



The Ruby Circle: A Bloodlines Novel

By Richelle Mead

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Their forbidden romance exposed, Sydney and Adrian find themselves facing the wrath of both the Alchemists and the Moroi in this electrifying conclusion to Richelle Mead's bestselling Bloodlines series.

When the life of someone they both love is put on the line, Sydney risks everything to hunt down a deadly former nemesis. Meanwhile, she and Adrian become enmeshed in a puzzle that could hold the key to a shocking secret about spirit magic, a secret that could shake the entire Moroi world and alter their lives forever.

Don't miss their unforgettable final chapter...

They will be tested, but LOVE WILL CONQUER ALL.

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Editorial Review

Review

“With all the magic, vampires, and steamy scenes, you'll be so grateful for this escape...”

--*Seventeen.com*

About the Author

Richelle Mead is the author of the international #1 bestselling Vampire Academy series, its bestselling spinoff series Bloodlines, and the forthcoming fantasy standalone *Soundless*. A lifelong reader, Richelle has always had a particular fascination with mythology and folklore. When she can actually tear herself away from books (either reading or writing them), she enjoys bad reality TV, traveling, trying interesting cocktails, and shopping for dresses to wear on tour. She is a self-professed coffee addict, works in her pajamas, and has a passion for all things wacky and humorous. Originally from Michigan, Richelle now lives in Seattle, Washington, where she is hard at work on her next novel. Visit www.RichelleMead.com to find out more.

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ADRIAN

MARRIED LIFE WASN'T WHAT I'D EXPECTED.

Don't get me wrong: I had no regrets about the woman I'd married. In fact, I loved her more than I'd ever imagined it was possible to love a person. The reality we lived in, though? Well, let's just say I'd never really imagined anything like that either. In all our previous fantasies, we'd dreamed of exotic locations and, most importantly, freedom. Being cooped up in a small suite of rooms had never been part of any escape plan, let alone a romantic getaway.

But I was never one to back down from a challenge.

“What's this?” asked Sydney, startled.

“Happy anniversary,” I said.

She'd just finished getting showered and dressed and now stood in the bathroom's doorway, staring around at the transformation I'd wrought in our living room. It hadn't been easy doing so much in so little time. Sydney was an efficient person, and that extended to showers as well. Me? You could have conducted full demolition and remodeling in the time it took me to shower. With Sydney, there'd been barely enough time to decorate the place in candles and flowers. But I'd managed.

A smile crept over her face. “It's only been one month.”

“Hey, don't say ‘only,’” I warned. “It's still monumental. And I'll have you know that I plan on celebrating every month for the rest of our lives.”

Her smile turned into a full-on grin as she ran her fingers over the petals of a vase full of flowers. It made my heart ache. I couldn't remember the last time I'd seen such a genuine smile on her. “You even got peonies,”

she said. “How’d you manage that?”

“Hey, I have my ways,” I stated loftily.

Though it’s probably better she doesn’t know what those ways are, a voice in my head warned.

Sydney strolled around and assessed the rest of my handiwork, which included a bottle of red wine and a box of chocolate truffles artfully set out on the kitchen table. “Isn’t it a little early in the day?” she teased.

“Depends on whom you’re asking,” I said, nodding toward the dark window. “For you, it’s technically evening.”

Her smile dimmed a little. “Honestly, I hardly ever know what time it is anymore.”

This lifestyle is taking its toll on her, my inner voice warned. *Just look at her.*

Even in the flickering light of the candles, I could see signs of the stress Sydney was feeling. Dark shadows under her eyes. A perpetually weary look—born more of despair than fatigue. She was the only human at the royal Moroi Court who wasn’t here specifically to feed us vampires. She was also the only human in any civilized Moroi place to have married one of us. Doing so had meant incurring the wrath of her own people and cutting herself off from friends and family (the ones who were still speaking to her, at least) in the outside world. And thanks to the scorn and prying looks she received around Court, Sydney had pretty much cut herself off from people here as well, narrowing her whole world down to our suite of rooms.

“Wait, there’s more,” I said quickly, hoping to distract her. With a button push, classical music began playing through the living room’s sound system. I extended my hand to her. “Since we didn’t get to dance at our wedding.”

That brought the smile back. She took my hand and let me draw her close. I twirled her around the room, careful not to bump any of the candles, and she regarded me with amusement. “What are you doing? It’s a waltz. It has three beats. Can’t you hear it? One-two-three, one-two-three.”

“Really? That’s what a waltz is? Huh. I just picked something that sounded fancy. Since we don’t really have a song or anything.” I pondered that for a second. “I guess we’ve failed as a couple in that regard.”

She scoffed. “If that’s our biggest failing, then I think we’re doing okay.”

Long moments passed as I danced her around the room, then I suddenly said, “‘She Blinded Me With Science.’”

“What?” Sydney asked.

“That could be our song.”

She laughed outright, and I realized I hadn’t heard that sound in a very long time. It somehow managed to make my heart both ache and leap. “Well,” she said. “I guess that’s better than ‘Tainted Love.’”

We both laughed then, and she rested her cheek against my chest. I kissed the top of her golden head, taking in the mingled scents of her soap and skin. “It feels wrong,” she said quietly. “To be happy, I mean. When Jill’s out there . . .”

At that name, my heart sank, and a heavy darkness threatened to descend on me and shatter this small

moment of joy I'd created. I had to forcibly push away the darkness, making myself step back from a dangerous precipice I knew all too well these days. "We'll find her," I whispered, tightening my hold on Sydney. "Wherever she is, we'll find her."

If she's still alive, that inner voice said nastily.

It's probably worth pointing out that the voice that kept speaking in my head wasn't part of some mental exercise. It was actually a very distinct voice, belonging to my dead aunt Tatiana, former queen of the Moroi. She wasn't with me in any ghostly form, though. Her voice was a delusion, born out of the increasing grip insanity was taking on me, thanks to the rare type of magic I used. A quick prescription would have shut her up, but it also would've cut me off from my magic, and our world was too unpredictable right now for me to do that. And so this phantom Aunt Tatiana and I had become roommates in my mind. Sometimes that delusional presence terrified me, making me wonder how long it would be until I completely lost it. At other times, I found myself taking her in stride—and that scared me even more, that I was coming to regard her as normal.

