the Queen no.

I stood and walked to the door, moving as slowly as I dared, trying my best to eavesdrop without appearing like I was eavesdropping.

Sadly, subtlety is not my strong suit. I felt fairly certain that everyone knew what I was doing, but thankfully no one cared. As long as I was moving in a forward direction, I was doing as the Queen asked. With that being said, you can bet your sweet ass I was going to break the sound barrier getting to the kitchen and back with her tea.

"Now Liam, what's this about getting your affairs in order? While I understand leaving everything to Jack, you have no idea what my decision is even going to be. Why?"

I had just made it to the door when what the Queen was saying hit me. Stunned, I twirled around to face Liam and ended up getting twisted in the rug

by the door. I flailed my arms wildly, trying in vain to catch my balance before I took a header into the door.

I could actually feel their stares like laser beams to the back of my head. “I’m fine,” I grunted out. “Just—just give me a minute.”

I’d been living with Liam long enough to know exactly what he was doing without even having to look, “Stop shaking your head at me, asshole,” I grumbled, reaching up to brace my hands on the door to stand. I wanted to give the offending rug a kick, but instead gave the Queen and Liam a curt nod, opened the door and sprinted through it.

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I made it back to the formal living room in exactly six minutes. Thank God, Regina had an electric kettle; if I’d had to wait on a teapot to boil I would have probably brained myself, my nerves getting the best of me.

I kicked the door open with my foot, Regina’s silver tea service balanced delicately in my hands. As soon as I cleared the door, one of the Guard hurried over to take it from me. I’m sure he was more concerned with the probability of me spilling scalding hot water on the queen than the mess I’d make of Regina’s Persian rug based on my graceful exit.

I shrugged it off and moved back to my seat to try to catch up on what had been going on in my absence.

“Thank you, Jack.”

My smile was strained, but I couldn’t bring myself to care. The tension in the room was palpable. There were small stress lines bracketing the Queen’s eyes. It was clear she wasn’t happy.

“As the Queen, it is my first duty to keep our race safe. Personal feelings can’t be given consideration. I cannot let indiscretions go unanswered. Not only would I be seen as weak by our race, but by other paranormals as well. They need to know my control is absolute.” She paused to lean forward and take Liam’s hand. “Liam, Regina loved you for as long as I have known you. You brought her happiness and gave her purpose. For that, I will be forever

thankful. However, in the last two months you have let loose the reins on your self-control. You have brought attention to us, you have walked a precarious line and in some cases, tipped over it. You have shown no remorse and no evidence that you have any intention of getting yourself together moving forward. The law is clear—the answer for that can only be execution. I am sorry.”

Before I knew my intent, I threw myself at Liam; standing between him and the Queen. “No,” I told her in a voice so low, it barely registered. “You will not take him from me. Regina is gone—that is enough! I will help him, I will care for him. I’ll keep a closer eye on him, but you will not take him from me!” I could feel Liam pulling on my arm, trying to get my attention.

“Jack. *Jack.*” His voice hissed in my ear. I grunted in acknowledgement, but didn’t take my eyes from the Queen.

She remained seated, hadn’t moved an inch since my outburst, but I could see the tiny flush of color in her cheeks. Anger, to be sure. I knew I was being disrespectful. I knew I was walking a fine line. I fully expected the Guard to come and remove me at any moment, but I couldn’t stop myself. I couldn’t lose Liam. I’d practically killed myself this past week gathering information, building a case for Liam’s defense. And it had been for nothing.

Pure rage took over; a haze of anger making it impossible for me to think rationally, to calm myself.

I was acting on pure instinct when I reached back and pulled Liam into my arms. For just that split second, I stared hard at the Queen, daring her with my eyes while I ducked my head and struck.

I buried my fangs hard and deep, through his white dress shirt, directly into the delicate skin over Liam’s heart.

“What in the fuck are you doing?!” he yelled, his voice hitting notes I didn’t know guys over the age of fifteen were able to produce.

I drank.

Liam struggled, trying to get away from me, but I was determined.

Still I drank. I was waiting for the Queen to stop me, for her to signal for the Guard, but she didn't.

She just watched, a look I wasn't sure how to interpret on her face. Satisfaction? Acceptance?

I drank so much that Liam's movements became lethargic, "Jack, you need to sssstop," he slurred.

I didn't stop until he was dead weight in my arms, and then I ripped open my wrist and held it to his mouth. Tipping his head back, I forced him to drink. Sealing our bond.

