

Veronika Grossman

escort for the witch

THE MYSTERY
OF
JESSE'S RUBY



Вероника Гроссман

**Escort For The Witch: The
Mystery of Psyche's Ruby**

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Second, and final, part of the fantasy adventure "Escort For The Witch" A year had passed since the tragic and perilous events in New Orleans, and a long-awaited peace seemed to have finally arrived. Jack Cornell and his motley crew could breathe out, and life was starting to get back on track. But it was only a calm before a storm. By a curious twist of fate, the heroes find themselves in the 18 century Paris, with only their conversational French to fall back on, and with no clue how to get back home. They become time prisoners in an era where every action they took could have lethal repercussions, quite literally. To time travel back, our friends will need to face their toughest challenges yet: stand up to a secret society whose plans endanger everything humanity holds dear; find their way out of seemingly hopeless situations. Add here befriending a prominent royal jeweller, heisting the Palace of Versailles, and racing against the clock in a deadly game with Time itself.

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Вероника Гроссман
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Chapter 1

The King is Dead, Long Live the King!

The dark alleys of the old city, usually bustling at midday, were now shrouded in a foggy haze. The empty streets aside, it seemed the city was still awake, even in the dead of night. Occasionally, faint whispers could be heard in the damp, cool air, all discussing the same thing – the news that had haunted Paris, and indeed all of France, for a few days now.

Sitting on the edge of a wide bed, in the centre of a dark room, was a woman; she was clutching onto a baby peacefully sleeping in her arms and listening intently to the soft patter of the autumn rain against the window pane, humming an old French lullaby.

Every now and then, she would brush away the tears glistening on her lashes. Her thoughts were consumed by the sweet memories of last summer: the Sunday picnics and the lofty conversations about art in the shade of the lush, green trees along river Loire. She had loved spending hours in casual conversations with her husband, playing with their young son, boating, and basking in the sun's warm embrace. She had tried not to think about that day when the summer would inevitably draw to a close and they would have to return to Paris—a dusty city reeking of foul odors, and full of soulless and treacherous people trying to get their neighbor, entangled in court intrigues or conspiracies.

By day, Paris was a vibrant circus, teeming with greedy, dishonest, and perpetually dissatisfied characters. But after sunset, France's capital transformed into a terrifying

labyrinth ruled by street urchins, thieves, courtesans, and eccentric adventurers in powdered wigs and garish attire.

The sudden noise of an approaching horse outside the window made the woman startle.

She pushed aside her gloomy thoughts and returned to reality—a cramped room in an old, inconspicuous house near Rue Saint-Germain-l'Auxerrois.

"Madame, do you hear that? The riders!" whispered the maid, Leonie, suddenly appearing at the bedroom door, her voice trembling with fear.

"Quiet, Leonie," the woman ordered, gesturing for the maid to come closer. "Why aren't you asleep?" she whispered, noticing the genuine fear in the grey eyes of the girl.

"How can I sleep when the King is dying? Oh, Madame, it's terrifying! There are rumors that he hasn't got long left and plans are being made for what will happen to Versailles after his death. They also fear a popular uprising," Leonie babbled, sinking onto the edge of the bed beside her mistress. "All of Paris is gossiping about it. And they say a messenger arrived at the Louvre today from Versailles with some news..."

"Let's hope it's just the idle chatter of court jesters who have nothing better to do," the woman interrupted, forcing a soft smile. "The Louvre cannot exist without gossip and intrigue. You know that as well as I do, Leonie."

"Madame, do you hear that? Outside! By our house!"

The woman, now thoroughly alarmed, clicked her tongue disapprovingly at the maid and peered out into the dimly lit street. She noticed a shadow move outside. A moment later, there was a firm knock at the door. Leonie jumped up in surprise and, biting her lip, stared at her mistress.

"Madame..."

"Take Armand and stay here until I call for you."

The lady gently placed the sleeping baby in the maid's trembling hands, smoothed out the folds of her dress, and headed toward the front door, behind which the impatient stomping of horses could

be heard. Taking a deep breath and counting to ten, she pushed open the door, letting in a faint stream of cool night air. Outside, a tall man stood with his back to her, trying to calm his horse which kept rearing up.

"What the devil took you so long, Blanche?" he snapped without turning to her, and handed the reins to a younger man in his command.

The man finally turned to face the frightened Blanche and gave her a tired smile.

"Hello, my dear. I know you weren't expecting me, but alas... We have much to discuss.

Auguste! Let the horses rest and prepare the carriage! And hurry, my friend!" he barked at the young man, then glanced around and quickly stepped inside, shutting and bolting the door behind him.

"What's happening, Joel? Where is my husband? He was supposed to return to Paris three days ago! He promised to send me a letter with Bernard, but Bernard never showed up. What's going on?" the young woman fired her questions anxiously, 2

hurrying to light a candle from the faint embers in the fireplace. The man tossed his wet traveling cloak onto the floor and sank heavily into a rough wooden chair.

"The journey was tough. We got attacked. Damned bandits... Your husband stayed in Versailles. He instructed me to go to Paris immediately. As for Bernard... Bernard was stabbed to death on the cursed Versailles grounds. Thank God the letter Thibault had given him was a decoy—a blank piece of paper. While everyone was distracted with Bernard's body, trying to figure out who had killed him and why, Auguste and I were already galloping toward Paris. So, my dear Blanche, now my record will likely include the murder of an old friend. Our escape played right into the hands of the true culprits in this bloody game. May they all be damned, Blanche!"

"Good heavens!" Blanche exclaimed, barely controlling her emotions. "Bernard... They say Louis is on his deathbed. Is it true?"

"It is. And I fear he won't last until dawn."

In the dim, flickering candlelight, the man could almost see all blood drain from Blanche's face.

"That can't be!" she whispered, glancing out the window. The impenetrable darkness of the night was beginning to fade, giving way to the first light of autumn dawn.

"What will become of us now?" she cried out, shuddering as she heard the soft footsteps outside.

"Don't worry, it's just Auguste. As for us... It's clear. The moment the King dies, his regent will step in. And he will waste no time putting us in the Place de Grève!" Joel smirked grimly.

"Thibault won't return," Blanche whispered in despair, her gaze blankly sweeping the small room where she, her son, and her loyal maid had been waiting for her husband for the past four days.

The man shook his head in silence, noting an instant change in Blanche's face: only a minute ago she had been lively and almost cheerful, now he saw a drooping mouth, dull eyes, and a wrinkly forehead. With a heavy sigh, Joel stood up and walked over to an old dresser in the corner of the room. He grabbed a bottle of red wine and two glasses.

He couldn't bear to see the pain and grief locked in the eyes of the woman to whom he had just delivered the gloomy news that all her hopes for a bright future had been in vain.

"No, Blanche. He won't return," he said darkly, filling his glass. "Frankly, we don't have much time left either. You know that as well as I do," he took a few greedy gulps of his favorite wine. "Ah, good wine, by the way! It's the only thing I'll genuinely miss in the afterlife," he added bitterly. "Blanche, I'll understand if you decide to..."

"No, I won't break my oath!" she said fervently. "I won't betray my husband or the others. Besides, they'll execute me anyway. So, sooner or later, but this was coming. I just didn't think it would be quite so soon. How much time do you think we have?"

Blanche stared out the window with an air of impending doom. She watched as tiny raindrops fell silently on the pavement outside, as if mourning the inevitable end.

"I don't know exactly. A few hours at most. No time to escape. Guards are posted all over France. They'll catch us no matter what, Blanche," Joel whispered, slowly approaching the petite

figure of the young woman. He noticed she had grown even paler, and her trembling fingers fidgeted with a crystal rosary on her left wrist. "My brother was very lucky to have you as his wife," he said gently, placing his hands on her slender shoulders. "You have an unyielding will. Just like him. You were a perfect match. And I'm grateful to you for your loyalty – to my brother and to our Order. But now we must hurry."

"Yes, you're right. You're always right," she said with resignation, clutching the rosary so tightly that her knuckles turned white. "Leonie!" Blanche called, trying her best to appear composed. "Leonie! Come here, please!"

"Yes, Madame," the frightened maid whispered.

"Leonie, we need to talk," Blanche gestured to a chair, inviting the girl to sit down. The maid stared confusedly at Blanche and her guest, who was pacing the room like a caged animal, a glass of wine in one hand, the gilded hilt of his sword in the other.

"Yes, Madame."

"Do you remember, six years ago, when Armand was born, you said you loved him so much that you would do anything to ensure his happiness?" Blanche studied the maid's frightened face.

"Madame, I..."

"Just answer me!"

"Yes, of course. I remember. I gave you my word! But, Madame, I don't understand..."

What are you getting at?"

"It's now time to keep that promise," Blanche said despairingly, brushing away the rising tears.

"Madame, I don't understand..."

"Quiet, Leonie! Just listen to me. Listen carefully!"

In a sweeping motion, Blanche removed a chunky ruby signet ring from the little finger of her left hand. The blood-red gem was framed by a halo of sparkling diamonds.

"Take this ring and hide it. Hide it as well as you can. And make sure it doesn't get into the hands of the regent or any of his lackeys! Do you understand me?" Blanche asked firmly. Before the maid could answer, Blanche rushed to an old wardrobe in the corner of the room and began rummaging around in the drawers.

"Here's a letter," Joel interjected, handing the maid a tattered envelope. "It's for Armand. Thibault wrote it. Give it to him when he's older. If, of course, you live to that day," he mouthed the last sentence almost to himself and, continued to pace the room, oblivious to the expression of horror on the maid's face.

"And here," Blanche whispered hurriedly, handing the girl a small wooden box with an intricately carved lid, "is some money and a few valuables. It should last you a while.

You can sell the box too, if needed. If anyone stops you and questioning, say Armand is your and Auguste's son, and you were just passing through Paris on your way elsewhere. Joel has also left some money and instructions for Auguste. He should know what to do. Try to blend in with the crowd, don't talk to anyone, save as much as you can, and... Leonie, you're my only hope!" Blanche suddenly cried out and fell to her knees, grabbing the maid's hand and squeezing it till the maid squealed in pain. "You won't abandon him, will you? Promise me you won't ever leave my son!" she pleaded, turning around to face Auguste who had come in from the rain and, without a word, strode toward the bedroom where her son was peacefully asleep.

The maid, utterly bewildered, looked to Joel for help, but he seemed transfixed, staring at the ring she held in her hand.

"Madame! How could I? I promise your son will be safe! But what should I do with this ring?"

"The carriage is ready, sir. We can leave now," the young man reported quietly, holding the sleeping baby wrapped in a woolen blanket.

"It's not about the ring," Joel muttered thoughtfully. "It's the stone. That damned ruby.

It must not fall into the wrong hands. Otherwise, the consequences will be disastrous.

So be careful, Leonie. Trust no one, don't show it to anyone, and don't talk about it to anyone. And for God's sake, don't try and sell it! Now it's time to say goodbye," Joel he added, helping Blanche to her feet. "Be strong, Blanche. It won't be long now."

The woman stifled a cry of despair and, with unsteady steps, approached the young man who was still holding her precious baby in his arms.

Careful not to wake her son, Blanche slowly leaned forward and kissed him on the pale-cheek. She froze when the baby turned his head toward her, then covered her face and began to weep quietly.

"I hope one day you will understand me. And you will forgive me," Blanche whispered through her sobs, kissing her son one last time. She carefully removed the rosary from her wrist and wrapped it around the baby's tiny hand. Then she turned away and gestured for Auguste to leave.

"Leonie! Go get ready, now! It's almost dawn!" Joel boomed. "You must leave immediately! Auguste will stay with you until the end. Trust him. I'll see you off now."

The terrified maid stumbled to her feet and, clutching the box tightly, rushed to her room. Joel sighed, shook his head and knelt beside the grief-stricken mother. Sitting on the bare floor, her face buried in her hands, Blanche could finally let her tears flow. She 5

sobbed, hating herself for the outburst, clawed at her arms until they bled, trying her best to not get up and run after the carriage.

"We knew what we were getting into. It was our choice," Joel said grimly, pulling a small glass vial with dark thick liquid out of his coat pocket. "There's enough here for both of us. In twenty minutes, it will all be over."

"Sir, we're ready," the maid whispered, peeping into room and paling at the sight before her.

The man looked up, mental exhaustion in his faded green eyes, and issued a resigned smile.

"I'll be there in a moment, Leonie. Take my cloak. I won't need it anymore," he said hoarsely.

Without further ado, the maid snatched up the cloak and ran out, leaving the sad room and her old life behind her for good. Joel turned back to Blanche.

"Blanche, my dear, look at me," he gazed into her grief-stricken grey eyes. "Are you ready?"

For a moment, Blanche relaxed, as if comforted by peace of mind, that often comes with full acceptance of the inevitable, and a faint smile appeared on her bloodless lips.

She nodded slowly, casting one last sad glance out the window. With trembling fingers, she took the vial from Joel and, closing her eyes, took a reluctant sip. Before she could take another one, Joel snatched the vial back from her and drained it in one greedy gulp.

"May God protect you," he whispered, kissing Blanche on the forehead, and then hurried out of the house, leaving her alone, consumed by grief.

Joel staggered up to the carriage where the petrified Leonie still sat, holding the sleeping baby close to her chest and rocking softly.

"Now listen to me carefully, Leonie. If something happens, should you be in danger, should you be chased or captured, you must do everything in your power to break the stone! Understand? Break the stone!" Joel half pleaded, half ordered, noticing his voice tremble treacherously, a hot wave rising in his throat and darkness clouding his vision.

"Do you understand me, damn it?!"

"Yes, sir. I understand," the maid whispered.

"Now, Leonie, goodbye. Don't forget the letter! Auguste, my friend! Drive! Drive as fast as you can! Get out of Paris! And don't ever come back! Never! And may God help you!" Joel turned on his heel and staggered back toward the house.