For now, I managed to ignore Aunt Tatiana as I kissed Sydney again. "We'll find Jill," I said more firmly. "And in the meantime, we have to keep living our lives."

"I suppose so," said Sydney with a sigh. I could tell she was trying to summon back that earlier cheer. "If this is supposed to make up for our lack of a wedding dance, I feel kind of underdressed. Maybe I should go dig out that gown."

"No way," I said. "Not that that dress wasn't great. But I kind of like you underdressed. In fact, I wouldn't mind if you were a lot more underdressed . . ."

I stopped waltzing (or whatever dance move it was I'd been attempting to do) and brought my mouth down to hers in a very different sort of kiss than the one I'd just given her. Heat filled me as I felt the softness of her lips, and I was surprised to sense an answering passion in her. In light of our recent circumstances, Sydney hadn't been feeling particularly physical, and honestly, I couldn't blame her. I'd respected her wishes and kept my distance . . . not realizing how much I'd missed that fire in her until now.

We found ourselves sinking down onto the couch, arms wrapped tightly around each other, still kissing passionately. I paused to study her, admiring the way the candlelight shone on her blond hair and brown eyes. I could've drowned in that beauty, that and the love I could feel radiating off of her. It was a perfect, much-needed romantic moment . . . at least, it was until the door opened.

"Mom?" I exclaimed, leaping off Sydney like I was a high school kid and not a married man of twenty-two.

"Oh, hello, dear," my mother said, strolling into the living room. "Why are all the lights off? It looks like a mausoleum in here. Was the power out?" She flipped on a light switch, making both Sydney and me wince. "It's back now. But you really shouldn't have lit so many candles. It's dangerous." She helpfully blew a cluster out.

"Thanks," said Sydney flatly. "It's nice to know you're taking safety seriously." Her expression reminded me of the time my mother had "helpfully" pulled out a bunch of sticky notes that were "cluttering up" a book Sydney had spent hours painstakingly notating.

"Mom, I thought you were going to be gone a couple of hours," I said pointedly.

"I was, but it was just getting too awkward over at the feeders' salon. You'd think everyone would be busy at

the council meeting, but no. So many stares. I couldn't relax. So they just let me bring one with me." She glanced around. "Where'd he go? Ah, there." She stepped back out into the hallway and steered in a dazed-looking human who was a little older than me. "Sit over there on that chair, and I'll be right with you."

I leapt to my feet. "You brought a feeder here? Mom, you know how Sydney feels about that."

Sydney made no comment but blanched at the sight of the feeder sitting across the room. His eyes—dazed and happy from the endorphins he received from letting vampires feed off of him—stared around blankly.

My mother sighed in exasperation. "What do you expect me to do, darling? There was absolutely *no way* I could feed with Maureen Tarus and Gladys Dashkov sitting there and gossiping right beside me."

"I expect you to have a little consideration for my wife!" I exclaimed. Since Sydney and I had gotten married and sought refuge at Court, most people—including my own father—had turned their backs on us. My mom had stood by us, even going so far as to live with us—which wasn't without its complications.

"I'm sure she can just wait in your bedroom," my mother said, leaning over to blow out more candles. Spotting the truffles on the table, she paused to pop one in her mouth.

"Sydney doesn't have to go hide away in her own home," I argued.

"Well," said my mother, "neither do I. It's my home too."

"I don't mind," said Sydney, getting to her feet. "I'll wait."

I was so frustrated, I wanted to rip my hair out. Passion was no longer the issue. All traces of that earlier happiness I'd seen in Sydney were gone. She was retreating back into herself, back to that hopeless feeling of being a human stuck in a world of vampires. And then, impossibly, things got worse. My mother had noticed one of the peony vases.

"These are beautiful," she said. "Melinda must have been so grateful for that healing."

Sydney froze mid-step. "What healing?"

"It's not important," I said hastily, hoping my mother would get the hint. At other times, Daniella Ivashkov was a remarkably astute woman. Today, however, she seemed to be in fully oblivious mode.

"Melinda Rowe, the Court florist," my mother explained. "Adrian and I ran into her the last time we were out at a feeding. She was having a terrible acne flare-up, and Adrian was nice enough to speed along its healing. She promised to help get some peonies in stock in return."

Sydney turned on me, speechless in her fury. Needing to calm this situation immediately, I grabbed hold of her arm and pulled her into our bedroom. "Make it fast," I called to my mom, just before I shut the door.

Sydney lashed out immediately. "Adrian, how could you? You promised! You promised no more spirit, unless it was to help find Jill!"

"It was nothing," I insisted. "It hardly took any power at all."

"It adds up!" Sydney cried. "You know it does. Every little bit. You can't waste it on stuff like this . . . on someone's acne!"

Although I understood why she was upset, I couldn't help but feel a bit hurt. "I did it for us. For our anniversary. I thought you'd like it."

"What I'd like is for my husband to stay sane," she snapped back.

"Well, we're long past that," I said.

She doesn't know the half of it, remarked Aunt Tatiana.

Sydney crossed her arms and sat on the bed. "See? There you go. Making a joke of everything. This is serious, Adrian."

"And I'm being serious. I know what I can handle."

She met my gaze levelly. "Do you? I still think you'd be better off stopping spirit altogether. Go back on your pills. It's safest."

"What about finding Jill?" I reminded her. "What if we need my spirit magic for that?"

Sydney looked away. "Well, it hasn't been of much use so far. No one's magic has."