At first nothing happened, his mouth slack in his unconsciousness, but then, slowly, a muscle twitch, a soft lick... and then he was back, sucking greedily at the blood I offered so freely.

A minute later, he was fully back to himself—staring at me like I'd lost my damn mind.

"What in the hell have you done, Jack?" he yelled, fury rolling off him in waves.

"Whatever the fuck I had to, Liam," I said just as fiercely.

"We're bonded now. I die, you die. You get that?"

"Yup. And that's how I want it." Finally, after weeks of worrying myself sick about what would happen with Liam, I finally felt my first bit of peace.

In a move that I never thought to see in all the days I lived, Liam dropped himself to his knees before the Queen. Not out of respect, but to humble himself. "My Queen, he—please have mercy on him. He didn't mean—" Liam was floundering with what to say, what to do. He was at a complete loss; pulling fistfuls of hair, shaking his head in disbelief. "He—he shouldn't be punished for what I have done. It isn't right. He's kind and selfless and beautiful and funny and—" Liam gulped audibly, his gaze frantic on the Queen, desperate to make her understand.

I don't know what I'd been expecting, tying Liam to me. I hadn't actually thought past the moment that I knew I wasn't willing to live without him, but

hearing him begging—for me—was unconscionable. Without so much as a look to the Queen, I crouched down in front of Liam. “Get up, Liam,” I demanded quietly.

He shook his head, his eyes swimming with unshed tears, hands visibly shaking. “No. I will stay here until we figure out some way for the Queen to break our bond.”

I jerked back as if I’d been slapped, dropping my hands from where they’d been resting on his shoulders. “You don’t care for me at all!” I cried. Even now, after everything I’d done, the lengths I’d gone to—he was still holding me away. Keeping a wall between us.

I was gutted. Utterly. Completely. “You don’t get it!” I yelled. “If you aren’t here, I don’t want to be here. The kindest thing you could do”—I turned and pointed to the Queen, who was still watching this whole scene unfold in complete silence—“That *she* could do, is sit us out in the sun together. I’m *not* living without you. You die? I still wouldn’t be living. That’s what you seem to not understand. Regina died and took half of my heart with her—you die? I’m done. There is nothing left.” Anger started to eclipse my devastation. “Now you get up off your knees. You don’t humble yourself—not for me. Get up.”

I jerked him to a stand beside me. I straightened his suit, smoothed his hair and we turned, with shoulders back, to face the Queen. “My Queen—”

She waved at me to stop. She looked like the witness to a train wreck, and perhaps that’s what we were. Her mouth hung open, wide-eyed... she was stunned. It was an expression that I’d never actually seen from her before now.

“*You—*”

The Queen was cut off by a commotion at the door. “I have to get in there.” I heard just before the door burst open and Gentry hurried in. “My Queen, please excuse this interruption. I was caught in the evening traffic.”

“What are *you* doing here?” Liam demanded, finding his voice again. “You aren’t welcome in this house.”

“From what I can tell, you won’t have long to care about it anyway,” Gentry sniped back.

Before things could escalate any further, the Queen, once again, stepped in, “That’s quite enough. Gentry Durian, say what you came to say.”

Gentry hurried forward to kneel before the Queen, keeping his head bowed in respect. “My Queen, it is my understanding that Liam will be executed. When that happens, it will leave Jack, a fledgling Vampire, alone. I would petition for him to be made a part of my house.”

I shook my head in an attempt to clear it, certain that I hadn’t understood correctly. “I’m sorry, what?” I asked

Gentry didn’t move, simply kneeled in front of the Queen, awaiting her response.

“Why?” she asked.

Wouldn’t the better question be, *Does Jack want to be made a part of your house?* I thought to myself.

Being made a part of Gentry’s house would be the next closest thing to a Sire and would give him dominion over me—a situation I was in no way comfortable with. Thankfully, I was now bonded to Liam so I wasn’t worried about his petition, but it chapped my ass that he’d stepped around me like that.

“I think Regina would have wanted someone to take care of him, my Queen. I would like that honor to be mine,” he said simply.

“Have you spoken with Jack about such an arrangement?”

“I have tried, but with all of Liam’s troubles,” Gentry practically sneered at Liam’s name, “there hasn’t been a good opportunity.”