Back in the room, he got to the table, picked up a candle, and moved to the curtain covering the only tiny window. Immediately, the curtain was a ablaze, the flames spreading in every direction. The man smirked, put out the candle nonchalantly, and tossed it into the farthest corner before sinking to the floor beside Blanche's lifeless form. He was relieved to notice that the mark of sorrow that had shadowed his unfortunate sister-in-law's face during their final conversation had now completely 6

vanished, replaced by an expression of eternal peace – a peace born in acceptance of the fate they had chosen for themselves. Joel's trembling fingers brushed against Blanche's cold cheek. He heard alarmed cries not far off the outside and, a moment later, breathed his last.

That same gloomy, damp morning of September 1, 1715, at a quarter to nine, a proclamation was read from the balcony of the royal palace at Versailles: "Le Roi est mort, Vive le Roi!"

Louis XIV³, the Sun King, was dead.

About the same time, the regent, Philippe II, Duke of Orléans⁴, had a secret meeting with the captain of the royal guard, ordering him to recover "Psyche"⁵, a famous ruby, and all those rumored to have been involved in its disappearance. The culprits were to be interrogated and executed, but it had to be done secretly, without drawing much or any attention of the royal court.

Blanche de Mercier, the wife of Thibault de Mercier, was to be accused of witchcraft, interrogated, tortured, and then taken outside Paris and burned at the stake. Thibault de Mercier and his brother, the conspirator and instigator Joel de Mercier, along with their followers, were to be accused of heresy, slander, and sorcery. They were to be publicly quartered at the Place de Grève. The "traitors' " remains were to be fed to stray dogs, reminding Parisians, and all of France, that betrayal and disrespect for royal authority would be met with merciless cruelty.

Chapter 2

What a Real Bachelor Party Is All About

I woke up to a "light" sensation of weightlessness. However, only the lower part of my body felt weightless—the part below my neck. Meanwhile, my head had somehow transformed into a bell that was being hammered on by a thousand invisible, massive, sadistic mallets. These little metaphorical sadists live in everyone's brain, hiding carefully until such an unfortunate time when they are let loose to wreak havoc on our bodies. This 'time' is otherwise known as a bender.

So, I was in a state of not-so-weightless weightlessness and couldn't lift my head off the pillow. With my eyes still shut, I tried to analyze the situation. That is, to try and assess how much alcohol I had managed to put in me the previous night. What had set me on my drinking spree? What was I thinking? Was I thinking of the consequences?

Was I at all thinking? Those were the questions I couldn't answer for the life of me.

I tried to roll over onto my right side and felt an unpleasant, prickly pain shoot through my body, followed by another mallet blow to where my brain was supposed to sit.

After more tossing and turning, I became aware of even more pesky discomforts: extreme dryness in my mouth, mysterious humming in my ears, nausea, and a now crystal clear realization that I remembered absolutely nothing about what had happened last night! But then if I don't remember, there's nothing to be ashamed of... Right?

Something wet and cold touched my already aching ear, snorting loudly. Then this something pressed against my cheek and snorted again. I tried to push whatever was so diligently trying to wake me up away. And of course, I couldn't. Should I have even been surprised.

"Gigantor, back off!" I mumbled, still unable to open my eyes.

I'm just like everyone else living on planet Earth: I do have an occasional drink. But ever to experience a hangover, and such a bad one at that? Heaven forbid! So, apparently, something must have gone wrong here big time... But what was it exactly that had caused to me to go off rails?

Rewind a few days back. Oh, now I remember! Two days ago, my better half and I were not seeing eye to eye, to put it mildly. We had an epic fight because I had flatly refused to fly to France. And why did we need to fly to France? Because we are getting married! That's it! Our wedding is exactly one week away! But surely that wasn't the reason to... And by the way, how long has it been since?

"And didn't I tell you, their pool game wouldn't end well?" came an irritated female voice from some way off. "No one ever listens to me."

Pool! That's it! The answer to the question that has been tormenting me since I regained my ability to think. Another wet nudge to my cheek made me shudder. I tried to turn my head toward my relentless, snorting attacker and look it straight in the face.

Or rather, the muzzle. Success! A few torturous attempts later, and I finally managed to pry my eyelids open. Peering into my puffed up face was not the habitually displeased muzzle of my cat Gigantor, but rather the devoted gaze of the warm brown canine eyes.

Seeing that I was awake, my beloved blondie eagerly jumped to her feet and barked loudly.

"Abby, ugh! Stop it, please!" My speech was still slurry, and I was racking what was left of my brains over how my parents' golden retriever ended up in my house. With a mammoth effort, I rolled onto my back and stared at the ceiling.

"Well, well! Look who's awake!" someone next to me said sarcastically. And I decided it was time to face the music and find out how my so-called "bachelor party" had ended.

It cost me some rather painful sensations, but I finally managed to sit up. The effort blurred my vision nausea engulfed me, and my head spun wildly. Summoning all my willpower, I turned my head to look around me. Yes, there I was, in my parents' house.

"How are you feeling?" a calm, almost too calm voice next to me enquired. I turned to face a short woman with neatly styled dark hair and angry green eyes. With her hands on her hips, she stood there waiting for my reply.

"Water!" I pleaded, and it was all I could muster. The woman snorted disapprovingly before disappearing through the door leading to the kitchen, followed by the loud clattering of crockery. Then, like a magician, she reappeared in front of me with a full glass of life-saving whiskey.

"Mom, I adore you," I said lovingly, though still incoherently, and drained the glass, feeling the liquid burn my insides on descent.

"Oh, do you, really? And is that all you'd like to say to me?" Mrs. Renton crossed her arms and gave me a piercing look.

"Tell me what you want to hear, and I'll say it, promise," I replied sincerely, if a little cheekily. The sound of my muffled voice and my slurry speech took me aback for a second. And my jaw was strangely sore...

"You know, Jack, I wouldn't mind if you got down on your knees and crawled after me around the house, begging for my forgiveness and showering me with gratitude," Mom said dreamily and gave me another knowing look, as if it was supposed to jog my memory somehow and make me feel guilty for whatever it was that I had done the night before.

"I'm... – sorry?" I asked uncertainly.

"You're sorry... Fine. And where's the 'thank you, mom'?"

"Thank you!" I muttered with a throbbing pain in my jaw.

"For what?" Mom asked, putting her hands on her hips again.

"For treating my hangover?"

"And for that too!"

"Mom, are you messing with me? Please, can't you just tell me what happened?"

Surely, I'd..."

"For getting you out of jail," Mom interjected calmly and sat on the edge of the coffee table, positioning herself directly in front of me.

"Jail? Please, tell me you're joking!" I couldn't believe my ears, nor could I conjure up any shred of recollection of that in my mind.

"Jack, sweetie, you know I am absolutely deprived of any sense of humor. But you, apparently, have plenty!"

"Mom! What happened?"

"You had a fight," Mom said calmly, taking off her glasses and carefully wiping the lenses clean with the corner of her kitchen apron.

"A fight?" I repeated dumbly, although I was starting to see how this explained the sore jaw.

"A fight with a police officer," Mom went on, her piercing green eyes fixed on me.

"No way!" I muttered in surprise. "Me? Police? What police?"

"New Orleans, I think. This is where you live, remember?"

"Mom! At this point I don't even remember that. I remember nothing! Can you please tell me what happened at last?"

"No, I'd rather just forget that altogether and never be reminded of what kind of son I have raised. Your father's right: you should never be drinking. People usually drink to let their hair down and reconnect with their foolish side for a bit, and you are foolish enough as is!" Mom fired at me, rolling her eyes theatrically and brushing away an invisible tear. "Who did you take after, I wonder? This is just awful...Twenty-five years old, and you're still acting like a troubled teenager! Brenda, dear, he's quite sane now. You can come out!"

Brenda? Brenda the mind reader – of course! The paranormal vulture who likes feeding on the most intimate thoughts of her unsuspecting victims and then monetise the knowledge, selling it to the highest bidder, no questions asked! What the hell is she doing here? With my eyes, I followed Abby the golden retriever as she trotted off toward the kitchen, loudly chewing on a rubber duck. Behind the kitchen door, the frightened Brenda had been hiding all this time. The girl took a deep breath and gingerly stepped into the room.

"Well, this is a surprise. What are you doing here?" I asked, annoyed.

"Hi, Jack," Brenda sung and stared at me shamelessly the way only a person with her non-existent scruples could. "Don't take this the wrong way, but you aren't exactly unlike a goblin right now, looks wise!" she chirped, bursting into headache-causing laughter.

"Come on! Spit it out! What the hell was I doing at the police station last night? You've already been inside in my head while I was... asleep, haven't you?"

"Yeah, I have. And you know what? You'll never guess..."

"Brenda! Spit it out, will you? Or I might get physical!"

"What, again?", she chuckled, perching herself on the edge of the coffee table next to my mom. "Alright, don't get mad, mind your headache. Your boys' night just got out of hand."

"Very informative," I remarked sourly.

"You were playing pool. And you hit the ball so hard that it bounced off and smacked Derek right in the forehead. The impact sent him reeling backwards right into some huge guy by the bar. The latter spilled his beer, too. Of course, the guy got mad and asked Derek what his problem was and all that. And you were so drunk that you decided to stand up for him. That's how it all started... Yelling, brawling... But the big bar guy turned out to be a cop."

"Oh, damn it!" I muttered and dropped my aching head into my hands.

"Yep. And you also threatened to kick everyone's ass down at the station."

"And how did you know I was at the station?" I turned to mom, who had been quiet the whole time, putting on airs.

"You know, my dear son, sometimes I look at you and wonder what lucky stars had aligned when you were born?"

"Guess that's your area of expertise... Mom, come on, enough already! So then I used my post-booking phone call right, didn't I?"

"No, my dear! You weren't exactly fit to do so at the time," she quipped. "It was your luck that last night, the father of one of my top students was on duty. He was kind enough to call me and ask me to pick my terribly ill-mannered, hopelessly drunk child up."

"Actually, he just asked her to pick you up," Brenda corrected, hoping to make me feel better and earning a sharp glance from Mrs. Renton.

"Well, as they say, all is well that ends well!" I said amiably, forcing a feeble semblance of a smile. "Anyway, the point is Dad doesn't know... It would hurt him to not have been invited."

"He does," Brenda whispered, fear returning to her eyes.

There it was: the guilt of not inviting my own father to my, his only son's, bachelor party came crashing down on my already throbbing head like a sledgehammer. He will never live this down, even though this was probably the most disastrous stag do in the history of New Orleans – which, of course, will be readily confirmed by my eccentric

"friend" Derek, who has now firmly secured his position as a valid member of our small family and...

"Where's Derek?" I asked Brenda, suddenly remembering my cheerful hippie bloodsucker. After all, he was the reason why our innocent boys' night out at the bar had turned into a "bachelor brawl." I stared at Brenda, who, by the looks of it, was on the verge of crying. "Brenda, what else don't I remember?" I asked, relieved to notice that the whiskey I had downed was finally doing its job. The ringing in my head ceased, the nausea subsided, and my mind cleared up a bit. "Spit it out already!"

“Yes, Brenda. Tell him. Tell him everything! Let him feel ashamed for once,” Mrs. Renton interjected.

“Mom...”

“Shame on you, son!”

“Well, I don’t even know if I should...” Brenda began, but Mrs. Renton wasn’t having it.

“Do you have any idea what your father and I went through after that police phone call in the middle of the night, telling us to come to the police station at once? We raced there, only to find you completely drunk and disorderly and shouting profanities, and it made me feel sick just realizing we were... directly related.”

“Oh, Mom, please!”

“And then an officer came up to us and said, ‘Brace yourselves. We have bad news. Your son Derek passed away on the way to the hospital!’”

I couldn’t believe my ears! The last sentence, uttered by my mother, hit me so hard that I instantly sobered up, gaping in shock.

“What? Your who? Passed away? On the way to the hospital? What hospital? And what do you mean ‘passed away’? He can’t pass away! He’s a vampire!”

“That’s exactly our problem,” Brenda noted quietly. “Your dad’s been racking his brains over how we sneak ‘the body’ out of the morgue unnoticed and without the body breaking into song.”

“Out of the morgue?” I repeated. So much for thinking that after last year’s events, nothing could surprise me anymore! Turns out, I was wrong. “Well, he really outdid himself this time!”

“Aren’t you even a little ashamed, son?” Mrs. Renton lashed out again, throwing her hands up in desperation. Apparently, she really wanted to see me suffer.

I stared at her. She looked determined to give me a good smack on the bottom. The last time I’d seen her like this was when I was eight, and my best friend Eric and I had just accidentally set the living room carpet on fire.

“Brenda,” I whispered, tilting my head slightly to the side. “Save me!”

“It was your idea, after all,” she replied mysteriously, her hazel eyes boring into me.

“Brenda, I’m not in a frame of mind to read between the lines right now!” I barked, instantly rewarded with a sharp pain in my head and jaw.

“It was you who got into a fight with the big cop guy, which landed all of you in the police station. Apparently, Derek’s appearance left the officers somewhat... confused. That’s why they called an ambulance...”

“Well, as far as I remember, he wasn’t wearing flashy clothes.”

“No, it wasn’t about the clothes. Turns out, he doesn’t handle alcohol very well either,” Brenda remarked, throwing another judgmental look my way. “Apparently he was mixing his ‘juice’ with whiskey, in undisclosed proportions, so by the time you had gotten to the police station, he was looking like a three days old corpse! My poor baby!” Brenda squealed and, to my and mom’s surprise, burst into tears.

“Brenda, what are you on about? He’s a vampire! He doesn’t drink whiskey. As for having one too many, moderation is not a concept he’s familiar with.” My eyes moved over to mom, who had walked over to the fireplace and demonstratively lit one of dad’s cigars. “What are you doing, mom? You don’t smoke!”

“I don’t smoke, and my son is an angel. At least you graduated from university – only just... For that, I’m grateful,” she retorted before elegantly sinking into a high-backed leather chair like a vintage Hollywood sweetheart.

“So why is he in the morgue?”

“Because some smarty-pants had reasoned that when the ambulance arrived and the doctors saw a swollen, black-and-blue form that Derek was, they’d rush to save his life,” Mom explained. “And the first thing they’d do is check his pulse. Imagine the commotion when they found out he

didn't actually have one? So you, smarty-pants, came up with nothing better than to suggest to Derek that 'passes away' in the ambulance, which he did."

