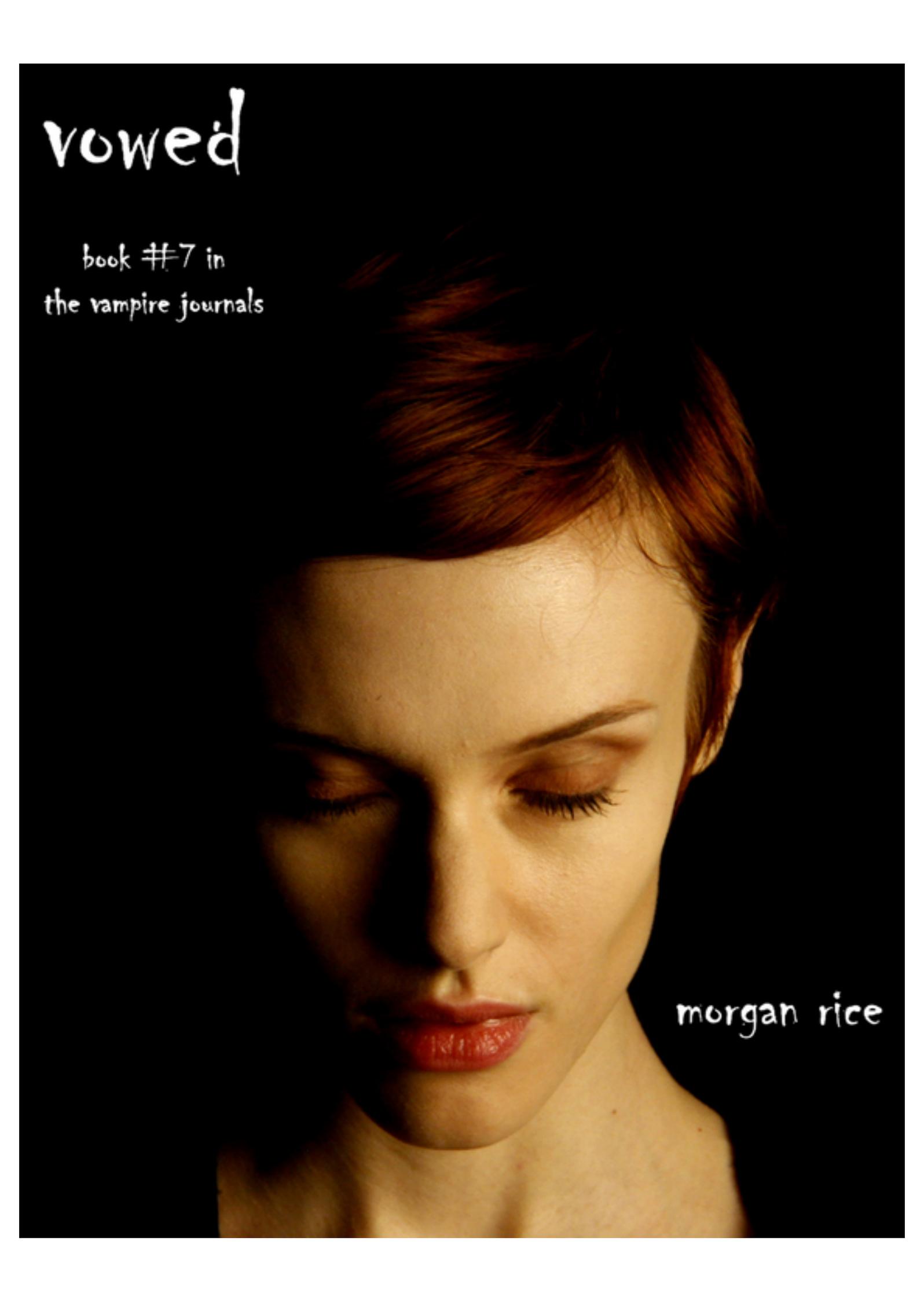


vowed

book #7 in
the vampire journals

morgan rice



The Vampire Journals

Морган Райс

Vowed

«Lukeman Literary Management Ltd»

2011

Райс М.

Vowed / М. Райс — «Lukeman Literary Management Ltd»,
2011 — (The Vampire Journals)

In VOWED (Book #7 of the Vampire Journals), Caitlin and Caleb find themselves in medieval Scotland, in 1350, a time of knights and shining armor, of castles and warriors, of the quest for the Holy Grail said to contain the key to true vampire immortality. Landing on the shores of the ancient Isle of Skye, a remote island off the Western coast of Scotland where only the most elite warriors live and train, they are ecstatic to reunite with Sam and Polly, Scarlet and Ruth, a human king and his warriors, and with all of Aiden's coven. Before they can continue their mission for the fourth and final key, the time has come for Caleb and Caitlin to wed. Against the most amazing backdrop Caitlin could ever hope for, an elaborate vampire wedding is planned, including all of the ancient rituals and ceremonies that accompany it. It is the wedding of a lifetime, meticulously planned by Polly and the others, and Caitlin and Caleb are happier than they've ever been. Simultaneously, Sam and Polly, to their own surprise, are each falling deeply in love with one another. As their relationship accelerates, Sam surprises Polly with a vow of his own. And Polly surprises him with her own shocking news. But all is not well beneath the surface. Blake has appeared again, and his deep love for Caitlin might just threaten her union, on the day before her wedding. Sera has appeared again, too, and vows to break apart what she cannot have. Scarlet, too, finds herself in danger, as the source of her deep powers are revealed – along with the revelation of who are her true parents. Worst of all, Kyle has landed back in time, and has tracked down his old protégé, Rynd, to force him to use his shapeshifting skill to trick and kill Caitlin and her people. As they fall into his elaborate trap, Caitlin and the others find themselves in deeper danger than ever before. It will be a race to find the final key, before everyone Caitlin holds dear is wiped out for good. This time, she will have to make the hardest choices and sacrifices of her life.

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Morgan Rice

Vowed

(Book #7 in the Vampire Journals)

*JULIET: What satisfaction canst thou have to-night?
ROMEO: The exchange of thy love's faithful vow for mine.
JULIET: I gave thee mine before thou didst request it:
And yet I would it were to give again... My bounty is as boundless as
the sea,
My love as deep; the more I give to thee,
The more I have, for both are infinite.*
– William Shakespeare, *Romeo and Juliet*

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Acclaim for the Vampire Journals

“Rice does a great job of pulling you into the story from the beginning, utilizing a great descriptive quality that transcends the mere painting of the setting... Nicely written and an extremely fast read.”
– *Black Lagoon Reviews* (regarding *Turned*)

“An ideal story for young readers. Morgan Rice did a good job spinning an interesting twist... Refreshing and unique. The series focuses around one girl... one extraordinary girl!... Easy to read but extremely fast-paced... Rated PG.”
– *The Romance Reviews* (regarding *Turned*)

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– *vampirebooksite.com* (regarding *Turned*)

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About Morgan Rice

Morgan Rice is the #1 bestselling author of *THE VAMPIRE JOURNALS*, a young adult series comprising eleven books (and counting); the #1 bestselling series *THE SURVIVAL TRILOGY*, a post-apocalyptic thriller comprising two books (and counting); and the #1 bestselling epic fantasy series *THE SORCERER'S RING*, comprising thirteen books (and counting).

Morgan's books are available in audio and print editions, and translations of the books are available in German, French, Italian, Spanish, Portugese, Japanese, Chinese, Swedish, Dutch, Turkish, Hungarian, Czech and Slovak (with more languages forthcoming).

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THE SORCERER'S RING

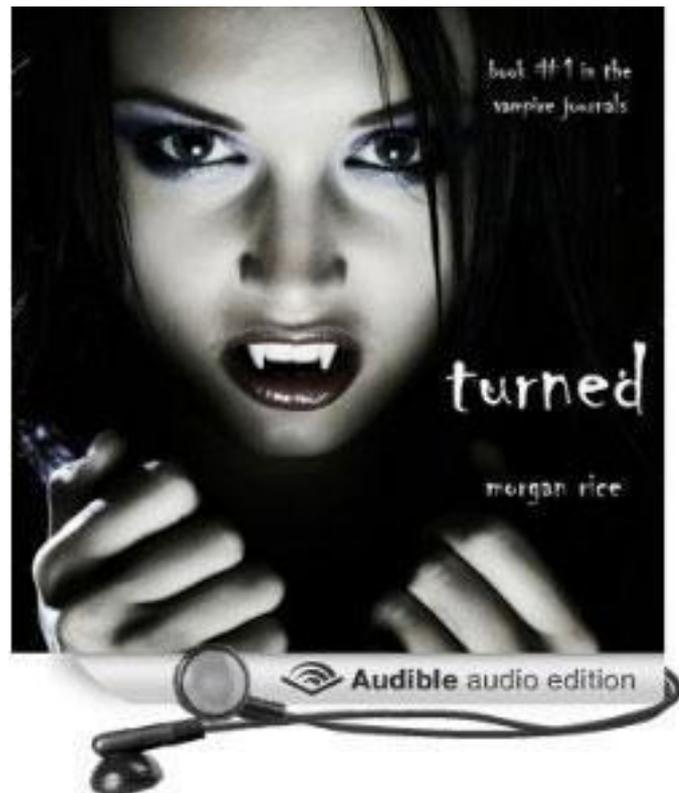


THE SURVIVAL TRILOGY



the vampire journals





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FACT:

The remote Isle of Skye (Nordic for “the isle of mist”), located off the Western coast of Scotland, is an ancient place, where kings have lived and fought, where castles still exist, and where the most elite warriors trained for centuries.

