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## Prologue

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*Zeke*

*Two years ago*

**F**our years we served together and Ryker, Drew, Tyson and I were closer than brothers. Ryker was our fearless leader, even if he wasn't officially our commanding officer; he did outrank us. Drew was our comedian, always keeping us in good spirits and reminding us of what we were fighting for. Tyson, our silent killer, a scary bastard, but the guy you always want in your corner. And me, laid-back and level-headed.

The Marines have taught me a lot about life, but it also made me realize that I want a slower life. My dream is to spend my days building custom motorcycles; maybe get a little shop and do repairs and custom-builds. One day, a wife to hang out with at night. A sweet, kind woman with a bit of a wild side behind closed doors. I'm still young, but... one day.

The day we got our discharge papers, Ryker told us he got a call from our former Commanding Officer. Gabe had discharged the year before and started some kind of company in Denver. He invited us out there for a meeting. None of us had any idea what we were walking into, but Gabe wasn't the kind of man you said no to. He'd led us through Hell and back. None of us even hesitated to go see what he wanted.

The taxi let us out in front of a skyscraper downtown. We stood on the sidewalk and took in the modern building with huge windows.

"Looks like Gabe's doing all right for himself," Drew pipes up.

Ryker starts into the building, and we follow. The lobby is huge, bright, and decorated nicely. I don't know what kind of style it is, but it's all swirls and muted colors. It gives the impression of relaxation and calm. We're stopped immediately at the door by a security guard.

After a call upstairs to confirm our appointment, we're directed to a bank of elevators, specifically number four, and instructed to travel to the twenty-eighth floor.

I'm wondering how the hell we're supposed to take a certain elevator—I thought there was one button and the closest one answered the call—but as we approach, I see that elevator four has its own button. Odd.

Ryker pushes the button and the doors open immediately. The elevator is nothing more than a metal box with no adornments. Once inside, Ryker pushes number twenty-eight, and we begin our ascent.

We all stand tall. Marines don't fidget.

The doors open, and we walk into the lobby of Gabe's office. It's almost exactly opposite the decor downstairs. Black, white and gray, sharp lines, no calming decorations. There's a small silver plaque by the elevator that just says N.W.E.. I don't know if the lobby could even be called a lobby. There's no chairs

or refreshments for guests. There's a large desk off to the side with a redheaded woman sitting behind it, regarding us curiously.

"At ease, Marines." Gabe strides out of the door at the far end of the lobby. "You look like you're here for sentencing."

"You're a big man now, huh, sir? Up here in your glass tower," Drew starts in immediately.

Gabe levels Ryker with a flat look. "Did you have to bring him?"

Ryker cracks a smile and answers easily, "Sir, yes, Sir."

Gabe laughs and steps forward to give us all one-armed hugs.

"Good to see you," I say honestly.

"I know it hasn't been the same without me." Gabe smirks and gestures into the room he came from. "Come into my office; let's talk."

Ryker and I sit in the chairs across from Gabe's large mahogany desk as Gabe settles into his chair. Drew stands behind us, and Tyson wanders off towards the windows a bit.

"Look," Gabe starts, "you boys know better than anyone that I'm not one to bullshit you."

He looks at each of us. We nod. Gabe's always given it to us straight. It's one of the things I respect most about him.

"You know on our last tour, I got word that my wife had been murdered." Gabe sits back in his chair. His eyes take on a haunted look as he speaks. "The cops claimed there were no leads so I had it investigated privately by a friend. What I found out was... disturbing."

Gabe stays silent for a minute, building the tension in the room.

Drew can't take it. "Well, fuck, don't leave us hanging!"

"Vampires are real, boys." Gabe leans forward, putting his elbows on his desk.

I glance at Ryker just as he looks at me. Gabe opens a drawer, pulling our attention back to him. He pulls out a file and starts

throwing pictures on his desk, one at a time. We all lean forward. Tyson moves back toward us to see too.

The images are bloody, gory, and, exactly as he said, disturbing. Broken bodies. Bite marks. Normal-looking people attacking others in broad daylight and biting them. Men, women, children. Gabe continues to throw picture after picture into the pile.

It's no worse than what we've seen in real life, but somehow it feels more ominous. *Vampires?*

"Enough." Ryker puts his hand up to stop Gabe's display. "Let's assume we believe you and continue."

Tyson and Drew take a step back. Ryker and I sit back in our chairs and wait for Gabe to deliver the punchline.