"What a champ!" I exclaimed, mentally addressing myself, rather than Derek even. "And why are you crying, Brenda? Your little leech will be home soon, practically 'alive' and reasonably healthy."

"He's not going out with you ever again! I swear, Cornell," she squealed, wiping away the tears. "When the two of you get together, there's always trouble. I'll do everything in my power to –"

There was a sudden knock on the door, cutting Brenda's fiery sermon short.

"Ah! There's Sabrina!" mom sang, dragging out the words for emotional impact. "I still don't get what she sees in you, son. Such a clever, beautiful girl..." "And then there's *you*," she added, stubbing out her cigar in the ashtray before hurrying to the door.

And there she was, standing in the doorway, like a ray of spring sunshine in a dark room. The girl who wanted to spend the rest of her life with me. A decision she had made entirely on her own. And it looked like she might well make another independent decision now to send me packing. I assumed a most innocent expression and started looking around for the hoodie I remembered wearing the night before.

"It's behind the couch," Brenda grumbled and headed toward the kitchen, where Mrs. Renton could already be heard bustling about.

Sabrina glided past me silently to take the spot where Brenda, who I'd apparently offended, had been wailing just a minute ago. I couldn't think of anything more original than 'attack is the best defence', so right in I went.

"Okay, so I screwed up," I declared, looking into the blue eyes of my beloved witch.

She sat opposite me, arms crossed, scanning every inch of my swollen face.

"Not the phrase Eric would use. You have a lot of apologising to do. He was furious when he found out you had 'slayed' a vampire – without his help!" Sabrina noted quietly, then burst into laughter.

"And just yesterday morning, you told me off for being wicked! Compared to you, I'm practically an earth angel! How are you feeling after your binge drinking? And then that fight... Are you really that bored with me? I can fix that easily."

"It's just that the drinks were too strong. And honestly, I hadn't even had that much," I stared at the floor to avoid looking at Sabrina who, I know, was enjoying tormenting me.

"No, sweetie, you had had much. And yes, the booze was strong. Tricia told me all about it—I began my shift right after you, idiots, had gotten hauled off to the police station."

Seeing my reaction, she had to bite her lip to avoid bursting into another raucous laughter. To think of it! Organise a beer party at a bar where your girlfriend works and drink yourself into being booked for a brawl... That's proper cringe material.

"Did *Tricia* call the cops then?" I enquired civilly, my eyes still riveted to the floor in front of me.

"No, she was curious to see how your little one-man show would end. But you really annoyed one of the frequenters, so he decided to turn you in."

"Alright, forget that guy. So, when are you going to start chastising me for being a complete and utter jerk about Derek? It was my idea to 'kill' him, by the way. And do it behind Eric's back, too"

"I'm not. You're already feeling – and looking – bad enough," Sabrina said softly, brushing a stray lock of dark hair away from her angelic face. "Besides, my bachelorette is coming up soon," she added with a mysterious smile, seeing a surprised look in my now-almost-sober eyes.

"So you're planning to one-up me?"

"Anything's possible..." my bride-to-be whispered ominously, then smiled again. But, Jack, if Derek doesn't finish my dress in time for the wedding, I'll kill you. And I won't care that you're my fiancé," I kept staring at her in disbelief.

“Are you for real? You have entrusted your wedding gown to a laid-back leech?” I boomed, drawing mom’s attention.

“He has excellent taste,” Mrs. Renton chimed in, coming to Sabrina’s (or rather Derek’s) defence.

“Sure, when it comes to friendship bracelets and other hippie crap – I mean, accessories, then I suppose he does...”

“Weren’t you the one telling me you didn’t care much what dress I wore?” Sabrina asked teasingly.

“Sabi, it’s my wedding, too! How could I not care?” I even threw up my hands, which earned me one of the warmest smiles from Sabrina to date and gave me a fresh wave of headache.

“You should go clean yourself up. You smell like you just crawled out of a dumpster. And your face... Come here,” Sabrina chirped, sitting down next to me on the couch. She gently touched my battered face. I heard a faint crack and felt a sharp pain come and go. “There, that’s better,” she said, planting a soft kiss on my stubbly cheek.

“That’s why I adore you,” I whispered. The next moment my attention was drawn to the front door, behind which loud, incoherent singing could be heard...

Chapter 3

Back from the Other Side

The singing intensified. A few minutes later, the front door opened, and a tall, stout, burly man with thick, silver-grey hair and matching moustache appeared on the threshold. He was breathing and snorting heavily, while constantly clenching and unclenching his fists. This could only mean one thing: Mr. Cornell Sr. was beside himself with rage.

“Gabriel, dear! I think I’m about to kill someone!” my father said through gritted teeth as he walked into the living room. On seeing me, he smiled and was about to step into the room when a long, drawn-out wail sounded behind him from the direction of the front door. “Derek! Stop howling!” father exclaimed, throwing up his hands, and then silently walked past Sabrina and me, collapsing wearily into his favorite high-backed leather armchair.

“I’m not howling, I’m singing, Mr. Cornell. The difference between the two is colossal,” the vampire declared, finally entering the house. “Let me explain it to you.”

“My God!” came a cry from the kitchen. Sabrina and I exchanged glances and, our mouths agape, stared at the strange creature that was cuddling and stroking his beloved dog.

“Abby! Ugh!” father barked. “Derek, leave the dog alone. She’s not a stuffed toy, you know.”

Derek hesitated but finally released the excited canine from his tight embrace and marched into the living room, grinning broadly. I felt Sabrina freeze in place, gripping my hand tightly. Brenda burst into even louder sobs and disappeared into the kitchen again. Mom clicked her tongue disapprovingly, while Dad, unable to control his emotions, stood up and began pacing the room. As for me, I stared wide-eyed at what used to be my drinking buddy from the night before. Standing before me now was a tall, bloated, blackened corpse, his skin covered in dried blood, wrapped in my father’s old brown dustcoat. Underneath the dustcoat, apparently, there was nothing else. His hair was dishevelled, his eyes resembling two overripe plums that someone had trampled on. The long claws that had adorned his bony fingers just the day before were now gone. On his bare feet sat a pair of tattered hospital overshoes, and a name tag was still attached to his left toe, sticking out ominously.

“Hey, buddy!” the vampire greeted me. “Looks like you’ve regained your senses, too! What a night, huh? I’m still buzzing that I managed to get drunk! I just had to keep you company. I always thought the stuff would just transit through, leaving me unaffected... Should have thought again, should have known better! Getting sloshed for the first time in a hundred years... Wish I’d known sooner. So much fun wasted.”

Derek chirped cheerfully, breaking into a blissful smile that revealed his blood-stained fangs.

“What do you mean, ‘known better’?” Sabrina enquired judgementsly, watching her “fashion designer” float around the room, mimicking Cornell Sr.

“Dad, how did you get him out?”

“He threw up right in the morgue,” Dad remarked, ignoring my question. “Can you imagine? Right there! Threw up! A vampire! And you know what happened to the doctor who tried to examine him?”

“Me!” the vampire in question interjected. “I happened to the doctor,” he chuckled. “Like in the good old horror movies. I open my eyes, push the dude in the white scrubs aside and dash to the sink! I heard the loud thud behind me as he fainted, of course, but I didn’t think he’d be so impressionable. He deals with stiff’s daily, after all... So unprofessional of him. People used to be different back in

the day. They weren't afraid of anything! But now? Everyone's gone soft," the bloodsucker mused, settling into my father's armchair.

"And what about you, Cornell? You did show your true colors last night: 'Give me a lever long enough and a fulcrum on which to place it, and I shall make a toast!'" the vampire mimicked me and guffawed. "Your toasting skills leave a lot to be desired. And – you're hardly Archimedes."

"Anyways, Jack, the next time you decide to get drunk—and I hope there won't be a next time—choose a more mortal companion, will you," uttered a quiet, unfamiliar voice behind us. "You're drawing too much attention. To yourselves, and to the things regular people shouldn't know about."

I turned around to face a tall stranger standing in the dark corner of the hallway. The man stood like a statue, observing us silently and intently, barely moving. How did he enter the house unnoticed?

"Felix, if my memory serves me right, you haven't met my son, have you?" my father addressed the stranger.

"No, Elliot. But I assume you'll introduce us now. Although I've heard quite a lot about the exploits of Mr. Cornell Jr.," the man said in the same quiet, raspy voice, moving further into the living room and allowing the rays of the setting sun to give us a better view of our new acquaintance.

Before us stood a tall, stately man in his mid-forties. Clean-shaven, neatly combed, and elegantly dressed. He looked and carried himself like a typical, successful businessman, except for one small detail: his unnaturally greyish skin and a thin, slightly opaque film covering the whites and pupils of his eyes. The stranger stepped closer, tilting his head slightly to greet us, then smiled broadly, revealing a row of sharp, razor-like fangs.

"Felix Timmons," he introduced himself. "Curator of the Ancient Letters Department at the 'Guardian.' And, incidentally, chief mentor of this... misfit," he nodded toward the armchair in which Derek was lounging, feeling a little too comfortable. "I've spent centuries trying to hammer some sense into him – all in vain."

"Don't take it to heart, Felix. This guy here, my son (God help us), is also a walking disaster," my father chimed in, pointing his index finger at me. "I can't even imagine what would have happened if Eric had been there too. Sabi, sweetheart, no offense, but that would be quite a crew. I'm almost afraid to think what they'd have gotten up to. We'd have to declare a state of emergency across the entire state!"

"That's exaggerating, Dad," I muttered.

"Not in the least! And do try to ensure a party like this never happens again!"

"I promise, Mr. Cornell, it won't happen again," Sabrina reassured, cutting in before me. "And if it does, I'll be the reason why someone ends up with a sore jaw," she looked me straight in the eye and smiled suggestively.

"Let's hope it won't come to that," my father grumbled, glaring at Derek. "And that goes for you too, 'son.' What were you even thinking... You bunch of fools."

"So how did you get him out of the morgue?" I've been itching to know the whole time. It must have been an extraordinary feat of planning: to extract this shaggy excuse for a human from the hospital freezer, and without anyone noticing.

"Felix and I went to 'identify the body.' We walked into the morgue to find the doctor unconscious on the floor. Meanwhile, Derek was belting out songs and rummaging around in a little side office for something to wear. I then darted back to the car for my coat, and while Felix was charming the pants off a nurse, I managed to sneak Derek off the premises. I must admit, we got damn lucky," Mr. Cornell Sr. concluded with a smirk. "Yeah, boys, you must have conspired there to spice up our quiet lives. And you nailed it. Pray my grandchildren won't inherit their parents' ways, right, Felix?"

"That's true. Elliot won't survive this," Derek the chill guy vampire chimed in, glancing curiously at my girlfriend.

"Solange de Manshand!" Felix exclaimed, once again nodding his head in greeting.

“Or, as your friends call you, Sabrina! It’s a great honor to meet such a talented descendant of a legendary family! I’ve known many women from your lineage, but I must admit, none of them were as charming and talented as you!” Felix proclaimed with undisguised admiration. I didn’t fail to notice how his previously lifeless, dead eyes glinted with near-human passion. “Derek told me he designed your wedding dress for you. Honestly, I was surprised...”

“You know, so was I. Surprised is putting it mildly. In fact, I was shocked!” I thought it appropriate to join the discussion at this point. I instantly regretted my decision, seeing Sabrina knit her beautiful, arched brows at my remark. A sure sign she was starting to get angry.

“What do you mean, Jack?”

“Well, to tell you the truth, I expected anything and was prepared for everything - except a hippie-style wedding.”

“Hey! What’s that supposed to mean, Jack? Have you absolutely no faith in me?”

Derek exclaimed, offended, and slowly rose from his armchair. “So, you think braided friendship bracelets are my limit, huh? Sabrina! Come on, tell him!”

Felix looked at everyone in confusion. A tense silence fell over the room. Considering that Sabrina had so far remained silent and avoided getting into spats, now was the moment when her patience could finally snap. Sensing that a controversial subject had been raised, Felix excused himself and, following my father’s example, disappeared into the kitchen, shutting the door firmly behind him.

“You two are driving me crazy!” the girl said coldly and took a deep breath. “You!” she barked, pointing a finger at Derek. “If my dress isn’t ready in four days’ time, I’ll cremate you alive! And no amount of Brenda’s sobs will save you! Rest assured. And you!” Sabrina turned to me, striking a warrior pose with her hands on her hips. “You’re not getting off lightly either! Don’t you doubt it for a second! Now get your things! We’re going home!”

She spun sharply on her heels and headed for the front door. Derek and I exchanged understanding glances.

“Tell dad that mom’s now smoking,” I instructed the now-quiet bloodsucker.

Pulling on my hoodie and swaying slightly, I shuffled after Sabrina.

Chapter 4

Pre-Wedding Torture

Two days later, our small family safely landed in Paris. It was here, in the province of Île-de-France, at the ancestral home of the de Manshands, that our grand wedding ceremony was to take place. Mom kept trying to lift my spirits, and every now and then, she would tug me at my sleeve and dreamily go over the details of her own wedding decades ago. She chattered nonstop about how, not so long ago, Sabrina and I hated each other so much that we were ready to tear each other's throats out. So considerate of her!

I endured her babbling stoically, all while stealing glances at my beloved out of the corner of my eye. In fact, I have been trying to keep my distance for now – to avoid idle arguments about the wedding's insignificant, minute details, thus souring everyone's festive mood. My nervousness didn't escape dad, when, just before boarding, I had politely asked mom to swap seats with me so she could sit next to Sabrina. Mr. Cornell Sr. tried hard to keep his composure and not give me a lecture, but in the end, he couldn't hold back.

"Don't stress so much, son. It's just a wedding," was his idea of cheering me up. "It's natural to be nervous in the run-up to it. But there's no need to torture yourself like that."

I didn't argue but just smiled back and turned on my MP3 player, signalling the end of the conversation.