“You’re too damned late.” Liam strode forward until he was practically standing beside the Queen. “He’s *mine*.” Liam ripped his shirt open, exposing my fang marks over his heart.

I was getting whiplash with the way this conversation was going. Liam was about to die, then we were bonded, then Liam’s pissed, then Gentry’s here and

now Liam's downright *gleeful* that I bonded us—and *still* I had no idea what the Queen was going to do about my impetuous decision. My heart could only take so much of this emotional rollercoaster. "You two," I all but shouted, "stow it."

"Gentry, you need to leave," I insisted. "You have no right to be here." I needed things settled and Gentry was doing nothing except muddying the waters.

"Well, technically, as the accuser, he had the right to be here," the Queen informed us.

"*It was you?*" I cried. "Even while you were 'helping' me, you were reporting back to the Queen?" I didn't know which I preferred; junk-punching him myself or finally unleashing Liam on him after all these years.

Gentry said nothing, just stared at the bite marks over Liam's heart.

"Liam is going to be executed. Jack will die," he said softly, almost as if he was talking to himself. "How could you let this happen?" Gentry turned, glaring at the Queen.

"How dare you speak to me with such disrespect? I am your Queen and I will be treated as such. The portion of the trial in which you would have been a part of has already concluded. You may show yourself out." Gentry stood, shamed in front of the Queen.

"I'm so—"

"I'll hear nothing else from you. It would be in your best interest to stay out of my sight until you are told otherwise, is that understood?"

"Yes, my Queen." Gentry stormed out, glaring at Liam as he passed, slamming the door behind him.

"Well," she said wryly, "now that that's been settled. Jack, what you have done, cannot be undone."

I felt Liam's hand reach for my own, twining our fingers together tightly. Shit must be getting real for him if he was giving into public displays of affection, and in front of the Queen no less.

“I find myself in a somewhat precarious position. Liam, you have to be punished, there is nothing that can be done about that. Given the tie you share with Jack, however, I cannot in good conscience allow you to be executed. Plus, there is now the issue of *your* disrespect Jack.”

I flushed in embarrassment. “Please, forgive me my Queen. I just—I couldn’t—”

“I think it’s quite obvious to everyone here what you *just couldn’t*,” she said dryly.

She tapped a finger to her lips absentmindedly, studying us both. “Please leave us,” she directed the Guard.

“My Queen?” the Guard closest to her asked.

“Just outside the door. Thank you.” When the door closed behind them and the three of us were left alone she started again. “Liam. You may think you are smart and awfully good at keeping things hidden, but you aren’t as good as you think.”

“I’m sorry?” Liam said as if asking a question, but it was obvious in the way his shoulders suddenly hunched forward that he had some idea of what she was talking about.

She glanced quickly from Liam to me and back, a small smile playing about her lips. “My hands were tied regarding the trial, but you, dear Jack, have given me something I can work with.”

I had no idea what was happening—and what was with all the cryptic comments? I just wanted to know our fate one way or the other.

“Here is what I can offer you. Liam, you are no longer the head of this house.”

I gasped in surprise. “But that makes me—” I couldn’t believe this newest turn of events. Outside of death, this was the harshest punishment a Vampire could be given. It meant loss of status, loss of honor. It made Liam answerable to me. I was given authority over him—and me a fledgling Vampire—it would be humiliating for Liam.



I was a mix of emotions. Elated at Liam getting to live. Horrified at the shame of this punishment for him. Worried Liam would resent me for forcing this on him. Anxious about whether I would be able to handle this new responsibility—if I would embarrass Regina’s memory.

“Yes. You are going to be responsible for this house now, Jack, and that in turn means Liam. His dishonor is yours, his punishment is yours. You understand what I’m saying here, Liam. You want him,” she flicked a hand in my direction, “to live a long life, you are going to have to start getting yourself together. No more half-baked ideas. And I want your word that you will explain everything you’ve been keeping to yourself to Jack here.”

His face flushed a bright fiery red. “Yes, my Queen.”

“*Well.*” And just like that, her posture relaxed and she was our Sire’s sister again. “That was really something, huh?” The Queen looked downright gleeful at this point. I think if she could have high-fived herself she would have. She was that proud of herself. “I didn’t know *what* I was going to do when Gentry called and told me what was going on, but Jack—you found the one thing, the loophole I could work with.”