FACT:

On the Isle of Skye, there exists a place in the landscape named Faerie Glen, where, it is said, if you make a wish, it must come true.

FACT:

Rosslyn Chapel, located in a small town in Scotland, is widely rumored to be the final resting place of the Holy Grail, rumored to be concealed behind a hidden wall, in a crypt in its lower levels.

Chapter One

Highlands, Scotland
(1350)

Caitlin woke to a blood red sun. It filled the entire sky, a ball on the horizon, impossibly large. Standing against it was a lone silhouette, a figure she sensed could only be her father. He held out both arms, as if wanting her to run to him.

She desperately wanted to. But as she tried to sit up, she looked down and saw she was chained to a rock, iron clasps holding her wrists and feet in place. In one hand she held three keys – the keys she knew she needed to reach her father – and in the other, her necklace, its small silver cross dangling in her palm. She struggled as hard as she could, yet she could not move.

Caitlin blinked, and suddenly her father was standing over her, smiling down. She could feel the love radiating off of him. He knelt down, and gently unlocked her chains.

Caitlin leaned forward and hugged him, and she could feel his warmth, his reassurance. It felt so good to be in his arms; she could feel the tears pouring down her cheeks.

“I’m sorry, father. I let you down.”

He pulled back and looked at her, smiling, as he stared directly into her eyes.

“You have done all I could have hoped for, and more,” he answered. “Just one last key, and we will be together. Forever.”

Caitlin blinked, and when she opened her eyes, he was gone.

In his place were two figures, lying motionless on a rocky plateau. Caleb and Scarlet.

Suddenly, Caitlin remembered. Their sickness.

She tried to move from the rock, but she was still chained, and struggle as she did, she couldn’t reach them. She blinked, and Scarlet suddenly stood over her, looking down.

“Mommy?” she asked.

Scarlet smiled down at her, and Caitlin could feel her love enveloping her. She wanted to hug her, and she struggled for all she had, but she could not break free.

“Mommy?” Scarlet asked again, reaching out a single, small hand.

Caitlin sat bolt upright.

Breathing hard, she ran her hands along her sides, trying to figure out if she were still chained, or if she were free. She moved her hands and feet freely, and looked around, and saw no signs of chains. She looked up, and saw a huge, blood-red sun sitting on the horizon, then looked around, and saw that she was lying on a rocky plateau. Just as in her dream.

Dawn was just breaking over the horizon. As far as she could see were mountain peaks, covered in mist, endlessly beautiful against the open sky. She peered into the muted light of dawn, trying to make out her surroundings, and as she did, her heart leapt. There, lying in the distance, were two figures, unmoving. She could already sense who it was: Caleb and Scarlet.

Caitlin jumped to her feet and ran over to them, kneeling between them, reaching out one hand to each of their chests, shaking them lightly. Her heart pounded with fear as she struggled to remember the events of their previous incarnation. Horrific image after image flashed through her mind, as she remembered how sick they had been, Scarlet covered in boils from smallpox, and Caleb dying from vampire poison. Last she had seen them, it had seemed certain that they would both die.

Caitlin reached down and felt her own neck, felt the two small scars. She recalled that final, fateful moment when Caleb had fed on her. Had it worked? Had it brought him back?

Caitlin shook each one frantically.

“Caleb!” she cried. “Scarlet!”

Caitlin felt tears well up, as she tried not to think about what life would be like without them. It was too much to even contemplate. If they could not be with her, then she would rather not go on.

Suddenly, Scarlet moved. Caitlin's heart soared with hope as she watched her shift and then slowly, gradually, reach up and rub her eyes. She looked up at Caitlin, and Caitlin could see her skin was completely healed, her small, blue eyes bright and shining.

Scarlet broke into a wide smile, and Caitlin's heart lifted.

"Mommy!" Scarlet said. "Where were you?"

Caitlin burst into tears of joy, as she reached down and pulled Scarlet to her, holding her. Over her shoulder, she said, "I'm right here, sweetheart."

"I was dreaming that I couldn't find you," she said. "And that I was sick."

Caitlin breathed with relief, sensing that Scarlet was completely healed.

"It was just a bad dream," Caitlin said. "You're okay now. Everything is going to be okay."

There was a sudden barking, and Caitlin turned to see Ruth charging around the corner, right for them. She was overjoyed to see that she had made it back, too, and amazed to see how large Ruth had grown, now a full-size wolf. Yet Ruth still acted like a puppy, wagging her tail excitedly, as she ran into Scarlet's arms.

"Ruth!" Scarlet screamed, peeling away from Caitlin, and hugging her.

Ruth could barely contain her excitement, charging her with such force, that she knocked Scarlet over.

Scarlet bounced back up, screaming with laughter and delight.

"What's all the commotion?" came a voice.

Caleb.

Caitlin wheeled, feeling a thrill at the sound of Caleb's voice. He was standing over her, smiling. She couldn't believe it. He looked so young and healthy, better than she'd ever seen him.

She jumped up and gave him a hug, so grateful he was alive. She felt his strong muscles as he hugged her back, and it felt so good to be in his arms again. Finally, everything was right in the world. It had been like a long, bad dream.

"I was so scared you had died," Caitlin said, over his shoulder.

She leaned back and looked at him.

"Do you remember?" she asked. "Do you remember being sick?"

He furrowed his brow.

"Vaguely," he answered. "It all feels like a dream. I remember... seeing Jade. And... feeding on you." Suddenly Caleb looked at her, eyes wide. "You saved me," he said, awestruck.

He leaned in and hugged her.

"I love you," she whispered into his ear, as he held her.

"I love you, too," he answered.

"Daddy!"

Caleb lifted Scarlet in a huge embrace. He then reached down and petted Ruth, as did Caitlin.

Ruth couldn't be happier with all the attention, jumping up and whining, trying to hug them back.

After some time, Caleb took Caitlin's hand and together they turned and looked out over the horizon. A soft, morning light filled the endless sky before them, mountain peaks punctuating the horizon, the rose-colored light swirling through the mist. The peaks stretched on forever, and looking down, she could see that they were at an elevation of thousands of feet. She wondered where on earth they could be.

"I was wondering the same thing," Caleb said, reading her thoughts.

They surveyed the horizon, turning completely in every direction.

"Do you recognize it?" Caitlin asked.

He slowly shook his head.

“Well, it looks like we only have two options,” she continued. “Up or down. We’re so high up already, I say we go up. Let’s see what’s to be seen from the top.”

Caleb nodded his approval, Caitlin reached out and took Scarlet’s hand, and the three of them began to hike up the slope.

It was cold up here, and Caitlin was barely dressed for this weather. She still had on her black leather boots, her tightly fitting black pants, and a fitted black long-sleeved shirt, from her sparring time in England. But it wasn’t warm enough to shield her from these cold, mountain winds.

They pressed on, climbing up the slope, grabbing onto boulders and pulling their way up.

As the sun rose higher in the sky, just as she was beginning to wonder if they’d made the right decision, finally, they reached the highest peak.

Out of breath, they stopped and surveyed their surroundings, finally able to see over the ridge.

The sight took Caitlin’s breath away. There, spread out before them, was the other side of the mountain range, stretching as far as the eye could see. Beyond that, an ocean. Far out into the ocean, she could see a mountainous, rocky island, covered in green. A primordial island, jutting out from the ocean, it was more picturesque than anything she had ever seen. It looked like a place of fairytales, especially in the early morning light, covered in an eerie mist, and in an orange and purple glow.

Even more dramatic, the only thing connecting the island to the mainland was an endlessly long rope bridge, which swayed violently in the wind and looked hundreds of years old. Beneath it was a drop of hundreds of feet to the ocean.

“Yes,” Caleb said. “That is it. That island is familiar.” He surveyed it in awe.

“Where are we?” Caitlin asked.

He looked out at the sight with reverence, then turned and faced her, excitement in his eyes.

“Skye,” he said to her. “The legendary Isle of Skye. Home to warriors, and to our kind, for thousands of years. We are in Scotland, then,” he said. “near the approach to Skye. Clearly, that is where we are meant to go. It is a sacred place.”

“Let’s fly,” Caitlin said, feeling her wings already active.

Caleb shook his head.

“Skye is one of the few places on earth where that is not possible. There will surely be vampire warriors guarding it, and more importantly, there will be an energy shield protecting it from direct overhead flight. The water creates a psychic barrier to this place. No vampire can enter without being invited.” He turned and looked at her. “We’re going to have to enter the hard way: by crossing that rope bridge.”

Caitlin stared at the bridge, swaying in the wind.

“But that bridge is treacherous,” she said.

Caleb sighed.

“Skye is unlike any other place. Only the worthy are allowed to enter. Most people who try to approach it, meet their deaths, in one way or another.”

Caleb looked at her.

“We can turn back,” he offered.

Caitlin thought about it, then shook her head.