"It's just a wedding..." The words weighed heavy on my heart, and I turned even gloomier. I had naively hoped that our wedding would be a modest affair: a small chapel in my hometown, only close friends and family. Not some grandiose ball type gathering with a bunch of strangers, "thanks to whom you haven't been kicked out of the Order yet," – quoting dad. With my reputation in the Order being, putting it mildly, not-so-great, I was genuinely worried that I may not be able to keep my cool on my own wedding day. And Sabrina... Oddly enough, although it was entirely expected, all Sabrina was fretting over was her wedding gown. After all, the long-awaited masterpiece was being created by none other than the greatest fashion designer of all time, Derek. But Derek, as I had thought he might, had disappeared from our radar more than 24 hours prior, after first switching off his mobile.

We stood in silence at the baggage carousel at Charles de Gaulle Airport. My parents were discussing something in hushed voices; Sabrina was glancing around nervously, searching for her self-confessed couturier. Whereas I was biting my tongue not to deliver another round of "Didn't I tell you so?"

"Jack! I don't know what I'll do to myself if Derek doesn't show up!" whispered my wife-to-be, gripping my hand tightly. "Promise me that if he disappears on us, you'll find him for me, so I can kill him!"

Well, I tell her he would?! Why does this girl never listen to me?

"You know, darling, even if he doesn't show up—which, by the way, I've warned you about more than once—there's nothing to worry about! What do you even need Derek for? We're in the fashion capital of the world, for heaven's sake! Don't you think there are enough dresses to choose from here? I'm certain we can find one so stunning that Derek himself would drop dead – pun intended – at the sight of it. And *that* he's quite good at." I finished my impromptu rant under Sabrina's scorching glare.

"Are you saying my dress, and what I want to look like on my wedding day, doesn't really matter?" she hissed, not taking her eyes off me.

"Oh, did I imply that? No, my dear. That's not what I meant. I'm just saying I can't wait till this damn circus is over!" I snapped, not holding back anymore. I freed my hand from hers abruptly and

rummaged around in my pockets for a cigarette. “Come on, did you really pack all my cigarettes in our checked luggage?” I exclaimed angrily, finding my pockets empty.

“I hate you so much right now, Jack. You have no idea!” Sabrina hissed furiously, heaved a sigh, and headed toward the exit, where cars sent by the Order were awaiting us.

“Yeah, things are spiralling out of control,” stated Brenda, who always showed up at the ‘right moment’ to rub it in. I glared at her and silently trotted to the exit.

The entire ride to the De Manshand castle, Sabrina and I played the quiet game. I stared blankly out the window, struck from time to time with pangs of remorse. We were lucky—France greeted us with beautiful sunny weather.

“They say September is going to be unusually warm this year,” Brenda broke the silence. “The weather forecast for your wedding day is also looking good.”

I heard Sabrina heave a sigh in reply to Brenda’s comment. I didn’t turn my head either and kept staring out the window. Brenda was right. The weather was glorious. Rays of golden sunshine were making its way through the red, yellow, and, in places, still green trees, dancing on the brown grass, scorched by the summer heat. Nature was valiantly sharing its beauty with us, but this mesmerizing sight only deepened the sorrow in my heart. What am I doing? What’s happening to me?

“Nearly there!” Brenda said cheerfully, apparently still keen to lighten up everyone’s mood.

I stole a glance at Sabrina, who was still silent and oblivious to everything around her. I looked out the window again and was stunned to see a line of parked cars stretching from that point all the way to the castle gates.

“Holy crap,” I muttered, swallowing a lump in my throat. The gates stood wide open, letting our car drive through to the inner courtyard. I clambered out of the car and looked around. Where did all these people come from? Who are they?

“Eric!” Sabrina’s cry made me turn around quickly. She rushed toward the castle steps and literally threw herself into the arms of a young man in dark sunglasses. The man gave her a tight hug and laughed.

“God, Sabi, sis! I’ve missed you so much! You look stunning! Absolutely stunning!” Eric was beaming, his wide grin revealing a pair of the habitual sharp fangs. “How are the happy bride and her hopeless groom doing?”

“We’re fine. But right now, I hate him,” Sabrina declared, shooting me an icy look. “He’s driving me crazy!” She turned back around, stood on her tiptoes, and kissed her brother on the cheek. “I’ve missed you too,” she added, then let go of him and disappeared through the imposing, medieval castle door.

“Same old, same old, huh? What is it this time?” Eric the-now-vampire asked, clearly amused. “Good to see you, by the way.”

“Likewise,” I replied, clapping Eric on the shoulder. Finally, I was reunited with my best friend, my partner in crime, my rock, who I knew wouldn’t lecture me or preach proper etiquette. The friend I’ve been missing so this past year. “What the hell are you doing out in the sunshine? You can barely see anything during the day.”

“Because I’d rather be out in the sun than inside, with Derek running around like a headless chicken, trying to make everything ‘perfect’. Can’t take this anymore!” Eric grumbled.

“Derek’s here?”

“You bet! And he’s been driving us all nuts for days now. And it’s not just him... So, what’s up with you two?” he deflected, sitting down on the wide marble slab at the bottom of the steps running up to the castle doors.

“Eric, is that... a ponytail?” I asked, eyeing my friend’s new hairstyle in disbelief.

“Renee thinks it suits me,” the vampire smirked and rummaged around in his hoodie pocket for a pack of cigarettes. “Old habits die hard, right?”

“Weird to see a vampire smoke. But then again, Derek managed to get plastered, so I guess nothing surprises me anymore,” I said, sitting down next to Eric.

“At least I won’t die of lung cancer,” Eric chuckled, handing me a cigarette. “So, what happened? Second-guessing the whole getting married thing amidst all the chaos, and she realised that?” Eric persisted, glancing at a party of newly arrived guests making their way in – people that we were seeing for the first and, likely, last time in our lives.

“How do I put this? You know your sister hates it when I voice my dissatisfaction, also known as opinion.”

“That’s her signature stance. But sometimes, brother, you’ve got to put her in her place.”

I smirked, remembering how Eric used to tease Sabrina back when he was still human and living in New Orleans. Ah, those were fun times!

“You’ve spoiled her,” Eric concluded, taking a drag on his cigarette.

“Oh my God, Jackie! I’m so happy to see you!” boomed someone on my left. I jumped up in surprise and turned my head, but no one was there. “What a wonderful occasion!

Your wedding! I can hardly believe it! Are you excited?”

Now the voice came from my right. What the hell was going on?

“Endlessly,” I replied to the invisible speaker. “Though I’d love to know who I’m talking to.”

“It’s me, Stella, a relative of Sabrina’s,” the voice chimed in cheerfully from somewhere above me. “I lived in the twenties of the last century, but that’s not important! Just look at how many people have come! And it’s only noon!”

For a moment, the air around me sort of rippled and shimmered, and I could make out the faint silhouette of a woman in a simple, flowing beaded dress.

“So much to do! See you later, boys!” the phantom made a kissing sound and vanished, leaving behind only a light breeze.

“For a ghost, she’s way too lively,” Eric muttered. “Let’s head inside, buddy! And smile! The day after tomorrow, you’ll be married! And to whom? My own sister!

Never thought I’d live to see the day!” Eric clapped me on the shoulder and let out a raucous laugh. I forced a crooked smile and trudged after him.

We entered the main hall with the grand fireplace, also known as the “Crimson Room.”

Inside, there was complete aesthetic chaos. Everywhere you looked, there were huge vases with hydrangeas and roses in pastel pink and beige. The flowers were everywhere: on the floor, as if growing out of the soft pile crimson carpet; on the massive antique table; and even on the tall chairs. The sweet fragrance filled the entire room, mingling with the scent of old wood and history. To the left, on a small, gilded bench upholstered in crimson satin, were sitting the ghosts of Alex and Vivienne, my grandfather and the first witch of the De Manshand clann. The ghosts were whispering to each other and exchanging furtive glances.

“Did I not make myself clear enough zat we still need peonies and lots of greenery?”

The keyword is *lots*, Derek! And I also requested carnations for ze ballroom. And what did you bring? Roses and hydrangeas!” came a high-pitched female voice with a subtle French accent. I couldn’t see the speakers, as they were in the adjacent hallway, but judging by the woman’s tone, we arrived just in time for the start of a heated argument.

“And I think roses and light blue hydrangeas will look far more dramatic when reflected in the tall mirrors. Carnations don’t belong here at all! But if you insist, we can add some deeper shades,” retorted the familiar, irritated voice of our prodigal designer.

“Derek! Don’t push me!” the woman snapped back resolutely, stepping into the drawing room. Before us stood a petite young woman with chestnut hair styled in an intricate updo. Her skin was pale, and her deep brown eyes, framed by thick lashes, were sending sparks flying in every direction. She ran a slender hand through her hair and tilted her head slightly in resignation.

“Alright, we’ll figure something out,” she mused, before finally noticing Eric and me.

“Mr. Cornell! Finally! I was starting to think Eric was keeping you away from us on purpose,” the stranger chirped, flashing a friendly smile that revealed a pair of sharp, perfectly shaped pearl-white fangs.

I was genuinely surprised by the turn of events. Never before had I met such a charming-looking vampire. And, judging by her demeanor, even she seemed annoyed with Derek today, meaning I needed to make quite an impression on this delightful lady—and fast.

“My name is Angelica Timmons,” my new acquaintance introduced herself, extending her hand in greeting.

“You must be Felix’s wife?”

“Exactement,” Angelica replied in her native tongue, smiling still. “Jack, I understand that most men don’t care about festive decor. Trust me when I say it... centuries may change, but men *never* do. And yet... What do you think?”

“I back your choice fully! Carnations should look perfect here,” I assured her and paused, involuntarily recalling the events that took place in this very ballroom only last year.

Eric tugged at my sleeve and gestured for me to look at the door, through which appeared the familiar head, adorned with dishevelled hair to which a multi-colored shoelace was attached.

“Carnations are so last century,” Derek grumbled, stepping into full view.

“*Your suit* is last century!” Angelica retorted teasingly. “What flea market even sells zis stuff anymore?”

“I bought it in the early forties, in Glasgow, Scotland. But that’s not the point. Cornell, are you for real about the carnations? Weren’t you the one telling us you couldn’t care less about wedding preparations and wedding theme?”

He was right, of course. *Awkward*. I scratched the back of my head and looked Derek straight in the eye, nodding silently.

“You disappointed me, Cornell,” Derek said pompously. “And by the way, roses are known for their vibration-raising and space-cleansing frequency.”

“For what?”

“Roses can purify the energetic field, also known as aura. You know – that invisible thing around them that all living humans have? Except you, buddy. You live shrouded in thick nicotine fog.”

“Well, then keep your nose out of my fog, go sniff some flowers, cleanse your chakras, and leave me alone!” I snapped.

Derek shot me an angry glance but didn’t argue further.

“I’ll go ask Sabrina if she liked the dress,” he changed the subject, casting another pitiful look at the hydrangeas that Angélique started removing from the vases to make space for carnations. With a theatrical roll of his eyes, he left the hall.

“Poor guy. He’s having a tough time,” Vivienne murmured with a gentle smile.

“Believe me, sometimes you just have to tell him to stop. Otherwise, trying to do everything at once, he’ll either accomplish nothing or create complete chaos... You should have seen what he had got himself into in the early seventies of the last century,” Angelica giggled, carefully tying a ribbon around a flower bouquet.

I tried to match the festive atmosphere, beaming smiles left and right and shaking hands with constantly arriving guests whom I’d never seen before in my life. Everyone rushed to congratulate me on this marvellous, life-changing occasion, inevitably asking where my better half was hiding. Each time I would just shrug innocently and blame her absence on the hectic last-minute preparations. Though, in truth, I had no idea where my beloved had disappeared to.

Lost in gloomy thought, I wandered through the long corridors of the old castle, mentally rehearsing the upcoming conversation with my bride. The longer I tried to focus, the heavier my heart

felt. I didn't know how long I had spent wandering around, but it seemed like eternity. Suddenly, I came across a tall oak door with a heraldic lily carved into it. I grabbed the gilded door handle and found the door unlocked. A moment later, I was in a spacious, dimly lit library. Wooden shelves laden with antique books were faintly illuminated by the twilight streaming through the tall French windows.

I stepped out into the garden, passed a small decorative fountain and sat down on an ornate cast iron bench, hidden from view by the thick branches of an old pine tree. I lit a cigarette. Memories of my first visit to the castle flooded my weary mind.

Last year when we left Eric here and flew back home to New Orleans, I was genuinely hoping to never return to this cursed place. And yet, despite all the promises I'd given myself, I ended up caving in to Sabrina's and my parents' relentless pleas to have the wedding here. What the hell was I thinking?

"Hi, Jack," a soft voice came from the direction of the library. I turned to face Angelica. She smiled gently, stepping into the garden. "Escaping the chaos?" she sank gracefully on the bench next to me.

"Honestly, I'd been tired of all this long before we even got here," I muttered, resting my head in my hands.

"This isn't what you wanted, is it? It's written all over your face. And Eric's not too thrilled either, although he's crazy keen to find out what the cake tastes like."

"You know, Angelica, I just wanted us to get married. At home, by the Mississippi. No crowd, no pomp and fuss. Neither me nor Eric can remember any one of these 'guests', because we never met them before! And – surprise, surprise – my parents seem to know everyone," I sighed heavily and looked at my companion, who seemed lost in deep thought.

"You really don't know anyone?"

"My bosses don't count."

"Over a hundred people," Angelica said thoughtfully.

"What?" I could not believe my ears. "Good Lord, where did they all come from? Did Derek hire film extras to make everything look exactly how he had envisioned it?"

"And that's not counting the ghosts of the long-deceased relatives who simply couldn't stay away."

"Holy hell," I mumbled, dropping my head back into my hands. Yeah, I'm going to need a miracle to get through the next two days.

"Seems like I really hurt Sabrina this time."

"Then maybe you should apologize?" Angelica smiled.

"Simple as that?"

"Trust me, I know," the vampiress nodded, standing up from the bench. "In our three hundred and four years of marriage, Felix and I have been through so much that you mortals would be needing a live-in mental health specialist."

"Three hundred and four years?"

"Yes. Quite a lot, isn't it?"

"How do you do it?"