My mouth fell open in shock at what I was hearing. “You mean, you *knew* you could have gotten around the law if we were bound? I—I worked myself to the bone this week, worrying and researching and you couldn’t even send a note or—”

“Jack. How, as the Queen, could I possibly have done that? I still have my duty,” she reprimanded gently. “I will say though, I know you. And I know Liam. Let’s just say, I had high hopes it would all work out.”

“High hopes!” I screeched. “I just—I can’t even... I need a drink.”

The Queen closed the half a foot distance between us and pulled me into a tight hug, whispering in my ear, “Thank you, Jack. You saved him. Regina would be proud.”

She pulled back before I was ready, to give Liam a hard look. “I’m serious about you telling him everything. You both need this, and it’s time.” Liam looked nervous, but he nodded in agreement. “Now, I’ve got a plane to catch. I

expect to see you two in Chicago. Just because Regina's gone, don't think you're excused from coming to visit. Don't make me play the whole Queen card because I'll do it, and I'll make sure it's painful for everyone," she teased. "Now give me a proper farewell and then I'll be gone."

We walked her to the front door, each of us kissing her cheeks before she was whisked off in her black Hummer.

We stood in the doorway together, watching until the dust settled. "Now," I said turning to face Liam directly, "what's all this cryptic 'tell Jack' shit?"

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"I'm sorry, come again?" I asked.

After the Queen had left, we'd decided to change clothes and meet downstairs in the media room so Liam could tell me whatever it was that Liam needed to tell me.

"You heard me."

"Uhm, no I'm pretty sure I didn't. You mumbled something and then proceeded to turn a fiery shade of red."

"I'm sorry, Jack. I'm just not ready for this." Liam jumped up from the couch and made a beeline for the door.

I leapt over the back of the sofa, blocking his exit. "Ohhhh no. We're going to hash all this out right now." I smiled as a thought occurred to me, "Under the authority as head of our house, I'm *ordering* you to tell me."

"Really? This is approximately forty minutes old and the power has gone to your head already?" Liam asked, rolling his eyes.

"Yup. So cough it up buddy. What could be so bad that you are *this* uncomfortable about it?" I asked. The last few weeks aside, it took a lot to ruffle Liam. It must be something really big for him to be this worked up about it.

"Can I—can I show you instead?" he asked softly, his eyes avoiding mine.

"Okaaaaay," I drawled.

“Go sit back on the couch, I’ll be right back.” Before I could reply he was out the door.

Three minutes later he was back and had a small wooden chest in his hands. He walked around the sofa and sat down next to me, handing me the chest.

I took a moment to study it before opening it. The box wasn’t anything ornate, just a simple wooden box with an aged golden hinge holding it closed.

I unlatched it and flipped the lid open. At first, I wasn’t sure what I was looking at. The box was filled to overflowing with newspaper clippings, restaurant menus, ticket stubs, pictures, and even an old black T-shirt.

I glanced up in time to catch Liam’s wince. “What is it?” I asked.

“Just—” He reached into the box and picked up a concert ticket stub, showing it to me. “What’s this say?” he asked, handing me the ticket.

I looked closely and saw that it was a ticket stub from the Led Zeppelin concert we’d all gone to for my twenty-fifth birthday. “I still don’t understand.”

He reached into the box again and pulled out a newspaper clipping, handing it over. Again, I looked it over and saw that it was the first article that I’d ever written and had published in the city Arts paper, featuring an up and coming local artist.

This time, I didn’t wait for Liam—I dove back into the box. There were other news clippings of my articles, ticket stubs for theater shows I’d seen, a coaster from McDuffy’s, and then the most surprising—dozens of candid pictures of me or me and Regina together. Pictures I’d never even known Liam had taken. And I had no doubt that Liam was the photographer in question. No one else would have been able to take such private pictures of us, plus, Liam had a style of taking pictures that was more than evident—even in these candid.

In some we were laughing and playing, some were of us outside in the garden. One in particular—worn around the edges from too much handling—

was a picture of me asleep outside in one of our Adirondack chairs. It must have been during winter because I was wearing my grey hoodie.

“What is all this Liam?” I couldn’t help but ask, staring at him in amazement.

“I think that would be fairly obvious,” he replied quietly.

“No. No it’s not obvious at all. This is a whole box,” I shook it at him, “of excuse-me-what-the-fuck-is-this.”

A bubble of laughter escaped Liam before he had a chance to choke it back; I couldn’t help but return it. This entire situation felt completely surreal. If someone—anyone—else would have shown me a box like the one I was holding, I would have known what it meant, but with Liam, nothing was obvious.