“No,” she answered, determined. “We were placed here for a reason. Let’s do it.”

Chapter Two

Sam woke with a start. His world was spinning, then rocking violently, and he couldn't understand where he was, or what was happening. He was lying on his back, that much he knew, on what felt like wood, slumped in an uncomfortable position. He was looking straight up at the sky, and he saw the clouds moving erratically.

Sam reached over, grabbed hold of a piece of wood, and pulled himself up. He sat there, blinking, his world still spinning, and got a hold of his surroundings. He couldn't believe it. He was on a boat, a small, wooden rowboat, lying on the floor, in the middle of an ocean.

It rocked violently in the rough sea, the waves lifting it and bringing it back down. It creaked and groaned as it moved, bobbing up and down, rocking side to side. Sam saw the foam of the waves crashing all around him, felt the cold, salty wind spray him in his hair and on his face. It was early morning, in fact, a beautiful dawn, with the sky breaking in a myriad of colors. He wondered how on earth he had ended up here.

Sam spun around and surveyed the boat, and as he did, he spotted a figure lying there, in the dim morning light, on the far side, curled up, on the floor, and covered with a shawl. He wondered who it could be, stuck with him on this small boat in the middle of nowhere. And then he sensed it. It went through him, like an electric shock. He didn't have to see her face.

Polly.

Every bone in Sam's body told him. He was surprised at how definitively he knew, at how connected he was with her, how deep his feelings ran for her – almost as if they were one. He didn't understand how it had happened so quickly.

As he sat there, looking at her, unmoving, he suddenly felt a feeling of dread. He couldn't tell if she were alive or not, and at that moment, he realized how devastated he would be if she were not. That was when he realized, finally, unequivocally, that he loved her.

Sam got to his feet, stumbling in the small boat as a wave turned and lifted it, and managed to take a few steps and kneel by her side. He reached over and gently pulled back the shawl, and shook her shoulders. She didn't respond, and his heart pounded as he waited.

"Polly?" he asked.

No reply.

"Polly," he said, more firmly. "Wake up. It's me, Sam."

But she didn't budge, and as Sam brushed the bare skin of her shoulder, it felt too cold to him. His heart stopped. Could it be possible?

Sam leaned over and held her face in his hands. She was as beautiful as he remembered, her skin a very pale shade of translucent white, her hair a light brown, and her perfectly-chiseled features exquisite in the glow of the early morning light. He saw her perfect, full lips, her small nose, her large eyes, her long, brown hair. He remembered those eyes when they were open, an incredible, crystal blue, like the ocean. He longed to see them open again now; he would do anything. He longed to see her smile, to hear her voice, her laughter. In the past, it had sometimes bothered him when she talked too much. But now, he would give anything to hear her talk forever.

But her skin was too cold in his hands. Ice cold. And he was beginning to despair that her eyes would never open again.

"Polly!" he screamed, and as he did, he could hear the despair in his own voice, as it rose to the sky, and blended with the screech of a bird overhead.

Sam was growing desperate. He had no idea what to do. He was shaking her harder and harder, but she was just not responding. He thought back to the time and place he had last seen her. Sergei's palace. He remembered freeing her. They had gone back, to Aiden's castle, and had found Caitlin and Caleb and Scarlet, all lying lifeless on that bed. Aiden had told him that they had gone back in time,

without them. He had implored Aiden to send them back, too. Aiden had shook his head, saying it was not meant to be, that it would interfere with destiny. But Sam had insisted.

Finally, Aiden had performed the ritual.

Had she died on the trip back?

Sam looked down and shook Polly again. Still nothing.

Finally, Sam reached down and pulled Polly close to him. He pulled her long, beautiful hair out of her face, placed one hand back behind her neck, and pulled her face close. He leaned down and kissed her.

It was a long, full kiss, planted fully on her lips, and Sam realized then, that this was only the second time they had ever really kissed. Her lips felt so soft, so perfect in his. But also too cold, too devoid of life. As he kissed her, he tried to focus on sending his love through her, on willing her back to life. In his mind, he tried to send a clear message. *I'll do anything. I'll pay whatever price. I'll do anything to have you back. Just come back to me.*

“I’LL PAY ANY PRICE!” Sam leaned back and screamed to the waves.

The scream seemed to rise into the heavens, and as it did, it was echoed back by a flock of birds, flying overhead. Sam felt a chill run through his body, as he sensed, at that moment, that the universe had heard and answered him. He knew at that moment, with every ounce of his body, that Polly would, indeed, come back to life. Even though she wasn’t meant to. That he had willed it to happen, had broken some greater plan in the universe. And that he would, indeed, pay the price.

Suddenly, Sam looked down, and watched as Polly’s eyes opened slowly. They were as blue and beautiful as he had remembered, and they were staring right at him. For a moment they were blank, but then they filled with recognition. And then, the greatest magic he had ever seen, a small smile formed at the corner of her lips.

“Are you trying to take advantage of a girl while she’s asleep?” Polly asked, in her typical, jovial voice.

Sam couldn’t help but break into a huge grin. Polly was back. Nothing else mattered. He tried to push out of his mind the ominous feeling that he had defied destiny, that he would have to pay the price.

Polly sat up, back to her nimble, happy self, looking embarrassed to have been caught so vulnerable in his arms, and trying to make a show of being strong and independent. She took in her surroundings, and grabbed onto the side of the boat as a wave brought them high, then lurched them low.

“This isn’t exactly what I would call a romantic boating expedition,” she said, looking a bit pale as she tried to steady herself in the rocking sea. “Where are we exactly? And what is that on the horizon?”

Sam turned and looked where she was pointing. He hadn’t seen it before. There, a few hundred yards off in the distance, sat a rocky island, jutting straight out of the sea, with tall, unforgiving cliffs. It looked ancient, uninhabited, its terrain rocky and desolate.

He turned and surveyed the horizon in every direction. It looked like the only island within thousands of miles.

“It looks like we’re heading right for it,” he said.

“I sure hope so,” Polly said. “I’m positively nauseous on this boat.”

Suddenly, Polly leaned over the side and threw up, again and again.

Sam came over and placed a reassuring hand on her back. Polly finally stood, wiping her mouth with the back of her sleeve and looking away, embarrassed.

“Sorry,” she said. “These waves are relentless.” She looked up at him, guiltily. “It must be unattractive.”

But Sam wasn’t thinking that at all. On the contrary, he was realizing that he had stronger feelings for Polly than he ever realized.

“Why are you looking at me like that?” Polly asked. “Was it that awful?”

Sam quickly looked away, realizing he was staring.

“I wasn’t thinking that at all,” he said, blushing.

But they were both interrupted. On the island there suddenly appeared several warriors, standing at the top of a cliff. One appeared after another, and soon the horizon was filled with them.

Sam reached down, searching to see what weapons he had brought with him. But he was disappointed to find he had not brought any.

The horizon blackened with more and more vampire warriors, and Sam could see that the current was bringing them right to them. They were drifting right into a trap, and there was nothing they could do to stop it.

“Look at that,” Polly said. “They’re coming to greet us.”

Sam studied them carefully, and came to a very different conclusion.

“No they’re not,” he said. “They’re coming to test us.”

Chapter Three

Caitlin stood before the rope bridge to Skye, Caleb beside her, and Scarlet and Ruth behind them. She watched the dilapidated rope sway violently, as she heard the wind whistling through the rocks, the waves crashing against the cliffs hundreds of feet below. The bridge was wet and slippery. Slipping off it would mean instant death for Scarlet and for Ruth, and Caitlin hadn't tested her own wings yet, either. Crossing this bridge was not really a chance she wanted to take – but then again, it seemed obvious that they needed to be on the Isle of Skye.

Caleb looked over at her.

“We haven't much choice,” he said.

“Then there's no point in waiting,” she answered. “I'll take Scarlet, you take Ruth?”

Caleb nodded grimly back, as Caitlin picked up Scarlet and hoisted her onto her back, while Caleb held Ruth in his arms. Ruth at first squirmed, wanting to get down, but Caleb held her firmly, and something about his grip eventually calmed her.

There was no choice but to walk single file on the narrow bridge. Caitlin went first.

Caitlin took her first, unsteady step onto the bridge, and could immediately feel how slippery the water-sprayed planks were. She reached over and grabbed the rope railing for balance, but the bridge only swayed as she did, and the railing fell to pieces in her hands.

She closed her eyes, took a deep breath, and centered herself. She knew she could not rely on her vision, or her balance. She had to call on something deeper. She thought back to Aiden's lessons, summoned his words. She stopped trying to oppose the bridge: instead, she tried to feel at one with it.

Caitlin trusted her inner instincts, and took several steps forward. She slowly opened her eyes, and as she took another step, a plank fell through beneath her. Scarlet cried out, and she lost her balance for a moment – then quickly took another step and found her footing. The wind swayed the bridge again. It felt like she had been going forever, but when Caitlin looked up, she saw they had only gone about ten feet. She knew instinctively that they would never make it.

She turned and looked at Caleb. She could see the look in his eyes, and knew that he was thinking the same thing. She wanted more than anything to just spread her wings and take off, but as she felt them, she sensed something in the air, and knew that Caleb had been right: there was some sort of invisible energy shield up around this island, and flying here uninvited would not work.