Gabe nods, setting the remaining pictures aside. "N.W.E. is basically a vampire hunting company, and I need capable men on my staff."

"You want us to kill vampires?" Drew summarizes.

"Not all of them," Gabe says. "Just like humans, not all vampires are bad. Most are just living their lives. They have humans who willingly give them blood. Some of them get blood from blood banks. They just want to be left alone, and I'm in favor of that."

We all wait for the *but*.

"Others are monsters," Gabe grinds out. "Psychopaths, criminals, rapists, pedophiles. The lowest scum who should never have been given immortality. The police are powerless against them. That's where I... or, hopefully, we come in."

"Vampire hunters," Drew muses, like he's trying the words out. He shrugs. "Cool."

Tyson grunts his approval.

I'm not sure what to think. I have my GI bill all ready to buy myself some space to work on my bikes. I just hadn't picked a location yet. I have no desire to return to Minnesota, even if my biological family is there. Being the only child from my mom's first marriage, I was always the black sheep anyway. My half-

brother and half-sister were spoiled brats. The only good thing my stepfather ever did for me was teach me how to build a motorcycle with my eyes closed.

"I'm with you," Ryker says after a beat.

I look at him.

He gives me a shrug. "What else am I going to do? At least I can use my skills here."

"I..." I hesitate. Can I walk away from my brothers? Will they consider it a betrayal? Can I walk away from my dream? Would I regret it? I look Gabe in the eyes. "I'll be there if you need me, Sir, but I'm going to have to decline."

"What are you going to do?" Drew asks.

"I'll buy a shop here in Denver and build motorcycles." I decide right then to stay in town. If my boys are here, then this is where I want to be. "I'll only be a phone call away if shit gets heavy. No hard feelings."

"None," Gabe confirms. "You need to do what's best for you."

As Gabe rises from his chair, Ryker and I immediately jump to our feet. Ryker claps me on the shoulder and gives me a look that lets me know he's okay with my decision. Drew doesn't look upset either. Tyson... looks like he always does.

"Let's take a tour," Gabe offers, gesturing us out of the office. "I'll introduce you to the team."

I suddenly feel uncomfortable, which has never happened before amongst this group. "Should I leave, Sir?"

Gabe snorts. "Hell no. Then I'll just have to give you a tour when we call you in."

*Everlee*

*More recently*

Mason approaches us as soon as Fox and I return from our drive. I leave them alone to talk, but I don't go far. I feel like I need to know what's going on. I've become very good at blending into this place and overhearing things I'm probably not supposed to.

What they have to say to each other is technically none of my business, but, in a way, it is. Fox finally understands my knowledge of her vendetta and my desire to get away from The Community. She promised to take me with her, and I feel closer to her than I ever have. Mason... well, my history with Mason is complicated, but I still feel some sense of loyalty towards him. I would never step between their dispute, but eavesdropping is another thing altogether.

Lydia, one of the vampires who lives in the Community house, approaches me in the hall and starts telling me about the latest gossip. I smile politely and nod at appropriate intervals, but one ear is trained down the hall and to the left. I can just make out their voices as they walk toward Fox's bedroom.

"People talk all the time about the gaggle of females you fuck on a daily basis," Fox is saying to Mason.

I smile at her bravado, and Lydia mistakes it for me encouraging her gossip. "I know, right? What could Mason possibly see in *her*? Okay, yes, Fox is hot and all, but she's no better looking than any of the rest of us." She tosses her raven-black hair over her shoulder and purses her thin lips together.

"I think it's more about her personality," I put in, not wanting to encourage the slander of my friend.

Lydia snorts. "What personality?"

"Are you jealous, Princess?" I hear Mason ask Fox.

"Yuck. Do not call me that," Fox replies. Lydia is looking at

me like she's waiting for me to reply, but I just shrug as I'm distracted. Fox continues, "And no, I'm definitely not jealous. Just appalled by your double standard and the ridiculous notions that you have in your head. Now, release my arm. I'm going to take a nap."

"Lots of people are afraid of her," I finally manage to say to Lydia. She rolls her eyes, but I can see the reluctant acceptance of that statement written all over her face. She runs one slender finger along the top of the white wainscoting that lines the hallways of the great mansion so many of us call home.

"Do not be so quick to dismiss me, Fox. This is going to happen whether you want it to or not. It will be in your best interest to just fall in line and do as you're told," Mason threatens Fox, and I want to groan at his stupidity. What the hell is he thinking? Nobody controls Fox.