That last remark was a condemnation of herself as much as of me. Our friend Jill Mastrano Dragomir had been kidnapped a month ago, and so far, our efforts to find her had been for nothing. I hadn't been able to reach Jill in spirit dreams, nor had Sydney—an adept student of human witchcraft—been able to locate her using the spells at her disposal. The best Sydney's magic had been able to tell us was that Jill was still alive, but that was it. The general belief was that wherever she was, Jill was being drugged—which could effectively hide someone from both human and Moroi magic. It didn't stop us from both feeling useless, though. We both cared about Jill immensely—and my relationship with her was particularly intense since I'd once used spirit magic to bring her back from the brink of death. Not knowing what had happened to her now had cast a shadow over Sydney and me—and any attempts at happiness we'd mustered while under this self-imposed house arrest.

"It doesn't matter," I said. "When we do find her, I need my magic. There's no telling what I'll need to do."

"Like fix her acne?" asked Sydney.

I flinched. "I told you, it was nothing! Let me worry about me and how much spirit I can use. It's not your job."

She turned incredulous. "Of course it is! I'm your wife, Adrian. If I'm not going to worry about you, who will? You need to keep spirit in check."

"I can handle it," I said through gritted teeth.

"Is your aunt still talking to you?" she demanded.

I looked away, refusing to meet her eye. In my head, Aunt Tatiana sighed. *You never should have told her about me.*

At my silence, Sydney said, "She is, isn't she? Adrian, that's not healthy! You have to know that!"

I spun around in anger. "I can handle it. Okay? I can handle it, and I can handle her!" I shouted. "So stop

telling me what to do! You don't know everything—no matter how much you want everyone to think you do!"

Stricken, Sydney took a step back. The pain in her eyes hurt me a lot more than her earlier words had. I felt terrible. How had this day gone so wrong? It was supposed to have been perfect. Suddenly, I needed to get out. I couldn't stand these four walls anymore. I couldn't stand my mother's control. I couldn't stand feeling like I was always disappointing Sydney—and Jill. Sydney and I had come to Court to seek protection from our enemies, hiding here so we could be together. Lately, it seemed like this arrangement was in danger of tearing us apart.

"I have to get out," I said.

Sydney's eyes widened. "To where?"

I raked a hand through my hair. "Anywhere. Anywhere to get some air. Anywhere but here."

I turned before she could say anything and stormed out through the living room, past where my mom was drinking from the feeder. She gave me a quizzical look, but I ignored it and kept on going until I was out our door and through the lobby of the guest-housing building. It wasn't until I emerged outside, until the balmy summer air hit my skin, that I paused to evaluate my actions—and pop a piece of gum, which was my current way to avoid smoking when stressed. I stared back up at the building, feeling guilty and cowardly for running out on our fight.

Don't feel bad, Aunt Tatiana said. Marriage is hard. That's why I never did it.

It is hard, I agreed. But that's not an excuse to run away. I need to go back. I need to apologize. I need to work things out.

You're never going to work things out as long as you're locked up here and Jill's still missing, warned Aunt Tatiana.

Two guardians walked past me just then, and I caught a piece of their conversation, mentioning extra patrols for the council meeting going on. I remembered my mom's earlier comment about that meeting, and inspiration suddenly hit. Turning away from the building, I began hurrying toward what served as the royal palace here at Court, hoping I could get to the meeting in time.

I know what to do, I told Aunt Tatiana. I know how to get us out of here and fix things with Sydney and me. We need a purpose, a goal. And I'm going to get us one. I need to talk to Lissa. If I can make her understand, I can fix everything.

That phantom made no response as I walked. Around me, midnight had clothed the world in darkness—bedtime for humans, prime time for those of us on a vampiric schedule. The Moroi Court was set up like a university: forty or so venerable brick buildings arranged around beautifully landscaped quads and courtyards. It was high summer, warm and humid, and there were a fair number of people out and about. Most were too consumed with their own affairs to notice me or realize who I was. Those who did shot me those same curious looks.

They're just jealous, Aunt Tatiana declared.

I don't think that's what it is, I told her. Even knowing she was a delusion, it was hard not to respond sometimes.

Of course it is. The Ivashkov name has always inspired awe and envy. They're all underlings, and they know it. In my day, this never would've been tolerated. It's that child queen of yours letting things run amok.

Even with the intrusive looks, I found I enjoyed my walk. It really wasn't healthy being shut indoors so much—something I never thought I'd admit. Despite the thickness of the humid air, it felt light and refreshing to me, and I found myself wishing Sydney could be out here too. A moment later, I decided that wasn't right. She needed to be outside later, when the sun was up. That was the time for humans. Being on our schedule was probably just as hard on her as the isolation. I made a mental note to suggest a walk with her later on. Sun didn't kill us like it did Strigoi—evil, undead vampires—but it wasn't always comfortable for Moroi either. Most slept or stayed in during the day, and Sydney would be less likely to run into anyone if we timed our outing correctly.

The thought cheered me as I popped in another piece of gum and reached the royal palace. Outside, it looked like all the other buildings, but inside, it was decorated with all the grandeur and opulence you'd expect from the royalty of an ancient civilization. The Moroi elected their monarchs from among twelve royal families, and massive portraits of those illustrious figures lined the corridors, illuminated by the light of glittering chandeliers. Crowds of people walked the halls, and when I reached the council's chamber, I saw that I'd arrived at the end of the meeting. People were leaving as I entered, and many of them, too, stopped to stare at me. I heard whispers of “abomination” and “human wife.”

I ignored them and kept my focus on my real goal, up near the front of the room. There, near the council's platform, stood Vasilisa Dragomir—the “child queen” Aunt Tatiana had referred to. Lissa, as I called her, stood ringed by dark-suited dhampir guardians: half-human, half-Moroi warriors whose race had originated from a time long ago, when Moroi and humans had intermarried without scandal. Dhampirs couldn't have children with each other, but through a genetic quirk, their race continued by reproducing with Moroi.

Standing just beyond Lissa's bodyguards, Moroi press shouted questions at her that she answered in that same calm way of hers. I summoned a bit of spirit magic in order to view her aura, and she lit up in my vision. She shone with gold, indicating she was a spirit user like me, but her other colors had dimmed, and there was a tremulous quality to it all, showing she was uneasy. I released the magic as I hurried up to the crowd and waved my hand in her direction, shouting to be heard among the noise. “Your majesty! Your majesty!”