The wind blew the bridge again, and Caitlin was beginning to feel desperate. They had gone too far to turn back.

She made a split-second decision.

“On three, jump off, grab your side of the railing, and let it swing you all the way!” she suddenly called out to Caleb. “It's the only way!”

“What if it gives!?” he screamed back.

“We have no choice! If we continue as we are, we will die!”

Caleb didn't argue.

“ONE!” she yelled, taking a deep breath, “TWO! THREE!”

She leapt into the air, off to her right, and saw Caleb leap to his left. She could hear Scarlet screaming and Ruth whining as they were falling over the edge. She reached up and grabbed hard on the rope railing, praying to God that it would hold true this time. She saw Caleb doing the same.

A second later, they were holding onto the rope and swinging through the air, at full speed, the saltwater rising up from the waves and crashing over them. For a moment, Caitlin couldn't tell if they were still swinging, or falling straight down.

But after a few seconds, she could feel the tension of the rope catching in her hand, and felt them not plummeting straight down, but rather swinging towards the far cliff. It was holding.

Caitlin braced herself. The rope was holding, and that was good. But they were also swinging fast, right for the side of the cliff. Smashing into it, she knew, would be painful.

She turned her shoulder and positioned Scarlet behind her, so that she could take the full force of the blow. She looked over and saw Caleb doing the same, holding Ruth with one arm behind him, and leaning in with his shoulder. They both braced for impact.

A second later, they crashed hard into the wall, with a flood of pain. The force of the impact knocked the wind out of Caitlin, and she was momentarily stunned. But she still held onto the rope, and she could see that Caleb did, too. She hung there, dazed for several seconds, checking to see if Scarlet was okay, and if Caleb was. They were.

Caitlin slowly stopped seeing stars, and eventually she reached up, and started to pull herself up the rope, straight up the face of the cliff. She looked up, and saw she had thirty yards to go before reaching the top. She then made the mistake of turning and looking down: it was a perilous drop, and she realized that if the rope gave way, they would plummet hundreds of feet into the sharp rocks below.

Caleb recovered and was climbing straight up his rope, too. The two of them were making good speed, even while slipping on the mossy cliffs.

Suddenly, Caitlin heard a sickening noise. It was the sound of rope snapping.

Caitlin braced herself for a moment, preparing to plummet to her death, but then realized she didn't feel her rope giving way. She looked over immediately, and saw that it was Caleb's.

His rope was snapping.

Caitlin jumped into action. She kicked off the rock, and swung her rope closer to him, reaching out a free hand. She managed to grab Caleb's hand just as he was plummeting to earth. She held it tight with her free hand, holding him there, dangling in the air. Then, with a supreme effort, she lifted him up several feet, into a deep crevice in the side of the cliff. Caleb, still holding Ruth, was able to stand firmly on a ledge, and to grab hold of a natural handle inside the rock face.

Secure, she could see the relief on his face.

But there was no time to reflect. Caitlin immediately turned and hurried up the rope. Her rope could snap, too, at any moment, and she still had Scarlet on her back.

Finally, she reached the top. She quickly jumped up onto the grassy plateau and deposited Scarlet. She felt so grateful to be on steady land – but she didn't waste any time. She rolled over, took the rope, and threw it hard several feet, so that it swung over to where Caleb was standing, below.

She looked down and saw that he was watching carefully for it, and as it came his way, he reached out and grabbed it, holding Ruth with the other hand. He managed to pull them up quickly, too. Caitlin watched carefully his every step, praying that it would not give.

Finally, he made it to the top, rolling over onto the grass, right beside her. They scurried far from the ledge, and as they did, Scarlet and Ruth embraced, and Caitlin and Caleb did the same.

Caitlin could feel the relief flooding her body, as it did his.

"You saved my life," he said. "Again."

She shot back a smile.

"You saved mine many times," she said. "I owe you at least a few."

He smiled back.

They all turned and surveyed their new surroundings. The Isle of Skye. It was gorgeous, breathtaking, mystical, desolate and dramatic at the same time. The island curved in a series of mountains and valleys and hills and plateaus, some of it rocky and barren, some of it covered in a green moss. It was all shrouded by a heavenly mist, which made its way into the nooks and cracks, and was lit up orange and red and yellow in the morning sun. This island looked like a place of dreams. And it also looked like a place that no humans could ever possibly live.

As she watched the horizon, suddenly, like an apparition, a dozen vampires walked out of the mist, over the hill, appearing slowly, heading right for them. Caitlin could not believe it. She braced herself for battle, but Caleb reached over and placed a reassuring hand on hers, as they all stood.

“Don’t worry,” Caleb said. “I can sense it. They are friendly.”

As they got closer, Caitlin could see their features, and sensed that he was right. In fact, she was shocked at what she saw.

Standing there, before her, were several of her old friends.

Chapter Four

Sam braced himself as their boat, rocking wildly, propelled itself inevitably toward the rocky shore. He could feel Polly's apprehension, as dozens of vampire warriors scurried down the steep cliffs, heading towards them.

"Now what?" Polly asked, their boat just feet from shore.

"No other way," Sam answered. "We make our stand."

With those words, he suddenly leapt off the boat, holding Polly's hand, taking her with him. The two of them leapt several feet in the air, landing at the water's edge. Sam felt the shock of the icy cold water on his bare feet; it sent a shiver up his spine, waking him completely. He realized he was still clothed in his battle gear from London – tight black pants and shirt, thickly padded around the shoulders and arms, and he looked over and realized that Polly was, too.

But there wasn't much time to take in anything else. As Sam looked to the shore, he saw dozens of human warriors charging towards them. Dressed in chain mail armor from head to toe, wielding swords, carrying shields, they were the classic vision of knights in shining armor that Sam had seen in picture books all throughout his childhood – the knights he had once wanted to be. As a child, he'd idolized them. But now, being a vampire, he knew he was so much stronger than they would ever be. He knew they could never possibly match the strength or speed that he did, never come close to his fighting skills. So Sam wasn't afraid.

But he was very much protective of Polly. He wasn't quite sure how evolved Polly's fighting skills were, and he didn't entirely like the look of these humans weapons. They were unlike any other swords and shields he had seen. He could already see, gleaming in the morning sun, that they appeared to be silver-tipped. Designed to kill vampires.

He knew it was a threat he had to take seriously.

From the looks on their faces, these humans meant business and he could see from their tight, coordinated formations that they were well-trained. For humans, these were probably the best warriors of this time. They were well organized, too, charging from both directions.

Sam wouldn't give them the advantage of the first strike.

Sam charged them himself, breaking into a sprint, suddenly approaching them faster than they were him.

Clearly, they hadn't expected this. He could sense their hesitation, unsure how to react.

But he didn't give them any time. With one flying leap, he leapt over their heads, using his wings to propel him, until he cleared the entire group, and landed behind them. As he did, he reached down and grabbed a lance from a rear knight. As he landed, he swung it wide, knocking several of them off of their horses in one motion.

The horses neighed and kicked, charging the rest of the group, and causing chaos.

Still, these knights were well trained, and did not let it faze them. Any other human knights would have dispersed immediately, but these, to Sam's surprise, turned and re-grouped, forming a single line and charging for Sam.

Sam was surprised at this, and wondered exactly where he was. Had he landed in some sort of elite warrior kingdom?

Sam didn't have time to figure it out. And he didn't want to kill these humans. Part of him sensed that they weren't out to kill; he felt they were out to confront, and maybe, to capture them. Or, more likely, to test them. After all, they had landed on their turf: he sensed that they wanted to see what they were made of.

Sam had, at least, succeeded in diverting them from Polly. Now they charged only for him.

He reached back with the lance, and aimed for the shield of their leader, wanting to stun but not kill him, and threw it.

A direct hit. He knocked the shield clean out of his hand, and knocked him off of his horse. The knight landed with a loud clang of metal.

Sam jumped forward and grabbed the sword and shield from the knight's hands. Just in time, as several blows descended upon him. He blocked them all, and as he did, tore a mace from another knight's hands. He grabbed on the long wooden shaft, reached back, and swung the deadly metal ball and chain in a wide arc. There was the clang of metal in every direction, as Sam managed to knock swords out of the hands of a dozen warriors. He continued swinging, hitting several on their shields and knocking them to the ground.

But again, Sam was surprised. Any other human warriors would surely have dispersed in chaos; but not these men. Those who had been knocked off their horses, dazed, regrouped, grabbed their weapons off the sand, and formed around Sam, encircling him. This time, they kept a greater distance, enough of a distance that Sam couldn't reach them with the mace.

More distressing, they all, from every direction, suddenly extracted crossbows off their backs, and aimed right for him. Sam could see they were loaded with silver-tip arrows. All meant to kill. Perhaps he had been too lenient with them.

They didn't fire, but they held him in their deadly sites. Sam realized he was in a bind. He couldn't believe it. Any rash move could be his last.

"Drop your bows," came a cold, steely voice.

The humans slowly turned their heads, and Sam turned his, too.

He couldn't believe it. Standing there, on the outer perimeter of the circle, was Polly. She held one of the soldiers in a deadly embrace, her forearm wrapped around his throat and holding a small silver dagger to his throat. The soldier stood there, frozen, unable to move in Polly's grip, his eyes wide with fear, the look of a man about to die.