"Are you?" Lydia asks me at the same time I hear Fox scoff out, "Have you met me?"

"Of course not." I give Lydia a cheeky smile to keep her pacified, and so she doesn't get any ideas. The gossip will stop finding my ears if people think I'm too close to Fox. "I saved her life, remember? She owes me." The truth is Fox is the only person I'd consider to be a friend and the only one I trust, but I'd never say so much to Lydia.

Lydia giggles with delight while I listen to Mason's warning. "You will regret fighting me on this. You will pay dearly, and you will suffer to no end if you keep up this charade. Heed my words and do what is right before it's too late."

There's a moment of silence as Lydia dismisses herself from my presence, and then a *crack* and Mason's howl in pain. I walk calmly down the hall in his direction, wondering what Fox broke. I think about the boy I once knew. I need to at least try to talk to him.

Mason is holding his nose in the hallway outside her bedroom as I round the corner. Blood has already seeped down

his face and covers the front of his suit. His nose is bent at an awkward angle.

"I'll need to set that if you don't want to heal disfigured," I announce as I approach him. I've always thought of Mason as classically handsome: blond hair, blue eyes, high cheekbones. In fact, he would've been perfect for the marriage market all those years ago if he'd been born into a different family. Unfortunately, back then lineage trumped appearances.

"I can get one of my men to do it," he tells me with a grimace. "It's not an easy thing to do, and I don't want you to get queasy."

"Don't be silly," I scold him, hating that after two-hundred years, he still sees me as a helpless *lady*. "I'm perfectly capable. Let's go somewhere you can sit down."

We walk quickly to the parlor at the end of the hall. It's one of the smaller parlors, with only one couch, two chaise lounges, and two armchairs. Bookshelves line the back wall and gauzy curtains hang in the windows. Two vampires are lounging on the couch, but they jump up and scurry out when they see the scowl on Mason's bloody face.

"Sit," I command, gesturing to a chaise lounge.

"You know you're the only person in the house I'd let get away with ordering me to do anything," Mason remarks, a touch of humor in his voice as he follows my command.

I don't waste any more time before anchoring my hands on either side of his nose and applying the correct pressure to fix the break. It makes a sickening noise, and he grunts.

"Why are you doing this, Mason?" I ask once the task is complete. I use the sleeve of Mason's shirt to wipe the smear of blood from my hands. Drinking blood from another vampire is almost equivalent to humans drinking potent energy drinks. Some vampires love it, but it's not something I'm interested in trying. New vampires wouldn't be able to resist if they were put in the same situation.



"Fox is the best choice for queen," Mason informs me, touching along the bridge of his nose tentatively to see if it feels straight. "She's smart and cunning, and people will follow her lead, even if it's only out of fear. Besides, if I was ever going to be a one-woman kind of guy, Fox would be the only woman I could tolerate having in bed every night. She's a wildcat."

I flinch at the overshare, but Mason mistakes my discomfort for jealousy.

"You'd be the perfect queen, sweetheart." He takes my hand and pulls me down on the lounge beside him. "I didn't mean anything against you. It's just that... well, we're friends. Right? I'm not saying you were bad in bed. I don't even really remember our one night together. I don't like to think about that time in my life; when I was weak."

I sigh deeply, trying not to care about our shared past. I haven't thought about it in a long time either. "What I meant was why do you want to be king?"

"Oh, that." He clears his throat, pulling a handkerchief from his pocket and wiping some of the blood from his face. "There's a lot that you don't know. Things most people don't see. When you look around The Community, you see a bunch of lazy vampires partying and gossiping endlessly. There's so much more to it, and someone needs to restore order."

"What do you mean?" I push, folding my hands in my lap demurely and waiting for him to explain.

"It's probably better that you don't know, sweetheart." Mason wads up the handkerchief and stuffs it back in the pocket of his slacks. "Let's just say I'm tired of being a nobody."

"You were never a nobody, Mason," I declare reflexively.

Mason scoffs. "I was a merchant's son."

"Times are different now," I tell him in a placating tone. "Nobody cares about that."

"Maybe, but they sure did back then." Mason runs his hand through his neat blond hair and looks away. "I was so angry. I

wanted to marry you, you know. I knew your parents wouldn't allow it. They'd expect you to marry an earl, at the very least. After I was turned, I came to you out of spite. I was so angry I couldn't control myself..." He fades off, but he doesn't need to continue. I know the rest of the story.

"It doesn't matter anymore, Mason." I look down at my hands and frown. We haven't talked about this in a very long time. Actually, I don't know that we'd ever had an actual conversation about it.