"Jack, are you doubting your choice?" Angelica asked suddenly, her gaze riveting me to the spot. I froze for a moment, the painful memories of last year resurfacing once more.

"No, not at all," I replied firmly.

"Then you should apologize and leave the past behind. The day after tomorrow is a big day. You shouldn't start a new life with a heavy heart."

"You're right. I'll talk to her right away."

"Just think carefully what you're going to say. It's more important now than ever,"

Angélique whispered, then smiled warmly and disappeared into the shadows of the shaggy pines.

After a moment's hesitation, I walked around the fountain and onto a narrow path that wound its way between the fluffy fir trees. Soon, I emerged onto a big lawn that housed elegant, ornate gazebos, adorned with white chiffon and fresh flower garlands. At the farther end of the lawn, away from a small stage, my father was sitting on a white limewash Chiavari chair. He was chatting animatedly with a woman I didn't recognize and laughing loudly. Trying not to draw their attention, I quickly turned around and headed toward the castle's main entrance. I had barely made a few steps when I nearly ran into the pensive Felix Timmons who suddenly appeared in front of me. He seemed oblivious to my presence, his eyes riveted on an old envelope with a dark wax seal that he was holding.

"Good evening, Felix," I greeted my new acquaintance. "Did you just arrive? I haven't seen you today."

"Hello, Jack," the vampire replied, raising his tired eyes to meet mine. "I was in Paris for an auction. Look what I bought," he handed me a time-worn wax sealed envelope, and on the seal were peculiar lines, barely visible now, that looked to me like sun rays.

"It's a royal seal," Felix declared proudly. "Dating back to King Louis XIV's court at Versailles."

"So what's so special about it?" I asked, out of politeness rather than interest.

"Look closer," Felix said softly, his long, claw-like finger pointing at the perfectly preserved seal. I lifted the envelop to eye level and squinted at it in the dim light of a nearby lantern. I could now see the faint outlines of a smiling face styled as the sun sitting inside a rose.

"Wow! That's the emblem of our Order!" Now it was me turning the strange envelope over in my hands and staring at it, puzzled. There was no address written on it – just a single word – or to be more precise, – a name.

"Why, Felix, curiosity won't kill *you*!" I exclaimed, noticing that the envelope hadn't been opened. "Don't you want to know anything about this Armand guy?"

"You're mistaken, my friend," the vampire replied, pointing at the seal yet again. I followed his finger carefully and this time I noticed a small crack running through the center of the seal. Someone already broke it once to read the letter and then tried to stick the seal parts back together with glue.

"So, what's it all about?" I asked, assuming it was Felix who had done it.

"No idea," was his reply. "What interests me more is how the Order comes into all this, and what ties it could have had with the King or his court."

"Well, that's something to spice up your immortal existence. A bit of mystery to solve, huh? Now I'm curious too. Will you tell me when you find out?"

Felix ignored my question and pulled a gold ribbon-tied black velvet pouch from his pocket.

"You know, Jack, I'd be very grateful if you could deliver this letter and this ring to Monsieur Armel Dumourier. He's arriving in Île-de-France tomorrow morning." The vampire untied the pouch and produced an old-looking gold ring with a massive ruby in the center. "Just look at this symbol of power and grandeur! A totally unique piece of jewellery. A genuine masterpiece."

"I'll bet it was stolen from some cardinal..." I muttered under my breath.

"What?" Felix looked hesitant, clearly second-guessing his choice of trusted courier for the delivery of such a valuable item.

"Sorry, it's just this ring evokes certain associations. You know, the ruby reminds me of a French cardinal's hat... and I just can't help but imagine one, with an arrogant, perpetually dissatisfied face, and his hand adorned with a ring like this one, stroking an equally dissatisfied cat while waiting to be bribed..."

I noticed Felix become slightly worried and suspicious at my rant.

"I mean, of course, I'll deliver it," I hastened to reassure him. "However... You're the curator of the ancient letters department. Shouldn't you be handling such 'correspondence' yourself? And who is this Dumourier anyway?"

“You see, Jack, the reign of Louis XIV is a rather controversial and ambiguous period in French history. The letter itself isn’t that important. But if my hunch about this ring is correct, we might make another groundbreaking discovery.”

“I don’t mean to sound like a bore, but, coming back to my question – why can’t *you* deliver this to him yourself? And... who is he, really?”

“He’s one of the leading experts on French history and has been studying the legend of the mysterious ruby Psyche for many years.”

“What does this ruby look like then?” I asked, examining the ring again. “Do you think this could be it? I remember reading something about it, but honestly, I can’t remember the details now.”

“Ah, Jack, I so wish I could answer all your questions. But alas, it’s beyond my power.

All I can say is: for as long as I can remember, the hunt for Psyche has been ongoing.

Why? That is the question, my friend! Perhaps, Armel knows and might shed some light on this mystery for us.”

“And you?”

“I won’t be at your wedding, as I must leave for Rome immediately. The matter can’t wait. In fact, I came here to deliver the envelope and the ring to Armel myself, but as it turns out, his flight has been rescheduled for next morning. Angelica is busy with wedding preparations, and keeping Derek’s creative juices in check, so I didn’t dare approach her with this. So, Jack, I want to apologize for not being able to attend such an important day for you and Sabrina. Nevertheless, please accept my best wishes. And once again, I ask for your forgiveness.”

“No problem. You can count on me,”

The vampire nodded to me curtly and turned to go, but hardly made a few steps before stopping suddenly.

“And, Jack,” he added, “make sure the ring doesn’t end up in Brenda’s hands.”

I smirked. Everyone knew Brenda was a trouble magnet. She couldn’t leave the house without falling into some sort of adventure, mostly unpleasant. I turned around and rushed back to the castle. Ahead of me lay a conversation with my future wife, who has been more distant today than ever, and not even trying her usual tricks of ‘accidentally’ running into to start an argument. Usually, she would try to appear extremely hurt over my actions and make me go crazy with guilt. I have learnt now to keep my cool and ignore her antics. But in the end, I always cave in to her mind games and start apologizing, causing yet more tears and complaints that I don’t love her and like to drive her to hysterics. She would eventually accept my pleas and promises to do better in future and would be all hugs and smiles again – for a few peaceful days. Today, however, we seemed to have set a new record in not talking to each other. I haven’t even glimpsed her once since this morning, when she told Eric I was annoying her. But, as Angélique rightly said, I needed to pull myself together and leave all grievances behind.

I had to talk to Sabrina.

I put the letter and the ring into my jeans pocket, gathered what little willpower I had left, climbed the massive staircase, and set off in search of my bride.

“You’re not lost, handsome, are you?” a playful voice came from somewhere on my right. I turned around, but no one was there. “Definitely lost,” the same voice now sounded in front of me.

The air shimmered and sort of rippled, and there appeared in front of me a slender silhouette of Stella in her vintage, embroidered, beaded beige dress. The phantom was lounging on a small sofa, its legs elegantly crossed, a glass of Martini in the ghostly hand, as transparent and shimmering as the phantom itself. I shot Stella a sideways glance and walked on, not thinking it the best time to socialise.

“Ah, how I loved parties,” Stella sang thoughtfully, suddenly appearing beside me.

“Where are you off to? Maybe you’ll keep me company?”

“I’m looking for Sabrina,” I replied quietly, trying to make it clear I wasn’t in the mood for conversation, let alone drinks.

“Oh, Jackie, you’ve got your whole life ahead of you! You’ll survive one night without her,” Stella drawled, taking another ‘sip’ from her transparent glass.

“What was that?” I asked, not getting her point.

“She’s talking about the old tradition of not seeing the bride before the ceremony,”

Alex’s ghost interjected, suddenly materializing before us.

“Oh! Mr. Venters! Punctual as ever! I’m already on my last legs!” Stella giggled and dissolved into the air like a wisp of smoke.

“Can you imagine how much idle noise that lady made in her lifetime?” Old Venters grinned at me warmly. “You could use some sleep, Jack. The day after tomorrow is a big day, and you look terrible.”

“I promise to shave. And I’ve got all of tomorrow still,” I muttered, forcing a pathetic smile. “Have you seen her?”

“She’s in the farthest bedroom. But you can’t go in there! Respect an old tradition, Jack.

The groom and bride must spend the night before the wedding apart,” Alex preached.

“One night, not two. Remind me about this tomorrow,” I said calmly.

“She’s been asking about you.”

“I have hurt her today. Any advice?”

“Sometimes you have to swallow your pride and make the first move. She loves you very much and has been waiting all day,” Alex encouraged me. “You know whose blood runs in Sabrina’s veins. Accept it and go to her. She’s too proud to admit she’s wrong.”

“That’s exactly what my problem with her is,” I muttered and walked over to the door Alex had pointed to. I knocked gingerly.

There was no answer. I assumed Sabrina was already asleep, but I turned the gilded handle anyway. To my surprise, the door was unlocked. I peeked inside, hesitating to enter. My princess’s chambers were in complete disarray: on the enormous bed, covered by a gold-threaded brocade throw, were scattered elegant mother-of-pearl hairpins. Scraps of white tulle, silk ribbons, and vintage lace were everywhere.

“I think the veil might not be necessary,” Angelica’s melodic voice came from somewhere on my left. I turned and saw a tall white intricately carved wooden door that was ajar. That was enough for me to peek inside without being seen.

What I saw took my breath away. Sabrina stood on a small wooden podium in the middle of a brightly lit boudoir. She was wearing a luxurious white corseted dress, its bodice lavishly embroidered with pearls. The dress seemed to hug her delicate figure, accentuating the slender waist and all the right curves. She casually ran her hand over the folds of the long skirt which flowed into a dramatic lace-trimmed train. From the side, she looked like a weightless porcelain doll, and I instinctively leaned forward for a closer look. I had to give Derek credit—he really knew how to sew.

“The most important thing is to ensure no one steps on the train. Or the dress – and the wedding – will be ruined,” my future wife sang in delight.

“And I think the veil is a must,” Derek retorted. “But it should be very long. We’ll have to make some adjustments. There’s still time.”

I was so absorbed in eyeing Sabrina in her fairy-tale gown, hidden behind the boudoir door, that I didn’t hear another door creak open behind me, and someone else enter the room. That someone else was the person who always showed up at the worst possible moment.

“Jack! What are you doing in here? You’re spying!” Brenda shrieked, dropping a box of white high heel shoes on the floor and lunging straight at me. Instinctively, I stepped forward and tried to clamp my hand over Brenda’s annoying mouth, but it was too late, of course. Apparently, Brenda decided to put up a fight. She pulled at my zip-up hoodie, desperately trying to shove me out of the

room. Silently, I unzipped it and literally slipped out of Brenda's clutch. She staggered, losing her balance, and fell on the floor. I smirked, reaching down to help her up, but she lunged at me again.

Hearing the commotion, Derek rushed out of the boudoir and froze on the spot. Then he closed his eyes, cursed loudly, and pulled the furious Brenda away from me.

"He saw the dress!" she screeched again, kicking and thrashing, trying to break free from the vampire's iron grip.

"Brenda, chill," I said as calmly as I could, though I was fuming on the inside. "Why are *you* so worked up? It's not like it's *your* dress I saw!"

"Don't you know it's bad luck if the groom sees the bride's gown before the wedding?"

Derek cut in coolly, still trying to contain his companion. "Brenda, enough!"

"Oh, come on! What kind of silly superstition is that?"

"The kind that's a really bad omen!" Derek grumbled. "Brenda! Calm down already!"

My poor nerves, which I'd been trying to keep in check this whole insane day, finally snapped, unleashing all the anger and frustration that had been building up inside me over the past month. I turned on my heel and forcefully flung open the boudoir door.

Sabrina was sitting on a small pouf, drowning in a sea of lace and organza. She was shaking with indignation and surprise. Suddenly, she started pulling delicate mother-of-pear hairpins from her hair. Behind her stood a bewildered Angelica.

"I'll leave you to it," Derek mouthed, leaning over Sabrina.

"Be wise, don't make any mistakes," Angelica whispered, then the pair of them left the boudoir, firmly shutting the door behind them.

I took a deep breath, waiting for Sabrina to lash out at me, also known as initiate the conversation. To my surprise, she didn't. She continued to remain silent, burning holes in me with her deep blue eyes full of tears and resentment.

"If that's how it is, may I begin then. Firstly, I don't believe in silly omens and superstitions invented for innocent maidens who faint at the sight of a dead fly.

Secondly, I did knock before entering. Thirdly... I just wanted to apologize and say that I don't want our married life to start with resentment and scandals. I love you, despite all your ridiculous antics. And forgive me, sunshine, but you've got the most infuriating personality. I love you still. And the day after tomorrow, unless you buy into all that omen nonsense spouted by the crazy duo and don't change your mind—which I'm still hoping for—I'll repeat it before God. And before the entire crowd of those strangers!

I'll smile dutifully, shake everyone's hands, and shower them with thanks for their congratulations and gifts. Although you know perfectly well how much that annoys me! I always want you to be happy. Even if you're hating me right now."

Sabrina remained silent, struggling to hold back tears, gripping the hairpins so tightly that her knuckles turned white. I waited a few minutes, expecting her to lunge at me and try to stab me with a hairpin, but none of that happened. She closed her eyes, letting a tear roll down her lashes. That single tear pierced my heart like a knife. I couldn't say another word. Hastily, I left the boudoir, leaving Sabrina tête-à-tête with her grief and pride.

I wanted to strangle that omnipresent Brenda for showing up at the worst time to ruin the moment for me, and, potentially, my entire future life with Sabrina. But where was she now that I needed to scold her? Brenda was only where she was not welcome or needed! And now that she had done her 'duty', she disappeared. Could this day have gone any worse? What Gods had I angered? Because I must have done. Feeling completely drained, I headed to my room, escorted by a subdued Angélique.

"What are my chances of a happy ending?" I asked the vampiress gloomily. Angelica paused for a moment, then shook her head sadly.

“You did the right thing, Jack. That’s my opinion. If you truly matter to her, she’ll listen to her heart. And don’t pay attention to any nonsense. I’ll have a little chat with Brenda. Derek’s hopeless—he’s always on the edge. But you – you need a rest right now,” Angelica smiled gently and headed away from me toward the grand staircase.