"If not," Polly continued, "this man dies."

Sam was stunned by the tone of her voice. He'd never seen Polly as a warrior, never seen her so cold and firm. It was like looking at a whole new person, and he was impressed.

The humans, apparently, were impressed, too. Slowly, reluctantly, they dropped their crossbows, one by one, onto the sand.

"Off your horses," she commanded.

Slowly, each one obeyed, dismounting. The dozens of human warriors stood there, at Polly's mercy as she held the man hostage.

"So. The girl saves the boy, does she?" suddenly came a loud, joyful voice. It was followed by a deep, hearty laughter, and all heads turned.

From out of nowhere there appeared a human warrior, mounted on a horse, draped in furs, wearing a crown, and flanked by a dozen more soldiers. Clearly, from the look of him, he was their king. He had wild, orange hair, a thick, orange beard, and glowing, mischievous green eyes. He leaned back and laughed heartily, as he took in the scene before him.

"Impressive," he continued, seeming amused by the whole thing. "Very impressive, indeed."

He dismounted, and as he did, all his men immediately parted ways, as he walked into the circle. Sam felt himself redden, as he realized that it must have looked as if he were unable to handle himself, as if he would have been helpless if it weren't for Polly. Which was, he realized, at least partly, true. But he couldn't be too upset, because at the same time, he was so grateful to her for saving him.

Furthering his embarrassment, the King ignored him, and walked right up to Polly.

"You can let him go now," the King said to her, still smiling.

"Why should I?" she asked, looking back and forth from him to Sam, still cautious.

"Because we were never going to hurt you. It was but a test. To see if you were worthy of being on Skye. After all," he laughed, "you landed on *our* shores!"

The King broke into hearty laughter again, and several of his men stepped forward, handing him two long, bejeweled swords, gleaming in the morning light, cover with rubies and sapphires and emeralds. Sam was taken aback at the sight: they were the most beautiful swords he had ever seen.

“You have passed our test,” the King announced. “And these are for you. A gift.”

Sam walked over to Polly’s side, as she slowly let go her hostage. They each reached out, and took a sword, examining the jewel-encrusted hilt. Sam marveled at its craftsmanship.

“For two very worthy warriors,” he said. “We are honored to welcome you.”

He turned his back, and began to walk, and it was clear that Sam and Polly were meant to follow. As he walked, he boomed out:

“Welcome to our Isle of Skye.”

Chapter Five

Caitlin and Caleb, followed by Scarlet and Ruth, walked at a brisk pace through the Isle of Skye, flanked by Taylor, Tyler, and several other of Aiden's coven members. Caitlin was overjoyed to see them. After the initial hardships of landing in this place and time, she finally felt a sense of peace and ease, as she knew they were exactly where they were supposed to be. Taylor and Tyler, and all of Aiden's people, had been thrilled to see them, too. It was so odd seeing them in this different time and place, in this cold climate, on this stark and barren island in the middle of nowhere. Caitlin was beginning to see how times and places changed, but people were timeless.

Taylor and Tyler led them on a brisk walking tour of the island, and they had been walking for hours. Caitlin had asked immediately if they had any news of Sam or Polly; when they had said no, she had been crestfallen. She desperately hoped that they'd made it back in time, too.

As they walked, Taylor filled them in on their coven's rituals, habits, new training methods, and on anything and everything Caitlin could possibly want to know. Caitlin realized that Skye was stunning, one of the most beautiful places she had ever been. It felt ancient, primordial, with boulders rising from the landscape, moss-covered hills, mountain lakes reflecting the morning sun, and a beautiful mist which seemed to hang over everything.

"The mist never leaves us," Tyler said, smiling, reading Caitlin's mind.

Caitlin blushed, embarrassed, as always, at how easily others read her thoughts.

"In fact, that's where it gets its name: Skye means 'the misty isle,'" Taylor said. "It lends a pretty dramatic backdrop to everything here, don't you think?"

Caitlin nodded, surveying the landscape.

"And it's useful in battling our enemies," Tyler chimed in. "Yet no one even dares approach our shores."

"I don't blame them," Caleb said. "That was hardly a welcoming entrance."

Taylor and Tyler smiled.

"Only the worthy can approach. That's our test. It's been years since anyone's tried to visit – and even more years since they passed that test and made it to our shores alive."

"Only the worthy can survive and train here," Taylor said. "But the training is the best in the world."

"Skye is an unforgiving place," Tyler added, "a place of extremes. Aiden's coven is as close here as it's ever been. We hardly ever leave. We train together nearly all day long, and in the most extreme of environments – cold, fog, rain, cliffs, in the mountains, on freezing lakes, on rocky shores – sometimes even in the ocean. There are very few training methods he hasn't put us through. And we are more battle-hardened than we have ever been."

"And we do not train alone," Tyler added. "Human warriors live here, too, led by their King, McCleod. They have a castle and their own legion of warriors, and we all live and train together. It is very unusual, vampires and humans training together. But we are very close here. We are all warriors, and we all respect the warrior code."

"Although, of course," Tyler said, "we don't cross any lines with mating. Many of them would like to have our vampire skills, but Aiden has strict rules about our turning humans. So they are resigned to the fact that they never will be one of us. We live and train in harmony together. We sharpen their skills beyond what any human could dream of. And they offer us shelter and protection. They have an arsenal of silver-tipped weapons, and if any rival covens should ever attack, they stand ready to defend us."

"A castle?" Scarlet suddenly asked. "A real castle?"

Taylor looked down, and broke into a big smile. She reached over and took Scarlet's free hand as they walked.

“Yes, love. We are bringing you there right now. In fact,” she said, as they rounded a hill and pointed, “it’s just over there.”

They all stopped and stared, and Caitlin was amazed at the sight. Before them was an expansive vista of rolling hills, mountains, lakes, and in the distance, perched on its own small cliff, was an ancient castle, nestled at the edge of a huge lake.

“Dunvegan Castle,” Taylor announced. “Home of Scottish kings for centuries.”

“WOW!” Scarlet screamed. “Mommy, we get to live in a castle!”

Caitlin couldn’t help but smile, as did the others, as Scarlet’s enthusiasm was infectious.

“Can Ruth come, too!?” Scarlet asked. Caitlin glanced at Taylor, who nodded back. “Of course she can, love.”

Scarlet squealed in delight, hugging Ruth, and the group hurried down the slope, towards the distant castle.

As Caitlin surveyed the castle, she sensed that some deep secrets lay within its walls, secrets that could help her on her search for her father. Once again, she sensed that she was in exactly the right place.

“Is Aiden here?” Caitlin asked Tyler.

“That’s what we’ve been wondering for a while now,” Tyler answered. “I haven’t seen him in weeks. Sometimes he disappears for a while. You know how he is.”

Caitlin did, indeed. She thought back to all the times, all the places she had been with them. She desperately needed to talk to him now, to know more about why they had landed in this place and time, to find out if Sam and Polly were okay, to find out about the final key – and most of all, if her father was here now. She had so many burning questions she was dying to ask him. Like, what had happened in London before they were all sent back? Had Kyle managed to survive?

As they approached the castle, Caitlin looked up and admired its architecture – rising fifty feet high, it sprawled over many levels, in a rectangular shape, with several square towers and parapets. It sat boldly and proudly at the top of a cliff, overlooking the vast lake and open sky, and unlike other castles, it was bright and airy, with dozens of windows. Its approach was impressive, with a wide stone roadway leading up to a front gate and an imposing arched doorway. This was clearly not a place one approached easily, and as Caitlin looked up, she spotted human guards on all the towers, watching them like a hawk.

As they approached the entrance, there was suddenly a sounding of trumpets, followed by the rumble of horses’ hooves.

Caitlin turned. Galloping over the horizon, rushing right towards them, were dozens of human warriors, dressed in armor. Leading them was an imposing man dressed in furs, with a large orange beard, flanked by attendants, and bearing the demeanor of a king. He had soft facial features, and seemed to be the type who smiled easily. He had a large entourage of warriors, and Caitlin would have tensed up, if it weren’t for Taylor and Tyler being so relaxed. Clearly, these were friends.

As the soldiers stopped before them and parted ways, Caitlin stopped in her tracks, shocked.

There, in the center of the group, dismounting, were two people she loved most in the world. She couldn’t believe it. She blinked several times. It was really them.

Standing before her, grinning back, were Sam and Polly.

* * *

Caitlin and Sam each stepped forward before the two large groups of warriors and met in a huge embrace. Caitlin felt so relieved to be holding her brother, to be hugging him, to see and feel that he was alive, and really here. She then leaned over and hugged Polly, as Caleb, too, stepped up, and gave both Sam and Polly a hug.

“Polly!” Scarlet cried, as she came running up, Ruth barking by her side. Polly knelt down and gave her a huge hug, picking her up in her arms.

“I didn’t think I’d ever see you again!” Scarlet said.

Polly beamed. “You can’t get rid of me that easily!”

Ruth barked, and Polly knelt down and hugged her, while Sam hugged Scarlet.

Caitlin felt herself basking in the warm glow of having her family and loved ones reunited. She thought back to London, to everyone sick and dying, to the time when she couldn’t imagine that a happy scene like this would ever be possible. She felt so grateful that everything seemed to be restored, and marveled at how many lifetimes she had already led. It made her so grateful for immortality. She couldn’t imagine what she would do with just one life.