“You’re a smart guy, Jack. You know what this means.” He slid his hand forward slowly until the tips of his fingers rested over the tips of mine.

I started to reply, but realized I was not going to let him out of saying the words. I was not going to be doing all the heavy lifting in this conversation alone. “I don’t think so, Liam. I want you to tell me what this means. Please.”

Liam stared at me hard, his eyes focused on mine. Searching. “I am in love with you, Jack.”

My heart lurched hearing him say those words to me. The sincerity of them—the look in his eyes. I mean I’d loved him in some form or another since the beginning myself, but then something occurred to me.

Without warning, I hauled back and nailed him straight in the jaw; the force of the hit knocked him back into the couch.

“Motherfucker,” he cursed, rubbing his jaw. He sat forward again, “What the hell, Jack?”

“You *asshole!*” I screamed at him, jumping up from the couch, dumping the box and all its contents on the floor as I paced in front of the sofa. “How *dare* you tell me that you love me, now? You were going to let the Queen execute you without so much as lifting a finger. What? You thought you’d

leave me everything and then, hey, when I got to clean out *your* belongings and I found this little box-o-love, I'd get to see how you truly felt? Then what do you suppose would have happened? How do you think I would have felt knowing you *never* said anything, *never* gave me any indication of how you felt..." I trailed off, losing steam as more and more thoughts bombarded my mind.

I didn't even notice when Liam stepped in front of me until I bumped into him on my next turn to the other side of the rug. "*Oohmp.*" Liam reached up, cupping my face in his hands. I tried to knock them away so I could step around him, but he held tight. He shook me a bit to get me to focus. "What?" I asked.

"Just want to make sure I have your attention." And with that he brushed the softest kiss imaginable across my lips. There was no teeth, no tongue—nothing like any other kiss I'd shared. It wasn't a stepping stone to getting in my pants. It wasn't used to persuade or cajole... it just *was*.

"For five years I've wanted this and then today—you handed it to me, Jack. Like a fucking gift, you just handed it to me. I got out of bed today and I thought this was going to be it for me. Then you bonded us. I just—I don't even know how to feel about it."

I nodded, trying to understand, to keep up with what he was saying, but Liam loving me didn't make sense. My whole world looked a certain way this morning and now everything was turned on its head. "I'm sorry if you didn't want to be—Okay, no. I'm not sorry. I'll take you however I can get you, so I'm not sorry I saved your life, but I'm sorry if you weren't ready."

Liam grabbed my hand, turning to sit on the sofa. He pulled me down with him, so we could face each other, tangling our legs together.

He reached forward to grab my hand, holding it tight in his own, took a deep breath and then started. "Regina knew, from the beginning, that I wanted you." He shot me a shy smile before he continued, "When we walked into McDuffy's that first night, you were back behind the bar and I swear to God, Jack. I couldn't draw a steady breath. You were gorgeous. You were pouring

some guy a beer and he was telling you this story, and you were listening and laughing.” He didn’t say anything for a moment. “You still do that, you know.”

“What? Laugh? Not lately I haven’t.” I reached forward to pinch his leg in mock punishment.

“Hey!” He flinched at the flash of pain before grabbing my hand and lacing his fingers through my own again. “Not the laughing, the way you listen, Jack. When someone tells you something, you are totally there with them. Focused. Your eyes trained on them. Like whatever they are saying is the most important thing in the world. All those times, I’d come into your office and needle you, it was only because I wanted your attention. I wanted you to look at me. I wanted your eyes on me. I wanted to be the only thing you saw.”

I couldn’t stop myself from leaning forward for a quick kiss. Liam and I may have had no physical relationship to speak of until sixty seconds ago, but that was going to change. Soon, I hoped. “I was always watching you, Liam. You are impossible not to watch. You’re like a magnet. You walk in? Everyone’s eyes are following you.”

Liam was shaking his head before I was even through speaking. “No. This is different. Even with Regina. I loved her. I owed her everything. She saved me and remade me into what I am now, but as much as I knew that, I couldn’t stop myself from wanting you. She deserved to be loved with someone’s whole heart, Jack, and the second I saw you—I didn’t love her less, but I wanted you *more*. Every second I’ve spent wanting you has felt like a betrayal, and I couldn’t get myself to stop. And then she died, Jack. She was alone in that ravine and she didn’t deserve to die that way,” Liam cried.