"But it does. Don't you see? That's the whole point!" Mason jumps up suddenly. His eyes are wild as he paces the floor in front of me. "I was young and stupid. Look at me now, Everlee. I'll never be that weak again. I'll never be that out of control again. I'm going to sit on the throne and rule the vampires! I'm going to be king! And when I'm king, vampires will rule the world."

It's all I can do to bite my tongue when I realize Mason has become slightly delusional.

"No more hiding in the shadows, Everlee." He's becoming animated, his arms flailing as he speaks, still pacing back and forth. "We'll do as we please and take what we want. We're the top of the fucking food chain, and we're going to show the pathetic humans that the only thing they're truly good for is food!"

Mason's eyes are glowing red at this point, something I've only ever seen the one time I made the mistake of going out hunting with him. He seduced some young girl, and then fed on her, offering to share with me. I declined and returned to The Community house alone. I almost never feed on humans, but if I do, it's only the few willing participants that come to the house. I hadn't realized Mason's intention that night until it was too late.

"Mason," I sigh and stand up, facing him and forcing him to stop his incessant pacing. "As your friend, I have to advise you to give up your pursuit of Fox. She will never be controllable."

His face turns red, and his mouth drops open to protest, but I

don't hang around to hear what he has to say. I spin on my heel and march out of the parlor. I know it was probably a wasted suggestion, but I had to try. Knowing that Fox and I will be leaving this place soon, Mason's obsession with her will be the one thing that could stand in our way.

Getting out of this place is the only thing I care about anymore.

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*Zeke*

*A few days ago*

The first time I saw her I was drawn to her. She was standing beside Fox in the medical room, looking over Ryker. Fox had gotten tongue-tied trying to explain the details of her alleged marriage, but Everlee had stepped up. She didn't even know us. She was so collected and poised. Add her gorgeous face and smoking hot body, and I was hooked.

Gabe sent us to do some tasks, but as soon as I could return, I was back to the medical room with the excuse of offering to sit with Ryker so Fox could get some rest. The petite blonde looked like she'd been through the wringer and could use some sleep. The girls left together, and Drew and I played rock, paper, scissors to see who would take the first shift. I won.

Two hours later, Drew came to relieve me. I grabbed a bite to eat in the little break room Gabe keeps stocked with sandwiches and bottles of water. After my snack, I decide to grab a workout.

My mind wanders to my shop and how long I'll have to be away. We already completed Fox's mission and now we're just in a stand-still until Ryker wakes up. I don't have a commitment to

N.W.E. but I won't abandon the guys until we're all clear. I'm still wondering how long it might take though.

As soon as I enter the state of the art weight room I see her. Everlee. Her long elegant strides moving fluidly across the track of the treadmill. I couldn't help but stare at her for a minute. Her movements were so graceful and effortless. She had ear buds in and was turned away from me, thankfully, so she didn't catch me acting like a creeper.

I finally tear my eyes away from her flawless form and jump up on the only other treadmill in the room, right next to her. I set a brutal pace for myself to warm up my muscles and to show off a little bit. She keeps running at the same pace, slow and steady. Her breathing is not labored in the least, not that it's a surprise since she's a vampire and all.

After my quick warmup, I start lifting weights. My mind stays focused on her as I do bench presses, lat pull-downs, and an array of dumbbell workouts. I push myself harder than I normally would knowing there's a chance she could look at me at any time. Sweat beads form on my forehead. I pull my shirt over my head and use it to wipe off my forehead and face.

As I lower the shirt from my face, our eyes lock in the mirror in front of her. Mere moments tick by but my heart swells and breathing becomes impossible. Her cheeks turn the faintest shade of pink as she breaks eye contact. She stops the treadmill as I jump up to grab the bar for pull ups. She slows to a jog on my first pullup. She's walking briskly on my second pullup. She's at a slow walk by my third.

By my fourth pullup, she's stepping off the treadmill. I shamelessly stare at her as she grabs her towel and water bottle. When she turns to leave, she glances at me again. The smallest smile is visible at the corner of her mouth. More of a smirk than a smile, really. I want to know what thoughts put a look like that on her innocent-looking face.

As she walks by me toward the exit, I decide right then that

she's going to be my girl one day. My shop is the furthest thing from my mind now. To be honest, though, I'm not thinking about N.W.E. and the guys either. My thoughts are consumed with Everlee: who she is, what she wants, and how I can make her mine.