“What happened to guys?” Caitlin asked Sam. “Last I saw you, you promised me you wouldn’t leave Caleb and Scarlet’s side. And when I returned, you were gone.”

Caitlin was still upset at their betrayal.

Sam and Polly looked down in shame.

“I’m so sorry,” Sam said. “It was my fault. Polly was abducted, and I left to save her.”

“No, it’s my fault,” Polly said. “Sergei had said there was a cure, and that I had to go with him to get it. I was so stupid – I believed him. I thought I would save them. But I broke my promise to you. Will you ever forgive me?”

“And me?” Sam asked.

Caitlin looked at both their faces, and could see their absolute sincerity. A part of her was still upset that they’d broke their word and left Scarlet and Caleb so open to attack. But another part of her, the part that was evolving, was telling her to completely forgive them and let it go.

She took a deep breath, and focused on letting it go. She exhaled, and nodded.

“Yes, I forgive you both,” she said.

They both smiled back.

“*You* might forgive them,” King McCleod suddenly said, dismounting and stepping towards them, “but *I* don’t forgive them for embarrassing my men like that!” he said, letting out a hearty laugh. “Especially Polly. The two of you put my finest warriors to shame. Clearly, we have a lot to learn from you, as we have learned from the others. Vampires versus humans. Never fair,” he said, shaking his head, with another hearty laugh.

McCleod stepped forward and approached Caitlin and Caleb. Caitlin liked him immediately. He was quick to smile, had a deep, comforting laugh, and seemed to put everyone at ease around him.

“Welcome to our island,” he said, reaching up, taking Caitlin’s hand and kissing it with a bow. He then reached over and shook Caleb’s hand warmly in both of his. “The Isle of Skye. There is no place like it on earth. Desperate home to the greatest warriors. This castle has been in my family for hundreds of years. You’ll stay with us. Aiden will be thrilled. As will my men. I officially welcome you!” he said with a shout, and all his men cheered.

Caitlin felt overwhelmed at his hospitality. She hardly knew how to respond.

“It is a great pleasure,” she said.

“And we thank you for your graciousness,” Caleb said.

“Are you a king?” Scarlet stepped forward and asked. “Is there a real princess here?”

The king looked down and broke into uproarious laughter, louder and deeper than before. “Well now, I am a king, yes indeed – but there is no princess here I’m afraid. Just us men. But perhaps you shall rectify that, my beauty!” he said with a laugh, and took two steps forward, picked up Scarlet, and spun her around. “And what might your name be?”

Scarlet blushed, suddenly shy.

“Scarlet,” she said, looking down. “And that’s Ruth,” she said, pointing down.

Ruth barked, as if in response, and McCleod set her down with a laugh, and stroked Ruth’s fur.

“I’m sure you are all ravenous,” he said. “To the castle!” he shouted. “It’s time to celebrate!”

All his men shouted, turned as a group, and headed for the castle's entrance. As they did, rows of guards snapped to attention.

Sam draped an arm around Caitlin's shoulder, and Caleb around Polly's, as they all walked together towards the castle entrance. Caitlin knew she shouldn't, but despite herself, she allowed herself to hope that, once again, this time, they had found a permanent home, a place in the world that they could all, finally, be at peace in forever.

Chapter Six

It was the warmest and most lavish welcome Caitlin could have imagined. Their arrival had been like one long celebration. They'd run into one coven member after another, and she saw faces she hadn't seen in what felt like forever – Barbara, Cain, and many others. They'd all sat for lunch at a huge banquet table, in the warm, stone castle, furs beneath their feet, torches along the walls, the fireplace roaring, and dogs running all around. The room felt warm and cozy, and Caitlin realized that it was cold outside – the end of October, Caitlin had been told. 1350. Caitlin couldn't believe it. She was nearly seven hundred years away from the 21st century.

She had always tried to imagine what life might be like in this time period, in the times of the knights, of armor, castles...but she had never imagined anything quite like this. Despite the stark change in surroundings, the lack of major towns or cities, the people were still very warm, very intelligent, very human. In many ways, not all that different from the people of her time.

Caitlin felt very at home in this time and place. She had spent hours catching up with Sam and Polly, hearing their stories, their version of what had happened to them back in England. She had been horrified to hear of what had happened between Sergei and Polly, and so proud of Sam for saving her.

And throughout the whole night, she couldn't help but notice that Sam barely took his eyes off of Polly. As a big sister, she sensed that a major shift had happened within him. He finally seemed more mature, and for the first time ever, truly and totally in love.

Yet Polly, this time, seemed a bit more evasive. It was harder for Caitlin to get an exact fix on where she stood, on her feelings for Sam. Maybe it was because Polly was more guarded. Or maybe it was because this time, Polly truly cared. Caitlin could sense, deep down, that Sam meant the world to her, and that she was being extra careful not to disclose her feelings, or mess it up. Caitlin did notice that every once in a while, when Sam looked away, Polly stole a quick glance back at him. But then she quickly averted her eyes, so that Sam wouldn't catch her looking.

Caitlin felt, beyond a doubt, that her brother and her best friend were about to become a couple. The idea of it thrilled her. And it amused her that both of them were still in denial of what was happening between them – and even trying to pretend that it wasn't.

The table was also filled with new human friends, and Caitlin met so many people who she felt close to. They were all warriors. The king sat at the head, surrounded by his dozens of knights. Throughout the afternoon, they all sang drinking songs, and laughed aloud as they recounted stories of battle, of hunting expeditions. Caitlin could tell that these Scottish people were warm, friendly, hospitable, loved to drink, and were great raconteurs. And yet they were also very noble and proud, and great warriors.

The meal and stories went on for hours, as lunch extended into late afternoon. Torches died out and were re-lit. Dozens of new logs were added to the massive, stone fireplace; huge vats of wine were replaced. Eventually, all the dogs tired out, fell asleep on the rugs. Scarlet finally fell asleep on Caitlin's lap, while Ruth curled up beside Scarlet. Ruth had been well-fed, thanks to Scarlet, who'd fed her a never-ending supply of meat. A dozen dogs were seated around the table, begging for scraps, but they all had the good sense to steer clear of Ruth. And Ruth, content, didn't seem interested in messing with them, either.

Some of the warriors, gutted from food and drink, eventually nodded off on their furs, too. Caitlin found herself drifting off, turning her mind to other times and places, other matters. She started to wonder what her next clue would be; if her Dad would be in this place and time; where her next journey would take her. Her eyes started to close, when suddenly, she heard her name.

It was the king, McCleod, addressing her over the din.

“And what do you think, Caitlin?” he asked again.

As he did, the jovial table slowly began to quiet, as people turned and looked her way.

Caitlin felt embarrassed, not having been listening to the conversation. The king looked at her, as if awaiting an answer. Finally, he cleared his throat.

“What do you think of the Holy Grail?” he asked again.

The Holy Grail? Caitlin wondered. *Was that what they had been talking about?*

She had no idea. She had not been thinking of the Holy Grail at all, and hardly even knew what it was. She wished now that she had been listening to their conversation. She tried to remember what it was, and thought back to childhood fairytales, to myths and legends. To the stories of King Arthur. Excalibur. The Holy Grail...

Slowly, it was coming back to her. If she recalled correctly, the Holy Grail was rumored to be a chalice or goblet, rumored to hold a special liquid... Yes, now it was coming back to her. Some people had said that the Holy Grail held the blood of Christ, that drinking it would make you immortal. If she remembered correctly, the knights had spent hundreds of years searching for it, had risked their lives trying to find it, to the ends of the earth. And no one ever had.

“Do you think it will ever be found?” McCleod asked again.

Caitlin cleared her throat, the entire table looking to her for an answer.

“Um...” she began, “I haven’t really thought about it,” she answered. “But if it really exists... then I don’t see why it can’t be found.”

There was a small roar of approval at the table.

“You see,” McCleod said to one of his knights. “She is an optimist. I, too, think it will be found.”

“An old wives’ tale,” said a knight.

“And what will you do when you find it?” asked another knight. “That’s the real question.”

“Why, I shall make myself immortal,” the king answered, breaking into a hearty laugh.

“You don’t need the Holy Grail for that,” said another knight. “All you need is to be turned.”

A tense silence suddenly fell around the table. Clearly, this knight had overspoke, had crossed a line and mentioned something taboo. He lowered his head in shame, recognizing his mistake.

Caitlin saw McCleod’s sudden, dark expression, and in that moment, she realized that he desperately wanted to be turned. And that he sorely resented Aiden’s coven for not obliging him. Clearly, this knight had raised a sore point, the one point of tension between the two races.

“And what is it like?” the king asked aloud, directing his question to Caitlin, for some reason. “Immortality?”

Caitlin wondered why he’d had to ask her, of all the vampires in the room. Couldn’t he have picked someone else?

She thought about that. *What was it like?* What could she possibly say? On the one hand, she loved immortality, loved living in all these times and places, seeing her family and friends again and again, in each new time and place. On the other hand, some parts of her still wished she had a normal, simple life, wished that there was a normal arc to things. Most of all, she found herself surprised at how brief immortality seemed: on the one hand, it felt like life forever – but on the other hand, it still always felt to her like there was never enough time.