I pushed open the heavy oak door and disappeared into the welcoming coolness and darkness of my chamber, illuminated only by the moonlight. The image of the slender girl in her poufy wedding dress reappeared in my mind. Before that wicked witch Brenda popped up in the room, I could have sworn I had glimpsed a sparkle of happiness in my bride’s eyes. My heart still heavy, I took off my T-shirt, pulled the envelope and the pouch with the ring from my pocket and placed them on a small table by the window. On the table – I now noticed – stood a tall decanter half-full of deep amber-colored liquid, which, upon closer inspection, turned out to be proper vintage cognac, and two glasses. I poured myself a glass, took a few sips, lit a cigarette and sank heavily onto my bed.

My life was changing rapidly, and not for the better. Cursing everything under the sun, I closed my eyes, plunging into impenetrable darkness, a darkness that now seemed to symbolise my entire existence. I tried not to think about the upcoming two days, for they promised to be fine fun for everyone, except for myself.

My gloomy thoughts were interrupted by the soft creaking of the opening door.

Someone entered the room and stood there, hesitating, waiting. After what felt like an eternity, my eyes still shut, I heard light footsteps approaching.

Someone stopped by the bed, then sat down beside me gingerly. The next moment I was aware of a gentle kiss being planted on my unshaven cheek, and the familiar tender fingertips ran through my tangled hair.

“I love you too,” whispered the dear voice in my ear. “And my temper really is awful.”

“Hey! You’re here... What about that old tradition? The bad omen thing?”

“I’m a witch, remember? Omens don’t bother me. What could possibly happen?”

Sabrina chuckled softly. “Let’s not fight anymore. I’m so tired of it. Plus, I’ll need to get up super early and sneak back to my room before anyone discovers I spent the night with you.”

“My devious goddess,” I muttered, pulling her closer.

Well, maybe I was wrong, and all was not so bad after all. Destiny, it seemed, decided to remind me that there was still light at the end of the tunnel. And tomorrow morning... Tomorrow morning, we shall start with a clean slate. And I hope the wedding goes without a hitch. Here’s to no more drama and hysterics!

Chapter 5

What Could Possibly Happen?

I woke up rather early to find Sabrina long gone. Outside, the weather was gloomy, and the rain was tapping lightly against the tall windows of my bedroom, like a soft drumroll. The clock hands were on nine. Considering the amount of people involved in the final preparations for our wedding, I selfishly decided they would manage just fine without me – which meant I could sleep for a couple more hours. My conscience completely clear, I nestled back in my bed and was about to doze off, when there came a sudden persistent knock on the door. I froze, pretending not to be there, then pulled the blanket over myself to hide. And then my phone pinged, announcing a delivered message. The message was a voice note from dad.

“Open up, son, I know you’re not sleeping! I’ve brought you your suit.” He was clearly irritated. Another urgent knock on the door.

Reluctantly, I crawled out of bed, opened the door wide enough for my hand to go through, grabbed the suit from my father with thanks and shut the door hastily behind him. To give him credit, he didn’t complain, just nodded understandingly and went on about his business. I had no desire to talk to anyone, let alone answer the same questions over and over. And now, I didn’t even feel like sleeping anymore. Why does everything always seem against me? There was nothing else to do but get up, so I decided to accept my fate. After a quick shower, I headed to the kitchen through the maze of old, dim corridors, moving in the shadows, trying to remain unseen. To my surprise, hardly anyone paid any attention to me, everyone busy with their own tasks.

Except for me and a local chef, the kitchen was empty, so I sat down to my breakfast in peace and quiet, and then, just as quietly, I returned to my bedroom. Today was supposed to be our wedding rehearsal, so I figured if I could survive today, I had every chance of surviving the Big Day itself.

I glanced at the perfectly ironed wedding suit and the lonely bow tie lying on the bed. I shuddered. It’s a good thing mom insisted on buying a classic tie right before the flight.

Well, it’s time I surrendered to fate and finally tried on this monstrous attire.

I donned the black pants, the white shirt, the black vest, and shiny new shoes, then stared at myself in the mirror. I couldn’t recognise myself. But I could now see why men wearing tux are often likened to penguins. Being in the suit made me feel somewhat strange and rather uncomfortable.

“Thank God I’ve never worked in an office. Suits are pure torture,” I muttered through clenched teeth as I lifted the collar to put on the bow tie.

There came a knock on the door, and before I could even decide if I wanted to see anyone or not, the door swung open. Derek stood in the doorway, sporting basketball shorts, a red Nirvana T-shirt, and a lime green hoodie. In his hands, he held a ball and a pair of sunglasses.

“Hey, Cornell,” Derek greeted me, spinning the ball on his finger. “Why are you all dressed up? The rehearsal isn’t due for hours.”

“Don’t ask,” I grumbled, giving my mirror reflection another disapproving look.

“Alright, I won’t. There’s no sun today, so Eric, Joey, and I are thinking of shooting hoops. You in?”

Derek stared at me, waiting for an answer while I struggled with the tie. It was my third attempt, and another failure.

“You’ll strangle yourself,” the bloodsucker remarked in a matter-of-fact way.

“Maybe that’s for the best. Why can’t we be wearing just jeans and T-shirts to own wedding?”

“Yeah, and ride off into the sunset on a Harley.”

“As an option, yes. What would be your dream wedding, by the way?”

“Well, my wedding was pretty traditional.”

I stopped and stared at the vampire. In all the years of our friendship, he had never once mentioned having been married. I couldn't help but notice a sudden change come over Derek. The usual cheerfulness and nonchalant manner were gone without a trace. He heaved a sigh and seemed to retreat into the world of memories, running his hands over the ball absent-mindedly. I could tell he was pondering something – or rather, reminiscing about something – and judging by his sad expression, now wasn't the best time to ask questions. But curiosity got the better of me, and I was just about to open my mouth when the door burst open, and Sabrina literally flew into the room.

“Jack, sweetie, is my phone charger in your suitcase?” she asked, pulling her phone out of the pocket of her long Terry bathrobe. “I can't find it, and my phone's nearly dead.”

Sabrina halted, looked me up and down, biting her lip playfully, and laughed.

“Holy crap, Jack! You look so smart! Boy, do I envy myself!” exclaimed my better half, adjusting the towel on her head before throwing her arms around my neck. “You look so sexy. A real gentleman. That suit looks amazing on you! Right, Derek?”

The vampire tossed the ball high into the air and, without looking at us, nodded silently in agreement. At that moment, I noticed someone else hiding behind him.

“Come on, Brenda, I've seen you now,” I called to her, finally giving up on the bow.

Sabrina smirked and put her hands on my tie. Moving her hands like a pro, she quickly did the bow for me and stood back to admire her work.

Brenda stood in the doorway for a moment, but eventually stepped hesitantly forward, handing me the hoodie I'd left in Sabrina's room the night before.

“I accidentally ripped your sleeve. But I sewed it back together. I mean... Derek did. And I'm sorry about yesterday. Really, I didn't mean to. It's just... everything's so overwhelming. And your constant thoughts...”

“What thoughts?” Sabrina asked me, alarmed.

“Don't listen to her, sweetheart. Everything's fine,” I said, kissing Sabrina on the tip of her nose and gesturing Brenda to go to the table. “Help yourself to some chocolate and find something else to occupy your mind with besides reading my thoughts. We'll look for the phone charger.”

I expected Sabrina to bombard me with questions, but to my surprise, she just started looking for the charger. Brenda fell silent and looked curiously at the unusually quiet Derek, who had put in his earbuds and seemed completely lost in thought.

Brenda slowly walked over to the table, on which were stacked a couple of chocolate bars, an old, yellowed wax sealed envelope, and a black velvet pouch. She glanced the items over, picked up a chocolate bar, stuffed it into her old leather jacket pocket, and gently ran her fingers over the velvet pouch. For a moment, she shut her eyes, as if trying to shake off the nagging urge to mentally scan its contents. She even bit her lip.

Still, curiosity got the better of her. She glanced at Derek again, as if hoping he might prove a welcoming distraction, but he seemed oblivious to everything around him.

Seeing that we were all busy with our own tasks, Brenda stealthily picked up the pouch, untied the ribbon, and pulled out the ring.

“Wowzer! Look at that beaut!” Brenda muttered under her breath, noticing the ruby start to glow faintly in her warm hands. She suddenly thought there might be some initials engraved on the back of the stone. She turned it over and peered at it, trying to make out the scratch marks that represented the letters worn away over time – sadly, she could decipher nothing. Brenda brought the ring to her face for a closer look, when suddenly the ruby began to pulsate, radiating a bright light. Her eyes widened, and she held her breath in awe.

A loud *thud* sound bounced around the room, creating an ominous echo. It was Derek slamming the ball down to the floor. Nothing to worry about, and yet the sound was enough to startle Brenda, causing her to drop the ring. It hit the stone slabs with a dull, metallic clink and rolled under the table. Brenda gasped and dropped to the floor after it. Picking the ring up with trembling hands, she saw in horror that a narrow crack had formed on the gem's surface.

"Damn it," she whispered, quickly getting to her feet and sliding the ring back in the pouch.

"Brenda! I told you only to take a chocolate bar and leave everything else alone!" I barked from the closet. "Sabi, I don't know where your charger is. Maybe you left it at home? My backpack was around here somewhere. Maybe it's in there."

I stepped out of the closet and froze on the spot. Something in the bedroom had changed. Something was off. Actually... *Everything* was off! What the hell was going on? I admit the wedding was driving me crazy, but – to *that* extent?

I looked around frantically, not believing my eyes. The room, which I now knew down to the smallest detail, had transformed beyond recognition. The burgundy curtains with gold brush fringe trim, which I distinctly remember being open when I had gone into the closet, were now tightly drawn, deep blue and missing the fringe trim. Bright sunlight barely reached through the thick brocade fabric, only leaving tiny pools of dim light on the floor. It was even more strange because I clearly remembered it was a grey, gloomy morning when I woke up, and it had been raining through the night. The air was suddenly thick with the almost tangible scent of candles: beeswax, vanilla, and a hint of incense. A bad feeling crept over me, followed by a blood-chilling realization that somehow, I had managed to travel to another time, another dimension.

I took a couple of steps toward the bed, which seemed to have shrunk in size. What used to be a massive, messy-looking bed was now a small, neat, four poster affair. It was made up with a bedspread the same shade of blue as the curtains. On the solid oak nightstand, which I also didn't recognize, stood a huge vase with a bouquet of scarlet roses. Next to the vase, rested a neat stack of antique-looking leather-bound books.

Their spines were adorned with gold embossing that glowed softly in the dim light of the strange chamber.

I kept looking around me in confusion. The walls of the room were changing right before my eyes. Their familiar color and pattern were slowly fading out, as if an invisible hand were carefully peeling the old wallpaper to reveal the ancient masonry hidden beneath. The patterns that were emerging now were intricate and unfamiliar: a tangled mess of grape vines, delicate flowers, and symbols I couldn't decipher. It was as if the room were breathing again, gifted a new lease of life, returning to its former glory, hidden from view for centuries.

I stood there, in the middle of the bizarre transformation, feeling my head spinning as my reality was shifting. Every object, every corner of the room seemed to be telling its own story in some sort of magical performance, and I was a mere spectator. And it didn't make me happy at all. What the hell was going on?

"Um... guys," Derek called out quietly. "Is it just me, or was this door white just now?"

Our friendly bloodsucker nodded toward the massive black oak door with a brass handle and drew the basketball to his chest.

"It's not just you," I muttered, feeling my stomach drop as if it were setting off on its own adventure. I tried to keep my voice calm, despite numerous alarms going off inside my head. How could my room have become so unrecognizable in just a few minutes?

Derek and I exchanged glances. Both of us were trying to ascertain what was happening and what to do next. Meanwhile, the space around us continued to transform slowly, as if obeying some invisible force. Gradually, the room became more austere, with fewer and smaller objects in it.

“What the hell?” Sabrina suddenly screamed next to me. “What kind of sick joke is this? Where are we even?”

She nervously adjusted the towel on her head and stared at me in confusion.

“I... I’m not entirely sure,” a soft voice piped up from behind us, “but I think it’s my fault.”

Well, of course! Could it have been anyone else’s? What even possessed me to think that having Brenda as a wedding guest would *not* make things go sideways? Naive fool! I closed my eyes, counted to five, then turned to face Brenda. She was standing there, shuffling, a silly, guilty smile on her face. I clenched my fists, taking a step in her direction, and was about to be extremely rude to her when a sudden, strange rustling noise behind the door made me freeze on the spot. Someone was there, and that someone was eavesdropping on us. My gut told me we were running out of time, which meant we had to think and act fast.

“Here’s your backpack,” Brenda whispered, almost apologetically.

“I see,” I whispered back. “Now, pack everything from that table into it before it’s sucked into that time hole or whatever it is, and let’s get out of here. Got it?”

A muffled noise came from deep within the hallway. Brenda, her hands trembling, quickly stuffed a comb, the envelope, and the chocolate bar into the backpack. She reached for the ring pouch, grabbing it and trying to lift it, but it seemed glued to the spot and, a moment later, it vanished completely. She bit her lip and sniffled quietly.

Struggling with my hoodie, I gave her a threatening look that said, “I’m getting you for this, but first – I’ll deal with this mess.”

“Okay, I’ve got everything. Let’s go before – ”

Her words were cut off by a loud knock on the door, making us freeze in place.

“Who is it?” Derek whispered, gripping the ball tight as if it could offer him guidance and protection.

“Maybe the maid?” Sabrina suggested in a shaking voice.

“Maids don’t knock, sweetheart,” I whispered back. “They just barge in and start cleaning, even if you’re still asleep.”

Loud voices could be heard behind the door now, and someone was resolutely turning the handle. Brenda moved closer to me, Sabrina closed her eyes, and Derek and I exchanged frightened glances. The four of us looked like the rabbits in the headlights.