Somehow, she heard my voice through the others and beckoned me forward once she finished answering someone else's questions. Her guardians parted to let me get close. That triggered everyone's interest—especially when the onlookers saw whom she'd allowed into her personal space. I could see they were dying to know what we were discussing, but the guardians kept them back, and there was too much noise in the room anyway.

“Well, this is an unexpected surprise. You couldn't have scheduled an appointment?” she asked me in a low voice, still keeping that public smile on her face. “It would've attracted a lot less attention.”

I shrugged. “Everything I do attracts attention these days. I've stopped noticing.”

A spark of legitimate amusement flashed in her eyes, so I felt good for at least bringing that about. “What can I do for you, Adrian?”

“It's what I can do for you,” I said, still fired up by the idea that had hit me earlier. “You need to let Sydney and me go look for Jill.”

Her eyes widened, and the smile slipped. “*Let you go?* You begged me to let you stay here a month ago!”

"I know, I know. And I'm grateful. But your people haven't found Jill yet. You need to call in some special help with special abilities."

"If I recall," she said, "you and Sydney have already tried those special abilities—and failed."

"Which is why you need to let us get out there!" I exclaimed. "Go back to Palm Springs and—"

"Adrian," Lissa interrupted. "Do you hear yourself? You came here because the Alchemists were trying to hunt you two down. And now you want to walk right back out there into their clutches?"

"Well, not when you put it that way. I figured we'd sneak out when they didn't know and—"

"No," she interrupted again. "Absolutely not. I have enough to worry about without you two getting caught by the Alchemists. You wanted me to protect you, and that's what I'm going to do. So don't get any ideas about sneaking out—I'm having the gates watched. You're both staying here, where you're safe."

Safe and starting to lose it, I thought, recalling the bleak look in Sydney's eyes.

Darling, Aunt Tatiana whispered to me, *you were starting to lose it long before this*.

"I have good people looking for Jill," Lissa continued when I didn't answer her. "Rose and Dimitri are out there."

"Why haven't they found her? And if someone wanted to remove you, why haven't they—"

I couldn't finish, but the sadness in Lissa's jade-green eyes told me she knew. Thanks to a law she was trying to change, Lissa's throne required her to have one living relative. Anyone wanting to remove Lissa would have simply had to kill Jill and show proof. The fact that it hadn't happened yet was a blessing but also deepened the mystery around this. Why else would someone have taken Jill?

"Go home, Adrian," said Lissa gently. "We'll talk more later—in private—if you want. Maybe we'll come up with some other options."

"Maybe," I agreed. But I didn't really believe it.

I left Lissa to her admirers and slipped back out through the gawking crowd, as a dark and all-too-familiar mood began to settle on me. Going to Lissa had been an impulse, one that had given me momentary hope. When Sydney and I had sought sanctuary, we'd had no idea what was about to happen to Jill. It was true that Lissa had good people looking for Jill—and even the reluctant help of Sydney's old organization, the Alchemists. Still, I couldn't shake the guilt-ridden feeling that if Sydney and I were out there, instead of hiding away, we'd find Jill. There was something going on that we didn't understand yet. Otherwise, Jill's abductors would have—

"Well, well, well. Look who decided to show his cowardly face."

I came to a halt and blinked, barely aware of where I was. My thoughts had been churning so furiously that I'd made it halfway home and now stood on a stone path that cut between two buildings—a quiet, out-of-the-way path that was perfect for an ambush. Wesley Drozdov, a royal Moroi who'd become a nemesis of mine recently, stood blocking my way, with several cronies around him.

"That's more than you usually travel with, Wes," I said mildly. "Dig up a few more, and maybe you'll finally have a fair fight to—"

A fist struck me from behind, in my lower back, knocking the wind out of me and causing me to stumble forward. Wesley surged toward me and caught me with a right hook before I could respond. I realized dimly, through my pain, that the comment I'd been about to make to him was actually spot-on: Wesley was traveling with a group because it was the only way he could combat my spirit magic. As someone's foot struck my knee, forcing me to the ground, I realized I had, in fact, been an idiot to reveal myself so publicly. Wesley had been waiting for a chance to get back at me for past grievances, and now he had it.

"What's the matter?" Wesley asked, kicking me hard in the stomach as I lay on the ground, struggling to get up. "Your feeder wife not here to save you?"

"Yeah," someone else chided. "Where's your human whore?"

I couldn't respond through the pain. More kicks followed, from more people than I could keep track of. Their faces swam above me, and I was shocked to recognize a number of them. They weren't all Wesley's usual tagalongs. Some of them were people I knew, had partied with in the past . . . people I might have once counted as friends.

A blow to my head caused stars to dance before my eyes, momentarily blurring their faces in my vision. Their taunts blended into an unintelligible cacophony as hit followed upon hit. I curled up in agony, struggling to breathe. Suddenly, through the din, a clear voice demanded, "What the hell is going on?"

Blinking, trying to bring the world back into focus, I just barely saw strong hands rip Wesley away and hurl him against the side of a nearby building. It took a second and then a third of his toadies following suit before they realized something had gone wrong. They backed away like the scared sheep they were, and a familiar face suddenly appeared as Eddie Castile stood over me.

"Anyone else feel like sticking around?" I croaked. "You still outnumber us."

Their numbers were nothing compared to one Eddie, and they knew it. I couldn't see them all run off, but I imagined it, and it was glorious. Silence fell, and a moment later, someone else was helping me stand. I glanced back and saw another familiar face, Neil Raymond, slipping his arm through mine.

"Can you walk?" asked Neil, his voice lightly touched by a British accent.

I winced as I put weight on my foot but nodded. "Yeah. Let's just get home now and see if anything's broken later. Thanks, by the way," I added, as Eddie supported my other side and we began to walk. "Nice to know this Moroi-in-distress can count on such gallant knights to follow me around."

Eddie shook his head. "Total coincidence, actually. We just happened to be on our way to your place with some news."