“It doesn’t feel as permanent as you might imagine.”

The rest of the table nodded in approval at her response.

McCleod suddenly rose from his chair. As he did, all the others rose at attention.

Just as Caitlin was turning over the odd exchange in her head, wondering if she had upset him, she suddenly felt his presence behind her. She turned, and he was standing over her.

“You are wise beyond your years,” he said. “Come with me. And bring your friends. I have something to show you. Something that has been waiting for you a very long time.”

Caitlin was surprised. She had no idea what it might be.

McCleod turned and strutted out the hall, and Caitlin and Caleb rose, followed by Sam and Polly, and followed him. They looked at each other in wonder.

They crossed the large, stone floor, following the king through the enormous chamber and out a side door, as the knights around the table slowly sat back down and resumed their meal.

McCleod walked in silence, strutting down a narrow, torch-lit hall, with Caitlin, Caleb, Sam and Polly following. The ancient stone halls twisted and turned, leading them to a staircase.

McCleod took a torch off the wall and led the way down the darkened staircase, into seeming blackness. As they walked, Caitlin began to wonder where exactly, he was leading them. What could he possibly have to show them? An ancient weapon of some sort?

Finally, they reached a subterranean level, well lit by torches, and Caitlin was amazed at the sight. The low, arched ceiling glittered, plated in gold. Caitlin could see illustrated images of Christ, Knights, scenes from the Bible, mixed with various odd signs and symbols. The floor was an ancient, well-worn stone, and Caitlin couldn't help but feel as if they'd entered a secret treasure chamber.

Caitlin's heart began to beat faster, as she sensed something important awaiting them. She strutted faster, hurrying to catch up to the King.

"The treasury vault of the McCleod clan for a thousand years. It is down here where we hold our most sacred treasure, weapons and possessions. But there is one possession which is more valuable, more sacred, than all of them."

He stopped and turned to her.

"It is a treasure we have been saving just for you."

He turned and lifted a torch off a side wall, and as he did, a hidden door in the wall suddenly opened up in the stone. Caitlin was amazed: she would have had no idea it was there.

McCleod turned and led them down another twisting corridor. Finally, they came to a stop in a small alcove area. Before them was a throne, on which sat a lone object: a small, jeweled treasure chest. Torchlight flickered over it, illuminating it, and McCleod gingerly reached down and picked it up.

Slowly, he lifted the lid. Caitlin could not believe it.

There, inside the chest, sat a single piece of ancient parchment, a faded, antique color, wrinkled and torn in half. It was covered in ancient handwriting, in a delicate script, in a language Caitlin did not recognize. Along its edges were multi-colored letters, drawings and symbols, and in its center was a drawing, semi-circular. But given that it was torn in half, Caitlin could not make out what it was supposed to be.

"For you," he said, gingerly lifting it and holding it out to her.

Caitlin held the piece of torn parchment, feeling it crinkle in her hands, and held it up to the torchlight. It was a torn page, perhaps from a book. With all of its delicate symbology, it looked like a piece of art in its own right.

"It is the missing page to the Holy Book," McCleod explained. "When you find the book, that page will be complete. And when it is, you will find the relic we are all searching for."

He turned and faced her.

"The Holy Grail."

Chapter Seven

Caitlin sat in her large room in Dunvegan in Castle at a writing desk, looking out the window at the sunset sky. She examined the torn page McCleod had given her, holding it up to the light. She slowly ran her fingertips along the embossed, Latin letters. They looked and felt ancient. The entire page was so beautifully and intricately designed, and she marveled at the intricate colors along the paper's edges. Back then, she realized, books were made to be works of art in and of themselves.

Caleb lay on their bed, while Scarlet and Ruth were sprawled out on a pile of furs before the fireplace on the far side of the room. This room was so sprawling, that even with all of them in it, Caitlin still felt alone with her thoughts. In the adjacent room, she knew, were Sam and Polly. It had been a long day, and a long feast with Aiden's coven and the king's men, and they were all settling in for the night.

Caitlin could not stop thinking about the torn page, the clue, where it might lead her, and if it would yield the fourth key. Would her father be there this time? Could it be that he was waiting, close by? Her heart beat faster at the thought of it. Did that mean she would finally find the shield? That all of this would be over? And what would she do then? Where would she go next?

It was all too overwhelming for her to consider. She felt she just had to focus on the clue before her, to take it one step at a time. She thought of what McCleod had said about the holy Grail. He had told her that he and his men had devoted their lives to finding the grail. That legend had it that a woman would arrive and lead them to it. He believed that she, Caitlin, was that woman. Which was why he had given her his precious clue, the ancient piece of paper.

But Caitlin wasn't so sure. Was the grail just a myth? Or was it real? And how was it tied to her search?

Caitlin didn't know where all this lead, but as she reflected, she realized that, once again, she had finally found a place, in this castle, with these people, where she felt a sense of peace and comfort. She felt at home in Skye, in this castle, with this king, with his knights, and of course, being back with Aiden's coven again. She was thrilled to be reunited with Caleb, Scarlet, Sam and Polly. Finally, once again, everything felt right in the world. It was cold and windy out there, and with a fire raging in her fireplace, she was cozy in here, and really didn't want to venture out there, hunting down more clues. She wanted to stay right here. She could see herself building a home here with Caleb, and Scarlet, and Ruth.

If they pressed on with their missions, how might that affect her relationship with Caleb? Or even endanger Scarlet or Ruth? It seemed that whenever she got close to finding another key, bad things started to happen.

Caitlin slowly set down the brittle piece of paper, and stared, instead, at her unopened journal before her, sitting on the desk. It was now worn, thick with use, looking like a relic in its own right. She reached out and slowly pulled back the pages, turning them all the way until she nearly reached the end of the book. She realized, with a start, that there weren't that many blank pages left. She couldn't believe it. When she'd first began this journal, it had seemed as if it would last forever.

She lifted the quill, blotted it into the ink, and began to scrawl.

I can't believe this journal is almost finished. I look back at some of my older entries, like the one from New York City, and it feels like lifetimes ago. But it also feels like it all just happened yesterday.

I think back on all that I've been through, and I don't even know where to begin anymore. I feel like too much has gone by to catch you up on everything. So I will just fill you in on the most important things.

Caleb is alive. He survived his sickness. I'm back together with him now. And we are going to be married. Nothing makes me happier.

Scarlet, the most beautiful eight-year-old girl in the world, is in our lives. She is our daughter now. She survived her sickness, too, and I am overjoyed.

Not to mention Ruth, who has grown bigger and stronger than Rose ever was, and might just be the most loyal and protective animal I've ever seen. She's as much a part of our family as Scarlet and Caleb.

And I'm thrilled to be reunited with Sam and Polly. Finally, I feel like my whole family is back together again, under one roof.

I am nervous for our wedding. Caleb and I haven't had a chance to talk about it yet, but I feel it will be soon. When I was younger, I always tried to imagine my wedding day. But I never imagined anything remotely like what this might be. A vampire wedding? What will it look like?

I hope that he still loves me as much as I love him. I sense that he does. I wonder if he is nervous for the wedding, too?

I look down at my ring, at the ring he gave me, so beautiful, covered in all these shining jewels. It doesn't feel real. Not any of it. But at the same time, I feel like I've been connected to him forever.

I want to find my Dad. I really do. But I don't want to search anymore, and I don't want things to change. Any of this. I want to be with Caleb. And I want our wedding to happen. Is it wrong to put our wedding first?

Caitlin closed her journal and sent down the quill. Still lost in another world, she blinked and looked around the room. She wondered how much time had passed while she was reflecting; she looked out the window and saw that it was twilight, and as she glanced about the room, she saw that Scarlet and Ruth were still fast asleep. On the other side of the room, beneath the torchlight, Caleb seemed to be asleep, too.

Caitlin also found herself feeling sleepy. She felt she needed to clear her head, to get some air. She got up from the desk quietly and began to cross the room, determined to slip outside. She grabbed a fur shawl on the way, wrapping it around her shoulders. Just as she reached the door, though, she heard a soft clearing of the throat.

She looked over and saw Caleb looking at her, one eye open, beckoning her.

She turned and walked over to his side, and as he patted the bed, she sat beside him.

He smiled as he slowly opened his eyes. As always, she was struck by his beauty. His facial features were so perfect, so clean and smooth, his jaw line and cheekbone prominent, his lips full and smooth, his nose angular and perfect. He blinked with his long eyelashes, then slowly reached out and ran one hand through her hair.

"We've hardly had a chance to talk," he said.

"I know," she smiled back.

"I want you to know how much I still love you," he said.

Caitlin smiled. "I love you, too."

"And that I can't wait to be married to you," he added, his smile widening.

He sat up and kissed her, and they kissed for a long time beneath the torchlight.

Caitlin felt her heart warm. That was exactly what she had been wanting to hear. It was uncanny how he had always been able to read her thoughts.

"Now that we're here, I want to marry you. Before we continue on our search. Right here. In this place." He studied her. "What do you think?"

She looked back at him, her heart racing with conflicting emotions. It was exactly what she wanted, too. But she was also scared. She wasn't sure how to respond.