The door opened slowly, revealing a man in his fifties. I looked him up and down, my mouth hanging open in surprise. He, however, did the same thing. In his beige, embroidered, tailored high-collar jacket and matching breeches that barely contained his enormous belly, he looked like he’d just returned from a period costume party. On his feet were black velvet shoes with silver buckles, and on his head – a bulky curly wig. The man stared at our party in bewilderment, his eyes darting from side to side. I noticed there was no one with him. We had to act fast.

“He’s definitely not happy to see us,” Brenda whispered behind me. “I don’t speak French, but in my head, I can hear him screaming and cursing right now.”

Our spectacular visitor, apparently, didn’t speak English either, because our remarks agitated him extremely. His face puffed up and turned red, his eyes bulged, and he started screaming at the top of his lungs. That kind of scream, in any language, could only be a call for help.

“Derek,” I whispered. “It’s like being back in Illinois.”

Derek nodded understandingly and hurled the ball at the screaming man. The man’s arms flailed as he sought to maintain his balance. He grabbed onto the doorframe, stunned. Not wasting any time, I stepped forward and pushed him hard. He crashed to the floor with a thud, clutching his nose with both hands and yelling something in French.

“Sorry,” Sabrina whispered, taping the man on his shoulder. At her touch, the man went limp and started snoring. Derek grabbed his ball, and the four of us took off in an unknown direction.

We raced down a long, unfamiliar hallway, its walls adorned with the portraits that I could now recognize. They were Sabrina's relatives. The stern faces seemed to radiate extreme displeasure at our presence. Brenda was panting under the weight of my backpack, Derek was clutching his ball tightly, like a lifebuoy, and Sabrina kept glancing back to check if anyone was following us.

"Where are we going? Who are we trying to escape from? And why?" Brenda panted out, struggling to keep up with us.

"From the wig guy in the breeches," Derek snapped. "Where did everyone else go? I'm not the only one who heard many voices behind that door, right?"

"Maybe we imagined it all? Maybe it's some public holiday, and everyone's at home, glued to the TVs?"

"Brenda, you saw that guy! Does he look like someone who knows what a TV is?" I barked, feeling my lungs burning from the hardcore running. It's done. I'm quitting smoking.

"Maybe it's some kind of historical re-enactment or cosplay game that is part of pre-wedding entertainment?" Brenda suggested.

"Oh, please, Brenda!" Sabrina cried. She, too, had had enough of Brenda's nonsense.

"What part of this looks entertaining and fun to you? Besides, if this was the case, we'd have know about it from Stella by now! She couldn't keep a secret to save her life. Just keep going, guys. We need to find a way out," Sabrina urged on, finally taking the towel off her head and putting it round her neck. "This is definitely our castle, but..."

She looked around. "It's almost unrecognizable. But I remember my way around it.

Let's keep moving."

The hallways and corridors kept whizzing past us until finally terminating in a vaulted room with tall arched windows, through which bright sunlight was pouring in. There we stopped at last to catch our breaths. Suddenly, I heard a loud *thud*. The basketball slipped out of Derek's hands and rolled across the parquet floor, creating a hollow echo. Derek cursed loudly and hastily put his hands over his eyes. In the sunlight, his skin instantly turned ashen grey, as if someone had emptied the contents of an extinguished fireplace over him.

"No, no, no, Derek, not now!" Sabrina exclaimed, rushing over to our beloved vampire, who was rubbing his eyes furiously, blinded by the bright light.

"Damn it! Talk about bad timing! I can't see a thing!"

"Come on, buddy, lean on me," I said, offering him my shoulder. He wrapped his arm around my neck, and together, we immediately went down on the floor.

"You're freaking heavy!"

"Well, I'm freaking dead! Of course I'm heavy! Hold on. How could I forget?" His eyes still shut, Derek reached into his shorts pocket and pulled out a pair of sunglasses.

"Alright, let's go."

We jumped to our feet, Derek grabbing the ball, and once again bolted forward, which seemed the only way to go anyway. At the other end of the vaulted room was another door, and as soon as I grabbed the handle, the door swung open, revealing another strange-looking man before us. This one was clad in modest yet smart clothes: a dark blue doublet with copper buttons, under which was a pristine white shirt with lace jabot, and black breeches tucked into knee-high black leather boots. His face was a mask of wrath. In his right hand, he was holding a pitchfork. He shouted something in French and bared his teeth in a menacing grin.

"One strike, four holes," Sabrina remarked. We turned to gape at her. "What? That's what he said! Does none of you folk speak any French? You're from New Orleans, for Heaven's sake!"

Without a moment's hesitation, I pushed Derek forward with all my might and he landed right on top of our unfriendly "gardener." The man collapsed under the vampire's weight with a yell. The pitchfork fell from his hand and clattered loudly against the stone floor.

“Stop whining,” Derek panted, re-adjusting his shades, and gently slapped the guy on the cheek. The vampire’s strength was enough, however, to knock him out instantly.

But in all the commotion, the man managed to kick a full-size medieval knight’s armor suit that was perched on a wooden pedestal by the door. The mass of polished old steel wobbled, tilted, and then crashed to the floor with a deafening bang, sending steel plates flying in every direction and creating an endless echo that reverberated throughout the castle, it seemed, alerting everyone to our presence.

We froze, realizing that whatever cover we might hope to have had just been epically blown.

“Let’s go,” was all I could think of. I helped Derek to his feet.

“The corridor terminates in the kitchen, and from there, a door leads out to the garden.

This way we can get to the main gates,” Sabrina stated, handing the ball back to the somewhat exhausted vampire, who was still sitting on the floor next to his ‘victim’. He really wasn’t used to being pushed around and used as a walking shield.

“You sure?”

“I know this castle like the back of my hand. So yes, I’m sure.”

We set off again, carefully stepping over the suit of armor pieces not to make any more noise. Derek picked up the pitchfork and was now leading the way, ready to face new challenges in the form of weirdly dressed strangers. Suddenly, he stopped and looked back.

“Did you hear that?” he whispered, holding the pitchfork in one hand and his emotional support ball in the other. “I’m sure you didn’t. But trust me, it’s time to step on it.”

We didn’t argue and picked up the pace. After a while, we heard loud voices and the sound of running feet echo down the corridor some way off. I turned around to glimpse a furious crowd closing in on us. They were waving their arms and – I’m pretty sure – cursing at us.

“Sabi!” I yelled, snatching the towel from her and tossing it into the air.

The girl instantly read my mind. She raised her hands, and the towel seemed to come alive. It started twisting in the air, gaining speed, creating some sort of vortex.

Suddenly, it shot forward and ploughed into the crowd of our pursuers, like a mini tornado. It wrapped itself around a short man at the front, knocking him off his feet. He crashed to the floor, yelling. The others behind him stopped, hesitating, causing the rest of the crowd to run into them, trip and fall on each, like the dominoes. This was the time to run for it. We bolted down the corridor, turned a corner, and a second later, found ourselves in the kitchen.

Derek was in the rear this time and a little too keen to escape, so didn’t notice the large wooden table standing in his way. In horror, I watched him crash into it at full speed, sending the copper pots, pans and crockery clattering to the floor on impact, with one particularly heavy frying pan landing on his foot, as if in revenge.

“Ouch! Damn it...” Derek hissed, hopping on one foot and rubbing the injured spot on the other.

“No time to rest,” Brenda snapped, grabbing the vampire by the arm and dragging him along.

The kitchen turned out to be a huge room with vaulted ceiling and a massive, almost pre-historic stove that took up an entire wall. Next to the stove stood a basket with live chickens. The sight of us apparently agitated the poor things so much that the basket toppled over. The hens darted out in all directions, clucking in panic and adding even more chaos to the proceedings.

“There!” Sabrina shouted, her voice barely heard over the clucks. She pointed to the door leading out to the garden.

“Grab the hens!” Derek shouted, putting the ever-slipping sunglasses back on the bridge of his nose.

Sabrina and I exchanged glances.

“Are you deaf, guys? I said grab the hens!” Derek commanded, losing his patience.

Did he really think Sabrina and I were professional chicken catchers? Like, *really*?

Still, on we got with the task. We just sensed it wasn't the time for questions. Obeying the command, we lunged forward after the squawking monsters. To our own surprise, we managed to catch a few. But just as we were about to make a run for it, a cook appeared from what looked like a pantry: a burly man with a ladle in his hand and a face purple with rage that boded ill for our future.

"Stop right there!" he barked in French, brandishing the ladle at our faces. Without further ado, Derek hurled the pitchfork at him. The cook dodged it deftly, but the manoeuvre gave us enough time to slip past him and out into the garden.

The great outdoors greeted us with the heavy scent of blooming roses and the cooling breeze of shaded alleys. I glanced at the sky. Not a cloud in sight! Sunny and warm!

We ran along a narrow path winding between thick bushes and small decorative fountains.

"I don't remember these fountains ever being here," Sabrina panted, clutching a hen to her chest as if it were her baby. She stopped to catch her breath and pointed toward a massive archway some way off. "Those are the main gates!"

But just as we turned to run in that direction, two men in identical outfits, and armed with swords, jumped out of the bushes in front of us. Judging by their smug faces, they were confident we were not going to get away now.

Once again, my body instinctively knew what to do, and since I was by now somewhat tired from running with that hen in my arms, I gladly hurled it at one of the men nearest to me. The bird squawked angrily as it catapulted into the unsuspecting guard's face.

The young man lost his balance on impact and went down like a sack of potatoes.

The second guard didn't move, staring confusedly at our motley crew. Brenda used that break to sneak up behind him and whack him on the head with my backpack. The sword fell from his hand, and not wasting any time, I picked it up and packed him another hefty punch. He passed out instantly, collapsing in a heap next to his partner.

"Sabi, lead the way!" Brenda shouted as the now familiar furious crowd of castle servants appeared on the kitchen doorstep.

My beloved witch didn't move but closed her eyes, trying to focus. Her long, dark hair moved slightly, although there wasn't the slightest breeze. Then, as if on her command, a sudden gust of wind blew out of nowhere, stripping leaves from the trees, kicking up dust and knocking our pursuers off their feet.

"Run!" I commanded, pointing toward the dense thicket beyond the castle gates. "Into the woods! Sabi, move!"

Sabrina opened her eyes, and we took off yet again, leaving the raging crowd far behind. Derek ran ahead, stumbling and falling, because his sunglasses kept sliding down his nose, thus being useless against the sunlight. He kept grabbing onto Brenda and nearly brought her down with him several times. I ran behind Sabrina. In one hand, I was holding the sword, and in the other – the remaining hen, which by now seemed to have accepted its fate and stopped clucking.

The castle gates were now behind us and we ran deeper into the forest. Tree branches intertwined above our heads in a dense canopy that barely let any sunlight through. We kept running until we were at a safe distance from the castle, and only then did we slow down.

"I think we've lost them," Derek panted, looking around.

"I hope so," Sabrina whispered, sinking on the ground by an old pine tree.

I finally caught my breath, too, dropping the sword, and sat down next to my fiancée.

She leaned on my shoulder, and I kissed her on the forehead. I was still holding the poor hen, which now looked like it had been electrocuted: its feathers ruffled, eyes open ever wider, its beak ajar.

"You're a genius, Sabi. I'm proud of you," I said, planting another kiss on her head.

The forest around us was thick and quiet, with only occasional bird chirping and rustling of dry leaves on the ground to break the solemn silence.

“What now?” Brenda asked, squatting down beside us.

“Now? Now we figure out how and where we ended up,” I replied, looking at Sabrina intently.

“You said it was your castle. Your ancestral home.”

“So it is,” Sabrina confirmed, although her voice carried a hint of uncertainty. “But something’s changed.”

“What exactly has changed?”

“*Everything* has changed! The furniture, the castle’s interior... And who’s that guy in the wig? And all those people? I don’t know any of them. Not even one of them! It’s like some weird re-enactment fest. Or maybe even a different century.”

Derek took off his shades and rubbed them on his T-shirt.

“We need to figure out what’s going on and come up with a plan, fast.” He declared, putting the shades back on.

I stood up and looked at everyone intently. In our current state, we weren’t going to get far. I was wearing classic pants, a shirt, a vest, and a not-so-classic hoodie. My new shoes were rubbing my feet raw. Derek, with his blue basketball shorts, a red T-shirt with a yellow smiley face, and a lime green hoodie, was a human version of a traffic light. He was fidgeting with a loose multi-color braid that was sticking out of his hair, adding to his already eccentric looks. He was not dressed inconspicuously, for sure. I turned my gaze to Sabrina. She was sitting silently by the tree, lost in thought, gently stroking the now-quiet chicken. She was only wearing a long white Terry robe and matching fluffy slippers that looked more like mini boots. Out of all of us, Brenda had the most appropriate outfit for a forest adventure: khaki jeans, worn-out off-white sneakers, a dark tank top, and a battered black leather jacket.

“Alright,” I finally said. “Sitting here waiting to be found isn’t an option. First we need to find a shelter, some clothes for Sabi, food, and then we can figure out what to do next.”

“What about Twiggy and Coco?” Brenda asked.

“Who?” we all asked in unison.

“The chickens! What about them?”

Derek stepped forward, frowning.

“I’m afraid one of them is now with that guard dude, back at the castle – did you forget? You decide if it’s Twiggy or Coco.”

Silently, he walked over to Sabrina and took the chicken from her, not without some resistance on her part.

“And this one here is my dinner. If you behave, I may let you have some,” he added, nodding to Brenda. “And don’t you complain.”

“Yeah, Brenda, you’d better not complain. Or I’ll feed you to him,” I said, winking at the girl, whose eyes were wide with horror.

“Let’s go, girls,” the vampire called out. “We don’t know what time it is, so we need to find some shelter before dark.”

I took my backpack from Brenda, and we moved deeper into the forest, hoping to find some kind of refuge there. The forest grew thicker and darker with every step. And with every step, I became more aware of just how deep a mess we were in.

Chapter 6

The Wedding Quest

We walked for a long time along a winding path leading seemingly nowhere, the forest growing ever denser and darker. The air was filled with pleasant aromas of pine trees and damp earth. Here and there, the sun managed to break through a thick canopy of trees overhead, creating magical forest rays that were dancing all around us. We walked in silence, each lost in deep thought. The only sounds were the rustling of leaves beneath our feet and birdsong.