A chill ran through me, and I stopped my halting steps. "What news?" I demanded.

A smile crossed Eddie's features. "Relax—it's good news. I think. Just unexpected. You and Sydney have a visitor at the front gate. A human visitor."

If I hadn't been in so much pain, my jaw would've dropped. That *was* unexpected news. In marrying me and seeking sanctuary among the Moroi, Sydney had cut herself off from most of her human contacts. One of them showing up here was weird, and it couldn't be an Alchemist. An Alchemist would've been turned away.

"Who is it?" I asked.

Eddie's smile turned into an outright grin. "Jackie Terwilliger."

CHAPTER 2

SYDNEY

"OH, ADRIAN."

There was nothing more I could say as I helped wipe blood and dirt from Adrian's face with a damp cloth, brushing aside wayward pieces of chestnut hair. He gave me his devil-may-care smile and still managed to look dashing, despite his bedraggled state.

"Hey, don't sound so down, Sage. It wasn't that hopeless of a fight." He glanced over at Neil and said in a stage whisper, "Right? Tell her it wasn't that hopeless of a fight. Tell her I really held my own."

Neil managed a wan smile, but Adrian's mother spoke before he could. "Adrian, dear, this is no time for jokes."

My vampire mother-in-law and I didn't agree on many things, but this was a topic we were in perfect harmony about. The pall from our earlier fight still hung over us, and I couldn't help but feel a little guilty that I hadn't worked harder to get him to stay. At the very least, I should've told him to bring a guardian, since this wasn't his first encounter with troublemakers. Usually, guardians only accompanied Moroi out in the world, where Strigoi were a real danger. But here, with the rest of Adrian's people thinking we were freaks of nature for getting married, antagonism hit a little closer to home. We'd faced plenty of threats and slander, though never outright violence before. It was a stroke of good—albeit weird—luck that Eddie and Neil had found him.

Eddie was gone, having hurried off to the front gates to escort Ms. Terwilliger to us. It was a sign of my distress over Adrian's condition that I'd barely spared a moment to ponder what in the world could've brought my former history teacher and magical mentor to the royal stronghold of a secretive race of vampires. Even though some troubled part of me worried her visit couldn't be for any good reason, I still couldn't help but be excited at the prospect of seeing her. It had been months since we'd been together in person. I loved Adrian and didn't mind Daniella—but was dying for some other sort of interaction.

"Nothing's broken," Adrian insisted. "I probably won't even have a scar from any of this. Too bad. I think a well-placed scar right about here"—he touched the side of his face—"could really accentuate my already-perfect cheekbones while adding a rugged touch of manliness to my features. Not that I need any more manliness—"

"Adrian, enough," I said wearily. "I'm just glad you're okay. That could've been a lot worse. And you should still see a doctor after this, just to be safe."

He looked as though he had another snarky comment ready and then, wisely, said, "Yes, dear."

He attempted an angelic expression that only strengthened my suspicion that he had no intention of actually following through. I shook my head, smiling in spite of myself, and then gave him a kiss on the cheek. Adrian. My husband. If anyone had told me a year ago that I'd be married, I would've said they were joking. If they'd told me I'd be married to a vampire, I would've said they were delusional. Looking at Adrian now,

I felt a surge of love well up within me, despite our earlier tension. I could no longer imagine a life without him in it. It was impossible. Could I imagine a life with him that didn't involve us being trapped in a suite of rooms with his mother while both our peoples reviled us and made plans against us? Definitely. There were any number of futures I'd love to have for us, but this was our current path until something spectacular happened. Outside the Court's gates, my people wanted to imprison me. Inside them, his people wanted to assault him. At least in this suite, we were safe. Most importantly, we were together.

A knock at the door saved Adrian from any more chastisement. Daniella opened it, and Eddie appeared in the doorway. Seeing him almost always brought a smile to my face. In Palm Springs, we'd passed ourselves off as twins, sharing similar dark blond hair and brown eyes. But over time, he'd truly come to feel like a brother to me. I knew few others with such courage and loyalty. I was proud to call him my friend, and as such, it hurt me to see all the pain he felt over Jill's disappearance. There was always a haunted look about him now, and sometimes I worried whether he was really taking care of himself. He hardly ever shaved anymore, and I had a feeling the only reason he bothered eating was so that he could keep training and stay in shape for when he located Jill's abductors.

But my concerns for Eddie were put on hold when I saw the next person entering our suite. I sprinted across the room and wrapped her in a big embrace that caught her by surprise. Ms. Terwilliger—I could never bring myself to call her Jackie, even if I wasn't her student anymore—had changed my life in so many ways. She'd taken on the role my father used to have: teaching me secrets of an ancient art. Unlike him, though, she never made me feel bad about myself. She'd encouraged me and supported me, making me feel worthwhile and capable, even if I wasn't always perfect. She and I had communicated by phone since I'd come to Court, but it wasn't until now that I realized how much I'd missed her.

"My, my," she said with a chuckle, trying to return the hug. "I didn't expect such a welcome." Her efforts were made a little awkward due to the fact that she was holding a satchel in one hand and what looked like a small animal carrier in the other.

"Will you finally let me take this?" insisted Eddie, pulling the carrier from her. She yielded it, allowing for a proper hug. The mingled scents of patchouli and nag champa surrounded her, reminding me of more carefree times, when she and I would huddle together to work on spells. I felt tears spring to my eyes and quickly stepped back to wipe them away.

"I'm glad you're here," I said, trying to become businesslike again. "Surprised, but glad. This couldn't have been an easy trip for you."

"What I have to say could only be said in person." She pushed her glasses up her nose and surveyed the others in the room. "Neil, nice to see you again. And Adrian, I'm glad Sydney finally made an honest man of you."

He grinned at that and introduced Daniella. She was polite but remained a little aloof. Moroi like her, who generally lived secluded lives at Court, didn't have many human friends. The whole concept of magic-using humans was just as weird for Moroi as for Alchemists, but I had to give Daniella credit for trying to come to terms with it all. She might have terrible timing and not be able to take a hint during would-be romantic interludes, but I couldn't deny that her life had also certainly undergone a lot of upheaval in the last year.

