

## Chapter 57

Axton

We left the boys with Eli and Michelle, knowing having to get them will only slow us down. Elena is a nervous wreck beside me, and all she has done is panic, conjuring up the worst-case scenario. What if the strigoi got Sondra? Or her father came back for revenge, or what if Osiris is behind it?

I have a feeling Sondra is missing because she chose to go missing; the strong old bat takes shit from nobody, so I doubt if someone came after her, she would go quietly.

“She may have run into town,” I tell Elena, and she nods, staring off vacantly out the window. Her bottom lip quivers, and she presses her top teeth against it.

“Elena, we’ll find her. Marco has gone to check the commune. We can check in town; she is probably at the bakery, eating all the cupcakes,” I try to reassure her, and she turns her head to look at me.

“She’s dying, Axton,” she answers, and I swallow. Yeah, Marco had said something about taking care of her, but she looked okay the last time I saw her.

“We’ll find her,” I answer. We have to; I don’t think Elena will cope with not knowing.

“Don’t go to the bakery. Go to Mary’s café,” Elena whispers, and I glance at her. I nod my head, taking the next turn to head down the main street of the small, derelict town.

Pulling up along the curb, I don’t see her car anywhere or any sign of her. Elena gets out to check the old café, letting herself in with a set of keys. She pauses at the door, and I stop on my way to the bakery to watch her. Her hands shake as she tries to get the key in the lock. Fear slivers through the bond, yet she is determined to find Sondra. Forgetting the bakery, I walk over to her and grab the key from her hand. She glances over her shoulder at me, and I brush my lips against her cheek and unlock the door.

“You don’t have to go in there. I will check it out,” I tell her. Elena, however, shakes her head.

Pushing the door open, Elena sucks in a deep breath. “How do you have a key,” I ask her, and she sighs, glancing at me.

“Sondra bought this place for Mary, turns out Jake never bought it, so once her death certificate was in the place, it was handed back to Sondra, who in turn gave it to me.”

“And you kept it?” I ask, a little shocked. She sighs, stepping inside further, and my stomach drops, feeling her anguish. “Have you been back here...you know, since?” I stop myself, only now realizing how much this place torments her.

“No, it’s why Sondra gave it to me, she wanted me to burn it down, yet I couldn’t bring myself to step inside it,” she whispers while looking up at the ceiling of the apartment above.

The place is mostly empty, though the fridges are full of old fizzy drinks and outdated milk. Other than that, my men had cleaned the place pretty good.

Elena stops near the basement door that is ajar and glances at me. “Want me to check?” I ask, and she nods her head. Nodding once, I quickly rush down the stairs to the pitch-black basement, my vision adjusting as Khan steps forward. We peer around the place, and I walk to the back, calling out for Sondra but don’t find her. However, I do find the cage that Mary and Alisha were both kept in. Turning around, I head back upstairs to find Elena, only she is no longer in the shop. I can feel she is close by, so I pull on the bond, using it to find her.

Climbing the stairs out to the back area, I see the apartment door open and rush up to find her. Stepping inside, it feels like déjà vu when I spot her. She holds the same look on her face. Back then, I thought she was petrified of me finding her shackled up with another man. Now, seeing the same expression, I recognize it for what it is. This place, her prison for so long. Something I used time and time again against her.

It is exactly the same as all those months ago, and I kind of regret not getting my men to clear it out. As I wander over to her, she is staring at the bed. I slip my arms around her waist, tugging her back against me.

“She’s not here,” Elena says, and I nod against her shoulder. Noticing the chains and cuffs on the bed, I swallow guiltily. Khan had tried to tell me, but I was angry; I only believed what I wanted to believe and chose her father’s words over my mates.

Instead of helping her, I hurt her more. “Sondra once said that some things she wanted to take to her grave,” Elena murmurs.

I turn my head on her shoulder. “This is one of mine,” she whispers.

“Well, you know the saying, two can keep a secret if one is dead. Jake is dead, Elena,” I tell her, but she shakes her head.

“No, he’s not because he is seared into my memories. He got the easy way out. He took it to the grave, while I live with it,” she murmurs.

“But you get to live, Elena. He hurt you, but—”

“He did more than hurt me, Axton. He broke me.” she croaks. Her lips quiver and the bond feels as broken as the words sounded leaving her lips.

“Then I’ll rebuild you, help put you back together again. It’s my fault you were here anyway. You wouldn’t have run, if I hadn’t leaked that video.”

“You were angry I rejected you,” she tells me with a sigh.

“That’s still no excuse for hurting someone I claim to love, I should have listened to Khan; I was just so focused on my plans to take down your father, too focused on my dreams I forgot you would have them too,” I tell her. She nods her head but adds nothing, she doesn’t need to.

I know she’s forgiven me; I can feel it, I just hope she can forgive herself. Because right now, all I feel is her guilt. She feels guilty because she ran, but what option did she truly have? Guilt over Alisha, but how was she supposed to know her best friend was a vamp? Guilt for allowing it and not fighting back, all those things play on her mind, yet now sensing her thoughts so clearly. I realize she was doing the best she could with the hand she was dealt.

Unfortunately, that meant allowing some things to protect others, and now I see why she didn’t try to run, the risk to Alisha and our sons outweighed the risk to herself. Her sanity, her body, and her heart were a sacrifice she could live with, losing them she couldn’t. So, she played along and... prayed I would come save her. Instead, I broke her all over again.

“Come on, we should find Sondra,” she breathes out, turning and walking out of the apartment. I follow, closing the door behind me when cigarette smoke wafts to me, Elena looks back at me before rushing down the steps to the back of the café.

Following her, she steps out the back of the store and I spot Sondra sitting in a green weathered plastic chair. She has a smoke between her lips. She is deathly pale, her skin clammy, and sweat glistens on her neck and forehead.