“The damned mosquitoes are eating me alive. This is a nightmare!” Sabrina complained. “I hate this forest! We’ve been walking for God knows how long. At this rate, we could well be in Paris by now.”

“And what are you suggesting?” I asked, sharing her frustration.

“I’m suggesting we find a road, hitch a ride, and get home already!”

Suddenly, Derek stopped and brought his hand to his mouth in a coughing fit, which could only mean one thing—our vampire friend was hungry. We all stared at him anxiously: none of us fancied being his dinner.

“I’m fine, don’t worry. Got it all under control,” Derek muttered before another bout of coughing seized him.

“Alright, let’s make a pit-stop and see what we’ve got,” I suggested. “Empty your pockets, everyone.”

We stopped at a small clearing and began examining our meagre supplies. I rummaged around in my pockets but found nothing. Sabrina only had a cell phone and a hairband.

Brenda also had her cell phone, a chocolate bar, her wallet, and a pack of chewing gum.

Derek proudly displayed his brand-new wireless earbuds, sunglasses, a cell phone, and a slightly scuffed basketball he’d been carrying under his arm since this morning.

“Jack, what’s in your backpack?” Brenda asked.

I unzipped the backpack, and we all craned our necks, hoping to find something useful or edible inside.

“Good news, Sabi, your charger’s here. Bad news, my phone’s back at the castle. On the plus side, we’ve got a can of cola, half a bottle of water, some cigarettes, a lighter, an old, tattered envelope, a couple of protein bars, a pair of new socks, and a wallet.

The cola and water should be enough to get us to the nearest gas station,” I announced and started to distribute the items among our group. “Now, stuff all of this into your pockets. And the chi...”

“Coco,” Brenda corrected.

“Fine – and *Coco* will go in the backpack – because it’s too damn uncomfortable carrying it in the arms. I have chicken poo all over me now!”

“And we’ve got a sword,” the vampire added thoughtfully, stealing a glance at our feathered companion. “If needed, it can double up as a skewer.”

Brenda’s already enormous hazel eyes widened as she read Derek’s mind, quite literally. She glared at him and hurriedly shoved the bird into the backpack.

“How much battery do you guys have left? Sabi’s got a little under fifty percent. What about you?”

“Almost a hundred,” Brenda said proudly.

“Same here,” said Derek. “But what does it matter? There’s no signal anywhere.”

As we were repacking the contents of my bag, I happened to look up and noticed something dark, like a shadow, move in the trees on our right. My heart sank, then started racing, and a thousand alarm bells went off in my head all at once. I tapped Derek lightly on the shoulder and put a finger to my lips. The vampire followed my gaze but just then, his coughing thought it was a good time for another round. With a sense of foreboding I closed my eyes, trying to shake off the growing sense of dread. I just knew then that whatever was coming wouldn't end well.

I straightened up and stepped forward, trying to shield Sabrina. Clutching the basketball tightly, Derek followed my lead and shielded Brenda.

The next moment, a group of men emerged from behind the trees. Derek and I looked in surprise at them, then at each other, then at the men again. They looked nothing like us. They looked like they'd just stepped out of the pages of a historical novel, except there was nothing romantic about their appearance. They were clad in rags almost, but rather antique-looking rags: shirts with flared sleeves, pirate pants cinched by enormous rough leather belts, and knee-high boots covered in a thick layer of dust and dirt. Their faces were hidden by wide-brimmed hats and neck scarves, and all I could see were just their burning, angry eyes.

Each of them held a knife or a short sword. Their movements were slow but deliberate, as if they already knew how this encounter would end. I felt a chill run down my spine.

Clenching my fists, I braced myself for the worst.

"Is this some kind of stupid wedding quest? Your dad said they had a gift for us that we'd remember for the rest of our lives. Is this it?" Sabrina asked, her voice trembling as she pressed herself against me. I could feel the tension in her body, and it made me even more uneasy. "Excusez-moi! Are you actors? Who are you?" she suddenly addressed the men in flawless French.

One of the strangers guffawed in response. He snorted, tossing his hat aside, and slowly reached for his leather belt, producing a long, deadly-looking knife. A moment later, he yanked the scarf off his face, revealing a toothless grin.

"No, sunshine, this isn't a quest," I answered as calmly as I could, rolling up my hoodie sleeves for an imminent fight. "This is..."

"Bandits," Derek finished the sentence for me, bursting into a violent cough again.

My eyes darted around, taking in every detail, trying to assess the situation. I counted the bandits. There were six of them. A manageable number, considering we had an undead and a witch on our force – and yet enough to make me nervous. I looked down and cursed under my breath. There was our sword, next to the loudly clucking backpack, and I couldn't grab it without drawing the bandits' attention. And using one of the girls as a distraction was not an option.

Derek and I exchanged glances. In his greyish-green eyes I read cold intent and determination. He was calculating our next moves, just like I was. Silently, we watched the bandits start to close in on us. The tension in the air was palpable.

"Well, guys," I finally said, loosening my tie and clenching my fists, "looks like a fight is on the cards. Derek, I need that sword. Cover me, if you can. Sabi, stay close behind me and watch out."

Derek nodded and got into a fighting stance, gripping the ball tightly. I noticed his eyes darken, and the claw-like fingernails were now longer and sharper than usual. He took a deep breath and grinned at the bandits, revealing razor-sharp fangs. Seeing this, the bandits froze for a moment and stepped back. One of them shouted something in French and took a decisive step toward us, brandishing his knife.

"Looks like Coco is in luck today," the vampire hissed and hurled the ball at the bandits. It whistled through the air and hit one of them in the stomach. The man doubled up in pain, clutching his stomach and dropping the wooden handle knife.

Derek lunged forward, picked up the sword and started fencing, fending off the second assailant's attacks with surprising skill and dexterity.

At that moment, Brenda rushed over to the first man, who was still writhing in pain on the ground, and picked up the knife he had dropped. Before he could rise again, her foot caught him square beneath the jaw.

"Jack, catch!" she shouted, throwing me the knife. I caught it mid-air and now had my own blade.

"Sabi, your turn, love," I winked at my bride-to-be, encouraging her, although deep down I was praying she wouldn't get hurt.

Another bandit, tall and burly, yanked his hat off and issued an inarticulate battle cry in French. I braced myself for the fight and tightened my grip on the knife. He charged at me like a mad bull, swinging his large knife wildly.

"He's cursing in French! That's about all I could get!" Brenda yelled suddenly, hiding behind Derek, who was wielding his sword like a gallant knight.

I dodged him, but only just. I could almost hear the blade cut the air just inches from my face. In the next moment, I grabbed his wrist, twisted it, and punched him square in the face. The bandit yelled and dropped his knife. Not giving him time to recover, I hit him in the stomach, knocking the wind out of him. The man gasped for air and crumpled head-first into the dirt.

I looked around quickly, assessing the situation. Two bandits were slowly approaching Sabrina, their mouths twisted in leering grins. I rushed toward her, but she gestured at me to stop. Stepping back and closing her eyes, my witch stretched out her hand and started moving her fingers through the air, as if pulling at invisible strings. Suddenly, a dull humming sound filled the air. The wind roared in the dense foliage, and the trees began to sway violently. The bandits stopped, unsure whether to continue their approach. I looked up and saw two more bandits in the branches above, their legs dangling in the air. Sabrina opened her eyes and started whirling her hand in the air, as if trying to create a vortex. Then she thrust forward her palm, and the wind slammed into the bandits, knocking them off their feet. I glanced up again just as one of the branches harbouring a bandit snapped under his weight, and he fell to the ground with a yell. The second degenerate was still dangling from his branch and was about to climb back on it for safety when something big, brown and round hit him square in the temple, sending him tumbling down.

"Bullseye!" Brenda shouted to Derek.

Not wasting a second, I jumped up to him and delivered a mighty kick to his jaw, knocking him out cold.

"Life never prepared me for this," Sabrina panted, clutching my arm. "I'm gonna need therapy. *A lot of therapy.*"

"We need to help Derek," I said, still trying to catch my breath. At that moment something we had expected the least, if at all, happened: a phone rang. Sabrina and I froze, staring at each other like idiots. Meanwhile, her phone kept going off in her robe pocket.

"Answer it!" I barked, before noticing another bandit appear behind her out of the corner of my eye.

"Hello?" Sabrina said nervously, her fingers trembling as she put the phone on speaker.

"What the hell, guys, where are you? Everyone's freaking out here!" came Eric's irritated voice. "If you decided to run off and get married without us, I'll get you for this! Where are you anyway? The rehearsal started hours ago, and the bride and groom are missing! Are you out of your minds? Derek and Brenda are gone, too."

Sabrina slowly sank to the ground next to the clucking backpack, her eyes wide and her mouth agape. Almost robotically, she switched the call to video. Eric's annoyed face appeared on the screen.

Just then, I engaged in hand-to-hand combat with the biggest and ugliest of the bandits.

He looked tougher than the others and knew how to throw a punch. He even managed to hit me twice on the jaw. I howled in pain but kept going. Out of the corner of my eye, I saw Sabrina hold the phone up in our direction. Was she seriously live streaming the fight? Her face was pale,

and her eyes were filled with terror. On the other end, Eric was equally shocked, his mouth agape as he flopped on the bed in my room. I turned around just in time to see a massive, grimy fist flying toward me. I ducked and jumped to the side.

Just then, Derek appeared beside me. His coughing had worsened, and he kept clutching his throat.

“Jack, remember what happened in Vegas?” he rasped.

“I do! And I’m not proud of it!” I replied, dodging another punch aimed at my head.

“I’m not talking about *that*! The *other thing*!”

“What happened in Vegas?” Sabrina asked, coming out of her fright coma.

“Trust me, sunshine, you don’t want to know!”

“Anyways, give him to me, buddy,” Derek commanded. I stepped aside, letting the big grimy guy approach. He bared his teeth in a vicious grin and spat on the ground.

He growled something in French and lunged forward.

I darted to the side, letting the attacker land right on Derek. The undead sank his claw-like fingers into the man’s shoulders and gave him a good yank before lowering his head over his prey’s neck. The bandit screamed and went limp in Derek’s arms. The fight was over.

I stood there, breathing heavily, my heart pounding and sweat pouring down my back. I looked around and saw two more bandits lying unconscious on the ground. The rest must have scampered. Slowly, I walked over to where Sabrina and Brenda were sitting quietly, clutching the precious backpack. Even Coco was quiet now. I took the phone from Sabrina’s trembling hands and stared at the screen. To my surprise, the room Eric was in looked the same as on the morning I woke up there the last time. The same burgundy red curtains, the same matching burgundy comforter thrown casually over the same messy king size bed, and the familiar limewashed furniture with delicate gold stencils.

Apparently, while Derek and I were busy manhandling the unfortunate bandit, Eric was joined in the room by my father and another man I didn’t recognize. The stranger was about my father’s age, stocky, with a shiny bald head and a sweaty upper lip. He kept wiping his face with a checkered handkerchief, his large brown eyes darting nervously around the room.

“What the hell, Eric! Is this a joke?” I barked. “If you thought this would be fun, then let me tell you, it’s not! We almost got killed just now!” I was pacing around, throwing nervous looks at the three bodies on the ground and trying to steady my nerves.

As if reading my mind, Sabrina took a pack of cigarettes from her robe pocket and handed me one. I looked lovingly at her. She was clearly putting on a brave face, but all the signs told me she was on the verge of a nervous breakdown.

“Jack, I have no idea what you’re talking about,” Eric said, scratching the back of his head. “We’ve been looking for you all morning. I felt like shooting hoops, but you and Derek were nowhere to be found. Sabi and Brenda vanished, too. We thought you were out on the castle grounds somewhere, but...”

“Oh, but we were there alright, having a blast!” Derek’s tired voice came from behind me. “We must now be about three or four hours away from the castle. On foot.”

I startled at the sound of Derek’s voice, recalling what he had done just a few minutes prior.

“I dragged the body into the thicket so the girls wouldn’t see it,” he answered my silent question.

I kept staring at him. He looked terrible. I might even say – downright terrifying. His hair was dishevelled, his eyes bloodshot, and sinister dark stains outlined his mouth.

Blood had splattered his hoodie, T-shirt, shorts, and the once-white sneakers. Bruises had started to form on his skin, and he looked slightly swollen – the aftermath of overindulging in blood. At least he wasn’t going to be hungry for a while now, and we could all breathe a sigh of relief. Feeling

a bit self-conscious under my hard stare, Derek busied himself with looking for his sunglasses, which he eventually found on the ground, hidden from view by my backpack.

“Still intact, thank God,” he muttered. “But the ball’s done for.”

“Holy crap! How can it be so sunny where you are, if you’re not too far from us?” Eric asked, turning his phone to face the window. It was almost dark outside and pouring with rain.

“I don’t know,” I replied, taking a drag on my cigarette.

“But maybe I do,” the stranger chimed in. “My name is Armel Dumourier. And if my guess is correct, then I think it’s quite possible that...”

“Oh, just say it already!” my father cut in, clearly agitated.

“I think they are in trouble...” Armel muttered anxiously, scratching his chin.

Chapter 7

The Time Trap

Armel Dumourier was clearly very nervous. He undid a few top buttons of his shirt and swallowed loudly.

“Felix gave you a letter and a ring, correct?” he asked Jack, wiping sweat off his face and adjusting his tiny glasses on the bridge of his nose. “Do you have those artifacts, Mr. Cornell?”

“Yes, I do.”

“You didn’t handle them, did you?” Monsieur Dumourier asked seriously and gave me a hard stare.

“I never really had time to. I just left the pouch on the dressing table by the window and...”

And then I remembered Brenda and my telling her to get a chocolate bar from that very table. I shot a furious glance at the girl still sitting on the ground, her legs crossed, listening intently to our conversation. Our eyes met. Reading my murderous intent, Brenda pursed her lips and buried her face in her arms.

Конец ознакомительного фрагмента.

Текст предоставлен ООО «Литрес».

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