"Come in, come in," I said, beckoning Ms. Terwilliger forward. We received so few guests that I'd nearly forgotten basic hospitality. "Sit down, and I'll get you something to drink. Or eat?"

She shook her head as she went with me toward the kitchen. The others followed, except for Eddie, still awkwardly holding the carrier. "I'm fine," she said. "And we may not have the time. As it is, I hope I'm not

too late.”

Her words made the hairs on my neck rise, but before I could respond, Eddie cleared his throat and lifted the carrier, which I could now see held a cat. “Um, would you like me to do anything special with her?”

“Him,” corrected Ms. Terwilliger. “And Mr. Bojangles will be just fine waiting in there while we talk. Besides, if I’m correct, we’re going to need him.”

Adrian shot me a questioning look at that, but I could only shrug in response.

We all gathered around the kitchen table. I sat, and Adrian stood behind me, resting his hands on my shoulder. In my peripheral vision, the rubies and white gold of his wedding band glittered. Ms. Terwilliger took the spot opposite me and produced an ornate wooden box from her satchel. It was covered in a floral design that appeared to have been hand-carved. She set the box on the table’s surface and slid it over to me.

“What’s this?” I asked.

“I was hoping you could tell me,” she said. “It arrived a few weeks ago, left on my doorstep. At first, I thought it was some sort of gift from Malachi—even though this isn’t his style.”

“Right,” agreed Adrian. “Grenades, camo vests . . . those are his usual gifts of choice.” Malachi Wolfe was a questionably stable self-defense instructor Adrian and I had taken classes with and who had inexplicably won Ms. Terwilliger’s heart.

She smiled briefly at Adrian’s comment but never took her eyes from the box as she continued. “I soon learned the box is magically sealed. I tried all sorts of unlocking spells, common and rare, with no luck. Whoever did this cast something extremely powerful. I spent the last few weeks exhausting my resources and finally took it to Inez. You remember her, of course?”

“She’s hard to forget,” I said, thinking back on the venerable and quirky old witch back in California who had decorated every single item in her house with roses.

“Indeed. She told me she had a powerful spell that could probably bust it open but I’d failed because this enchantment is keyed to a specific person.” Ms. Terwilliger looked chagrined. “I hadn’t detected that. Obviously, that person isn’t me. Inez speculated whoever the box was intended for would be able to open it with little difficulty, and from there, I concluded that *you* were the recipient.”

I started at that. “But why would they give it to you for me?”

Ms. Terwilliger glanced around with a wry look. “This isn’t exactly an easy address to deliver to. I just wish I’d learned this sooner. Hopefully, whatever’s inside isn’t time sensitive.”

I regarded the box in a new light, feeling myself fill with both eagerness and trepidation. “What should I do?”

“Open it,” said Ms. Terwilliger simply. “Although I’d advise the rest of you to step back.”

Daniella complied quickly, but Adrian and the dhampirs obstinately stayed put. “Do what she says,” I said.

“What if it’s a bomb?” demanded Eddie.

“I can most likely minimize any damage to Sydney but make no guarantees to the rest of you,” said Ms.

Terwilliger.

“‘Most likely’?” asked Adrian. “Maybe this is the Alchemists’ way of finally getting to you.”

“Maybe, but they’re not fans of human magic. I can’t imagine they’d turn to it.” I sighed. “Please. Just move back. I’ll be fine.”

I didn’t know that for sure, but after a little more coaxing, the guys yielded. Ms. Terwilliger took out a small pouch and sprinkled a yellow, spicy-smelling powder on the table. She murmured a Greek incantation, and I felt magic—my kind of magic—burn in the air around us. It had been a very long time since I’d sensed it in another, and I was surprised at the rush it gave me. With the protective spell in place, she nodded encouragingly at me.

“Go ahead, Sydney. If just opening it doesn’t work, then try a basic unlocking spell.”

I rested my fingertips on the lid and took a deep breath. Nothing happened when I lifted it, but that was to be expected. Even if Ms. Terwilliger was right about this being intended for me, that didn’t mean it was going to be entirely easy. As I summoned the words of an unlocking spell, the obvious questions nagged at the edges of my mind: Was this really for me? If so, from whom? And most importantly, why?

I spoke the spell, and though the box didn’t change, we all heard a small *pop* sound. I tried the lid again, and this time it lifted easily. Even better, no bomb went off inside. After a moment of hesitation, the guys all crowded forward to see what the box held. Looking down, I saw some folded pieces of paper with a single hair on top. I lifted it carefully, holding it up to the light. It was blond.

“Probably yours,” said Ms. Terwilliger. “To key a spell like this to a specific person, you need something that’s part of the recipient. Hair. Nail. Skin.”

I wrinkled my nose at that as I opened up the first piece of paper and tried not to think about how someone would have obtained one of my hairs. The paper turned out to be a flyer for a robot museum in Pittsburgh. That would’ve been comical if not for the chilling words written over the picture of one of the museum’s featured exhibits, the Raptorbot 2000: *COME PLAY, SYDNEY*. My breath caught, and I looked up sharply. Everyone else looked as bewildered as I felt. The writing was none I recognized.

“What’s the other piece of paper?” asked Neil.

It too was folded and had a sheen to it, like it was from a magazine. At a glance, it appeared to be some sort of travel ad. I opened it up and found myself looking at a picture of a bed-and-breakfast in Palo Alto. “What’s this have to do with a robot museum in Pittsburgh?”

Ms. Terwilliger stiffened. “I don’t think that’s the page you’re meant to see.”

I flipped the paper over and gasped at what—or more importantly, whom—I saw.

Jill.