“She deserved better than that. I couldn’t let myself have you after that, Jack. You are more than I deserve. *She* was more than I deserved. I never said anything to her, never would have, but she’s Regina so, of course, she knew—she knew I wanted you. And so she pulled you into our family... for me. *That’s* why we kept coming in and coming back,” Liam finished in a whisper.

I was stunned at what he was telling me. Regina had always joked that because Liam and I had looked so alike that she simply had to have me. She wanted matching bookends—arm candy guaranteed to make the other Vampires jealous. I always rolled my eyes when she would laugh and tease me with about it. I knew she was full of crap. Regina might be a lot of things, but she wasn't shallow. I always thought we'd connected and that she loved me, but turns out, she didn't or at least not at first. Not in the way that I thought.

My gut churned at the thought that perhaps we were less than I had always imagined, but then Liam was there, squeezing my hand. "She loved you. I can see on your face what you are thinking. And I'm not telling you she didn't ever love you. Of course she did. You, Jackson Aaron Miller, are impossible not to love. And when you think back over the last five years, you'll see it for yourself. I didn't mean to muddy that for you. I just wanted you to know that I've been loving you—undeniably, completely, head over heels in love with you, from the beginning."

I blinked up at him. Taking in what he was saying. Holding it against the memories I had of the past five years, trying to see the truth in it from his side. It was like someone took the lens on my camera and changed it, changed the light, changed the focus and now, I could see all the subtle things I had missed; the looks, conversations, touches...

"Yeah?" I smiled tentatively, wanting to believe what he was saying. "Well, for the record—in case you haven't figured it out by now..." I crawled forward, straddling his hips, to sit in his lap. I wrapped my arms tightly around him. "I love you too, Liam."

He squeezed me tight, dropping his head to my shoulder. "I can't—I can't lose you, Jack. I came out of losing Regina by the skin of my teeth, but you, love, you I would never be able to get over." Liam grabbed two handfuls of my hair and jerked my face down to meet his own, capturing my mouth again. Using lips, tongue, and teeth, he kissed me until I couldn't breathe, until I couldn't think and the only thing I could do was hold on, letting him take what he needed.

I pulled back slowly until we were nose to nose, my lips brushing his with every word, “You aren’t going to lose me, Liam. I’m right here and I’m not letting you go—we’re bonded. Understood?” I waited for his nod before I let myself kiss him again. “It’s you and me together from now on, Liam.”

“*Just* you and me, right? No one else?” he asked, a smile building bigger and bigger on his face.

“Yeah. Why?” I asked, confused about where he was going with his question.

“No more boyfriends or girlfriends coming over.” His smile at this point was out of control.

“Not if you want to keep all of your dangly parts,” I assured him.

“So, Gentry—” I clapped a hand over his mouth, temporarily stopping whatever he’d been about to say, but then I thought about it and dropped my hand.

Normally, Liam’s smug I-told-you-so attitude would have gotten him a foot in his ass, but damned if he didn’t deserve the right to gloat, he’d been right about the asshole.

I nudged him with my elbow. “Go ahead,” I murmured.

“See! I told you. He’s an asshole. Grade A asshole. But that’s not what I want to hear from you, baby. Oh, no. I want to hear my three *very favorite* little words.”

I sighed in resignation and rolled my eyes. He was going to be completely unbearable to live with after this. “Fine, *but* you will reward me with the best sex of my life immediately following this, and we will never speak of this again. Agreed?”

He leaned down to give me another quick kiss. “Agreed.”

“You. Were. Right.” I muttered softly.

He tapped his ear like he was having trouble with it. “What was that? I couldn’t hear you. You are going to need to speak up.”



“You. Were. Right,” I all but yelled at him, “Satisfied?”

“Not yet, but I have high hopes for the future.” He waggled his eyebrows at me, grinding his hips against mine.

“Me too, Liam. Me too.”

**THE END**

## **Author Bio**

*Reece was raised in Northern Florida, but courtesy of Uncle Sam (and her husband) she's been moved coast to coast and across oceans. She has been an avid reader since she was old enough to crack open a book. It was only as she got older that she discovered that she loved telling stories as much as reading them. Her stories originated as songs, but a well-meaning friend told her to put down the guitar and pick up a pencil. So she did. And it stuck.*

## **Contact & Media Info**

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