Finally, she stood.

“Where are you going?” he asked.

“I’ll be back soon,” she said. “I just need to clear my head.”

She kissed him one last time, then turned and walked out the room, closing the door softly behind her. She knew that if she stayed, she would end up in his arms, in the bed. And she first really needed to gather her thoughts. Not that she had any doubts about him. Or about their marriage. Or about their wedding. But she still felt conflicted, divided, over whether she needed to be out there, pursuing her mission. Was it selfish to put the wedding first?

As Caitlin walked down the empty, stone corridor, her footsteps echoing, she spotted a stairwell heading up, and saw natural light filtering down it. The castle roof, she realized. That was just the place she could go to get privacy and fresh air.

Caitlin hurried up the steps and into the twilight air. It was colder up here than she imagined, a late October wind driving strong. She wrapped her furs tightly over her shoulders, and was grateful for the warmth.

As Caitlin walked slowly along the ramparts, she looked out over the countryside in what little light was left. It was breathtakingly beautiful. On one side, the castle was perched beside a vast and lake, covered in mist. On the other side was a great expanse of trees and hills and valleys. This place felt magical.

Caitlin walked to the edge of a rampart, staring out, taking in the landscape – when suddenly, she sensed another presence. She didn’t know how that could be possible, as the entire roof had been empty. She slowly turned, not sure what to expect.

She couldn’t believe it.

Standing there, at the far end of the roof, was a lone figure, his back to her, looking out over the lake. An electric thrill ran through her. She didn’t need to see his long, flowing robes, his long silver hair, or the staff at his side to know who it was.

Aiden.

Could it really be? she wondered. Or was it just an illusion in the twilight?

She crossed the roof, slowly walking over to him, and stopped a few feet away. He stood so still, his hair blowing in the breeze, not turning. For a moment, she wondered if he was real. Then came his voice.

“You have come far,” he said, his back still to her.

Slowly, he turned and faced her. His eyes were a large shining blue, even in the dim light, and they seemed to look right through her. As usual, his face was expressionless. Intense.

Caitlin was thrilled to see him here. There had been so many questions she was dying to ask him, and as usual, he seemed to show up at just the moment when she needed guidance the most.

“I didn’t know if I would see you again,” she said.

“You will always see me,” he answered. “Sometimes in person, and sometimes otherwise,” he answered cryptically.

A silence hung between them, as she tried to gather her thoughts.

“There is only key left,” she found herself saying. “Does that mean I will see my father soon?” He studied her, then slowly looked away.

Finally, he said, “That depends on your actions, doesn’t it?”

His habit of answering a question with a question always drove her mad. She had to try again.

“The new clue,” she said. “The page. The torn page. I don’t know where it leads. I don’t know what to look for. Or where.”

Aiden stared off into the horizon.

“Sometimes clues look for you,” he answered. “You know that now. Sometimes you must wait for things to be revealed.”

Caitlin thought about that. Was he telling her to do nothing?

“Then... is there nothing for me to do?” she asked.

“There is much for you to do,” Aiden responded.

He turned and faced her, and slowly, for the first time in as long as Caitlin could remember, he broke into a smile. “You have a wedding to plan.”

Caitlin felt herself smiling back.

“I wanted to. But I was afraid that it was frivolous,” she said. “That I should put on hold. That I should be searching first.”

Aiden slowly shook his head.

“A vampire wedding is not frivolous. It is a sacred event. It is the merging of two vampire souls. It brings more power to each of you, and more power to our entire coven. And it will only deepen your growth, your skills. I am proud of you. You have grown greatly. But if you are to evolve to the next level, you need this. Each union brings its own power. Both for the couple, and for the individual.”

Caitlin felt relieved, excited – but also nervous.

“But I don’t know how to plan this kind of wedding. I would barely even know how to plan a human wedding.”

Aiden smiled. “You have many friends who will help you. And I will preside over the ceremony.” He smiled. “I am a priest, after all.”

Caitlin smiled wide, liking the thought of that.

“So, what do I do now?” Caitlin asked, excited, nervous, not knowing where to begin.

He smiled.

“Go to Caleb. And say yes. Let love take care of the rest.”

Chapter Eight

Kyle trekked through the bogs of southern Scotland, fuming with hatred. With every step he took, he raged at the thought of Caitlin, running free, eluding him, in time after time, place after place. He dwelled on ways he could capture and kill her, exact revenge.

He had already exhausted nearly every method he could think, and she always seemed to slip through his grasp. He did manage to exact a small, petty revenge in poisoning her family. He smiled inwardly at the thought of that.

But it wasn't enough. This had gone on already way too long, and the last time they'd met, he had to admit it, she had overpowered him. He was shocked at her strength, her fighting skills. She had actually outfought him. It was beyond anything he could have anticipated.

A part of him had feared this, which was why he had gone to such lengths to poison her, to avoid a head-on confrontation. But that, too, had backfired. He'd poisoned Caleb by accident, and while he felt certain that his poison had killed Caleb, he hadn't had a chance to confirm it, as he'd had to flee in the night.

This was the last time and place, Kyle vowed to himself, that this would happen, that he would pursue her. Either he would kill her for sure this time, or he would die trying. There was no retreat, no surrender. No more times or places. This would be his last and final stand. Here, in Scotland.

And for this final stand, he had a grand strategy, the grandest of them all. The vampire poison had seemed a good idea at the time, but in retrospect, it was just too risky, left too much room for chance. His new idea, though, could not possibly fail.

In coming up with this new scheme, Kyle had thought back to all the times and places he had cornered in Caitlin, and tried to recall the time he had come closest to killing her. He concluded that it was back in New York, when he'd captured her brother, Sam, had him under his control, and used him to shapeshift and trick Caitlin. That had nearly worked.

Shapeshifting, Kyle realized, was the key. With this type of trickery, he could dupe Caitlin, gain her confidence, and then kill her for good.

But the problem was, Kyle did not possess this skill. He did, though, knew one person, in this time and place, who did.

His old protégé.

Rynd.

Centuries before, Kyle had trained a fleet of the most vicious, sadistic vampires who'd ever roamed the face of the earth. Rynd had been one of his shining stars. He'd become too vicious even for Kyle to handle, and Kyle eventually had to expel him.

Last Kyle heard, Rynd was living in this time and place, hiding out in the remote Southern corner of Scotland. Kyle would find him now. After all, Kyle had taught him everything he knew, and he figured Rynd owed him one. It was the least he could do for his old mentor. All Kyle needed from him was for him to summon his old shapeshifting trick, just once.

Kyle, ankle deep in mud, smiled at the thought of it. Yes, Rynd was exactly what he needed to dupe Caitlin, to finish her off for good. This time, it was a plan that could not fail.

Kyle looked up, taking in the scene. It was cold, and windy, and the dampness in the air seeped into his bones. It was twilight, his favorite time of day, and there was a heavy fog creeping over the ancient wood. It was just his kind of day. If there was anything Kyle loved more than twilight, it was fog. Kyle felt positively at home.

Suddenly, his senses were on high alert. A creepy feeling raised the hair on his skin, and something told him that Rynd was close.

As Kyle walked into the fog, he heard a slight creaking, and looked up and spotted something moving. As the fog parted, Kyle could make out a barren forest of dead trees, and as he looked closer, he saw objects hanging from the branches.

As he stepped forward and examined them, he realized they were bodies – humans – dead, hanging upside down by their feet, tied by rope to the branches. They swung slowly in the wind, and the sound of rope creaking on wood permeated the air. From the look of these corpses, it seemed they had been killed long ago; their skin was blue, there were telltale holes in their necks, and Kyle realized they had been fed upon, drained of blood.

Rynd's work.

As the fog continued to part, Kyle spotted hundreds – no thousands – of bodies, all hanging. It was obvious that they'd all been kept alive for some time, tortured slowly for days. It was sadistic, malicious stuff.

Kyle admired it. It was something he himself would have done in his heyday.

Kyle knew that Rynd had to be very, very close.

Suddenly, out of the mist, there appeared a solitary figure, slowly approaching. Kyle squinted into the fog, trying to make out who it was.

And when he realized, his heart stopped.

It couldn't be.

Standing there, before him, was his mother. His *real* mother, his human mother, before he was ever turned. It was the one person he loved most in the world, the one person who could recall what a kind person he had been before he'd been turned – and the one person who reminded him of his own humanity.

Kyle felt as if he'd been struck through the heart. Pangs of guilt and remorse tore him apart.

At the sight of her, he dropped to his knees, and wept.

“Mother!” Kyle yelled, weeping like a child.

She came closer to him, arms outstretched, a compassionate smile on her face.

Kyle could not comprehend what she was doing in this time and place. Had she come to ask him to repent?

“Come to me, my child,” she said, beckoning him.

Kyle rose to his feet, and took a step forward to her.

The second he did, he regretted it.

Suddenly, he felt his whole world turn upside down, as he went rocketing upwards into the air. This was followed by a loud creaking noise, and as Kyle swung side to side, staring down at the ground, he realized he'd stepped into a trap.

The silver rope had tightened around his feet, had propelled him high into the air, twenty feet off the ground, dangling upside down. Kyle reached up to tear it off, but realized it was vampire-resistant material, one he could not tamper with.

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