I’d nearly forgotten about this ad. Ages ago—or at least it felt that way—Jill had briefly done some modeling for a Palm Springs fashion designer. I should’ve never allowed it, seeing what a security breach it was. The picture I now looked at was one that had been done in secret, against my wishes. Jill wore a pair of large, gilt sunglasses and a peacock-colored scarf wrapped around her abundant curly hair. She was gazing off at a cluster of palm trees, and unless someone knew her well, it would be difficult to realize this was her. In fact, it would be difficult for most people to even recognize she was Moroi.

“What the hell is this?” demanded Eddie. He looked as though he might rip the page away from me. Few things could make him lose his cool and collected nature. Jill’s safety was one of them.

I shook my head in disbelief. “Your guess is as good as mine.”

Adrian leaned over me and picked up the first page. “Surely it doesn’t mean Jill’s being held prisoner at some robot museum? In Pittsburgh?”

“We have to go,” said Eddie fiercely. He turned as though he might walk out the door then and there.

“I have to go,” I said, pointing at the flyer Adrian held. “The box was intended for me. This note is even addressed to me.”

“You’re not going alone,” Eddie retorted.

“You’re not going anywhere,” said Adrian. He set the paper back down. “Before my little, uh, fallout with Wesley, I had a chat with her majesty, who made it very clear you and I are not allowed to leave Court.”

Sorrow and guilt filled me as I gazed at Jill’s profile. Jill. Missing for almost a month. We’d waited desperately for some lead, and now it had come to us. But as Ms. Terwilliger had speculated: Was it too late? What had happened while this box sat around?

“I have to,” I said. “There’s no way I can ignore this. Adrian, you know that.”

Our eyes met. So many feelings churned between us, and he finally nodded. “I do.”

“You don’t think Lissa would really forcibly have security stop me?”

He sighed. “I don’t know. But she—correctly—pointed out that after all the trouble we gave her by staying here, it’d cause even more if you left and were caught by the Alchemists. We could try to sneak out . . . but I wouldn’t be surprised if they’re checking cars at the gates.”

“I thought something like that might be going on,” said Ms. Terwilliger. She’d overcome her shock and was slipping into her let’s-get-things-done mode, which I found immensely reassuring. “Which is why I came prepared. I have a way to smuggle you out, Sydney, if you’re willing.” Her gaze lifted to Adrian. “Just Sydney, I’m afraid.”

“No way,” he said promptly. “If she goes, I go.”

“No,” I said slowly. “She’s right.”

His eyebrows rose. “Look, you risk a lot more than I do by going out there. I’m not going to let you go and endanger yourself while I stay safe, so don’t—”

“It’s not that,” I interrupted. A moment later, I amended that. “I mean, I want you safe, yes, but listen to what you just said. If I go out there, I risk more because the Alchemists are looking for me. Except they aren’t looking right now because they think I’m safely locked away with you. And so long as they keep thinking that, they aren’t going to be actively looking for me. No one sees me here around Court, but they do see you every once in a while for feeder visits. If we both suddenly disappear, word might get out to the Alchemists that we’ve left. But if people still see you . . .”

Adrian grimaced. “Then they’ll think you’re still here too, just hiding away from the mean vampires.”

“You’d be part of my cover,” I said, placing my hand over his. “I know you don’t like that, but this really would help. It’d let me move around more freely in the world and try to figure out how that”—I nodded at the robot flyer—“is tied to Jill.”

He took a few moments to answer. I could tell he knew the truth of my argument—but still didn’t like it. “It just bothers me to think of you out there alone while I sit around.”

“She won’t be alone,” said Eddie. “I don’t have any assignment, and no one’s after me. I can come and go freely from Court.”

“Me too,” said Neil.

“One of you needs to stay with Adrian,” I argued. “Just in case there’s another repeat of today. Neil, would you? And Eddie, you’ll come with me to check this out?”

I made it sound like a request, a favor even, but knew there was nothing on earth Eddie would rather do right now than search for Jill.

“Here’s the deal,” said Adrian, once the dhampirs had agreed. “I’ll stay here and cover for you, but as soon as there’s a way I can join you without blowing our cover, I will.”

I met his eyes again, wishing I could tell him so much. Like that I was sorry about our earlier fight, that I wasn’t trying to control him. I was worried. I loved him so much that I just wanted him to be safe. I hoped he knew all of that. All I could do now, with so many witnesses, was nod in agreement.

Ms. Terwilliger regarded us all with dry amusement. “Has everyone decided which brave roles they’ll be taking on?” she asked. She shot me a smile. “You don’t seem very concerned about how I plan on getting you out of here yet, Sydney.”

I shrugged. “I have faith in you, ma’am. If you say you’ve got a way, I believe it. What’s it involve?”

After she told me, silence fell in the room. We all stared at her, dumbfounded, until Adrian finally spoke. “Wow,” he said. “I can’t say I saw that coming.”

“I don’t think anyone could have,” admitted Eddie.

Ms. Terwilliger’s focus was on me. “Are you up for it, Sydney?”

I swallowed. “I guess I have to be. And we shouldn’t waste any more time.”

“First,” said Adrian, “can I have a word with my wife before the hilarity ensues?”

“Of course,” said Ms. Terwilliger, gesturing grandly.

Adrian steered me away and called to the others, “Talk amongst yourselves.” He led me to our bedroom, not saying anything else until the door shut behind us. “Sydney, you realize this is crazy, right? And I don’t say that lightly.”

I smiled and drew him to me. “I know. But we both also know there’s no way I can’t *not* follow a lead that might take us to Jill.”

His expression darkened. “I wish I could do more than be your cover,” he said. “But if that’s what it

takes . . .” He sighed. “What also seems crazy is you leaving after we fought so hard to get here and be together.”

“Yeah, but . . .” I hesitated, hating to say my next words. “You can’t say this has exactly been what we imagined.”

“What do you mean?” he asked, but I could tell he already knew.

“Adrian, there’s no question I love you and want a life with you. But this particular life . . . hiding away from both our people . . . having your mother hovering over us . . . I don’t know. Maybe some space is a good thing.”

His green eyes widened. “You want to get away from me?”

“No, of course not! But I want to reevaluate things, to figure out how we can get that life we’ve been wanting.” I sighed. “And of course, even more than that . . .”

“We need to find Jill,” he finished.

I nodded and rested my head on his chest, listening to the steady rhythm of his heartbeat. That earlier emotion rose up within me as I thought about the last year and all we’d gone through. We’d had to keep our relationship a secret, and then once it was discovered, the Alchemists had held me prisoner and tried to brainwash me into coming back into their fold. Every moment I had now with Adrian was a precious gift, but reveling in that, turning my back on Jill . . . well, that would be selfish.

“Finding her is bigger than us right now,” I said.

“I know,” he said, pressing a kiss to my forehead. “And part of why I love you is that there’s no question you have to do this. And that you’d let me if our roles were reversed.”

“It’s what we do,” I said simply.

“I swear it, as soon as I feel like I can sneak out safely, I’ll come to you. You won’t be alone.”

I touched my heart. “I never am. I always feel you in here.”

He brought his lips down to mine in a long, exquisite kiss, the kind that sent heat all the way to my fingers and toes and made me very conscious of the fact that there was a bed behind us. I pulled back before we accidentally got distracted.

“I’ll be back before you know it,” I said, giving him one more hug. “And if all goes as planned, Jill will be with me.”

“If all goes as planned,” he countered, “we’ll get a call any minute now that whoever’s holding her has released her after the law change and she’s on her way home.”

I smiled at that, but there was no true joy in it. “That would be nice.”

We kissed again and returned to the others. I realized then that although Adrian and I were on good terms again, we hadn’t exactly resolved the fight from before. There were still a lot of issues to deal with—the biggest one being his continued flirtation with spirit. I’d missed my chance, and now I could only hope for the best with him.

Meanwhile, Ms. Terwilliger had already made herself busy converting our kitchen into a spell workshop. Bottles and bags of components were set out on the table, and she was busily boiling water on the stove. She sprinkled something into it, and the steam soon took on the fragrance of star anise.

“Good, good,” she said, barely looking up. “You’re back. Would you measure two teaspoons of that beetroot powder for me?”

I fell in beside her and had a brief sense of déjà vu. It was easy, momentarily, to feel like I had slipped back into those old days together. Not that they’d been exactly stress-free. Learning magic from her had been difficult both mentally and physically, and I’d always had the added pressures of my struggles with Adrian and the others. Still, the familiarity was nice, particularly since I’d missed this sort of magic-working. I still practiced but rarely cast anything of this magnitude here at Court. The spell she had in mind to make my escape work required both of us and a few hours of labor. Adrian and the others tried to distract themselves as best they could, and Eddie left once to grab an overnight bag, since none of us knew exactly what would happen in Pittsburgh.

Jill, I hoped silently. Please just let us get to that robot museum and find Jill there selling tickets.

Somehow, I doubted it’d be that easy.

Around four in the morning, Ms. Terwilliger and I completed our work. This was still practically midday on the vampiric schedule, which I’d adjusted to, but she was showing signs of fatigue. I knew she was dying for coffee, but caffeine reduced the effectiveness of magic, and she’d had to cast small spells along the way. The final one in the process was mine, however, and as the end neared, I began to question just what I was about to do.

“Maybe it would be easier to just smuggle me in the trunk,” I said, holding a cup of the brew we’d crafted.

“Good chance they’ll be searching cars as you leave,” said Adrian. “Especially hers. Lissa made it clear she didn’t want us leaving.”

I started to carry the potion over to where Ms. Terwilliger was setting up a mirror. A new worry fell over me. “Do you think she’ll let me back in when she finds out I left?”

No one had an answer for that right away until Ms. Terwilliger said pragmatically, “We can always get you back in the same way we’re getting you out.”

I grimaced and glanced down at the cup in my hands, wondering how I’d feel about that later. In the living room, Ms. Terwilliger had helpfully propped up a full-length mirror from Daniella’s bedroom. She now hauled the pet carrier over to it and opened the door. A white cat with tabby patches—Mr. Bojangles—came out and calmly sat in front of the mirror. If I hadn’t known any better, I would’ve said he was admiring himself.

“You know the words?” asked Ms. Terwilliger.

I nodded and knelt down by the cat. I’d memorized the spell throughout our work time today. “Anything I should know before this happens?”

“Just remember to look at the cat once the spell is cast,” Ms. Terwilliger said.

I glanced at the others one last time. “See you soon, I guess.”

“Good luck,” said Neil.

Adrian met my eyes for a long moment, saying nothing aloud yet somehow conveying a million messages. I felt a lump form in my throat as that earlier sentiment returned. We’d fought so hard to get here, and here I was, walking away. *Not walking away*, I told myself. *Going to save Jill*. What Adrian and I had talked about earlier was true. We loved each other but weren’t so selfish about our love that we could simply turn our backs on someone we cared about.

I gave him a small smile and then drank the potion. It had a faintly peppery taste, not entirely unpleasant but also not something I’d really drink for fun. When the cup was empty, I set it aside and then focused on the mirror—particularly the cat’s reflection beside mine. Mr. Bojangles was still sitting contentedly, and I assumed Ms. Terwilliger had picked this particular cat for his good nature. I called upon the magic within me, tuning out the rest of the world and focusing only on the spell at hand. I spoke the Latin words, still gazing at the cat. Aside from the physical labor involved, the spell required a fair amount of personal strength, and when I finished speaking, I felt exhausted as the magic surged through me and went to work.

My eyes were on the cat, but slowly, my vision of him changed. In fact, my eyesight changed completely. The cat’s orange color muted to gray in my vision while the pattern on his coat suddenly sharpened. I noticed more nuance and detail in the tabby pattern than I had before. Meanwhile, everything looked incredibly bright, as though the lights had been turned up. I blinked a few times to try to clear up that sensation and noticed I was getting closer and closer to the ground. Something fell over my face, obscuring my sight, and I wiggled out from under it. It was my shirt. Looking back at the mirror, I found myself regarding the reflections of two cats.

One of them was me.

“Well, I’ll be damned.”

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