

## *Chapter 1*

### *Corbin*

Music blared around me, the rhythmic beating overpowering all other noise. I leaned against the bar counter, scanning the throngs of humans dancing and moving about the club in an attempt to locate my brother. Sighing, I glanced to my watch. It was almost two in the morning. He was late, as usual.

I turned back to the counter and nodded to the bartender, catching his attention, then held up my empty bottle of beer. He nodded back. Seconds later, a fresh beer landed on the counter before me. "Thanks," I said, handing him a ten. I didn't care that it was more than twice the cost of the beer; it was an assurance he'd keep them coming.

I brought the bottle to my lips and drank, the cool liquid quenching my thirst. Thankfully, I didn't crave blood, or being in such close proximity with humans would be dangerous.

As I turned back to the dancers, I sensed the presence of another immortal being. I closed my eyes and focused, tuning all my senses to the individual. All sound fell away, leaving only the beating hearts of everyone around me. A little more concentration, and the faster human heartbeats faded. Silence. A vampire had entered the club, not my immortal brother.

I slowly took in a breath, allowing my senses to return to normal. The music once more pounded in my ears, making me regret coming here. I didn't understand how humans enjoyed places like this, or why Vic did. I hated nightclubs. Every time Vic dragged me to one, I ended up getting into a fight with someone. He blamed it on my drinking. I believed it had more to do with my low tolerance to assholes.

Before I had a chance to scan the crowd and visually locate the vampire, a hand touched my shoulder. I looked to my right to see a tall, thin, blonde-haired woman with dark brown eyes standing beside me. *Shit*, I thought. Of course she had to be the vampire that walked into the club. I turned away. "Elise."

If she heard the dismissiveness in my tone, she chose to ignore it. She leaned in closer, her long hair brushing against my arm. "I've missed you, Lover," she said into my ear. "Come dance with me."

I rolled my eyes and shook her off. "Not going to happen."

"Oh, come on, Corbin." She wrapped her arms around my shoulders, pressing her breasts into me. "You know you want me in your arms again."

"Nope." I took another swig of my drink, hoping Vic would hurry up. "I'm done with this game, Elise."

Elise pulled back. "What game would that be?"

Scoffing, I faced her. "Playing dumb? That's mature. Look, I know what you're up to, and I'm done."

She fluttered her eyelashes. "I don't know what you mean, Lover."

"Your power play won't work."

Elise dropped her arms. "Power play?"

"Zach sees right through you. He'd never allow you to have any sort of command in the coven."

She shook her head. "Who said anything about wanting to command the coven?" She took hold of my hand. "I just want you."

"Liar," I said, pulling my hand away. "Even if you did, I don't want you. Not anymore."

"You can't mean that."

"You know I don't lie, Elise."

Her eyes flashed red with anger. "You do still want me, Corbin. And I can prove it."

As she stomped away from me, I lifted my beer again. "Good luck with that," I muttered, knowing she'd still hear me.

A chuckle sounded beside me. I didn't need to turn to know Vic had finally arrived, and witnessed the entire scene with Elise. "Pissing people off already, I see," he said, taking a seat beside me.

"Elise isn't people. She's a leach."

"You know she can hear you."

"I really don't give a shit."

Vic shook his head. "Well, do you care that she's dancing with—"

"Nope." I swallowed the last of my beer. "She can do whatever the hell she wants."

Sighing, my brother took the empty bottle from me before I could catch the attention of the bartender. "How many of these have you had?"

"Does it really matter? It's not like I'll have a hangover tomorrow. I can't even get drunk!" Our bodies metabolized the alcohol too quickly for it to have much of an effect. It usually took about ten bottles for me to get even a slight buzz.

"Then why bother drinking them?"

"I hate hard liquor." I swiveled on the stool, turning toward him. "So, what took you so long?"

He smiled, rubbing the back of his head. "Mira."

I shook my head. "Figures."

"I thought you liked Mira."

I shrugged. "Whether or not I like her is irrelevant. But..." I trailed off, not wanting to make him mad.

"But what, Corb?"

"Look, you haven't even told her the truth. She thinks you're human. What is she going to say when she learns you can't die, and don't age?"

Vic leaned back against the counter. "So, you're suggesting I end things, just because she's human, and can't become like me?"

Sighing, I looked away, luckily making eye contact with the bartender. He placed another beer in front of me within seconds, and I handed him another tip. "I just don't understand why you want to put yourself through that pain. She's not going to be around forever," I said after the bartender walked away. "Unless she's your mate, you can't turn her."

"Who says I need a mate? Mom didn't have one."

I glared at him. "We've talked about this."

"Yeah, and it's time for you to get over it. She's been dead for twenty years."

"She's been dead to me for a lot longer than that." I brought the bottle to my mouth and tipped it back, taking a long swig. Before I could swallow, Vic yanked the bottle from my hands, spilling some of the liquid on my shirt. "What the hell!"

"Mom's dying words were that she loved you. Why can't you just focus on that?"

"I was unconscious, thanks to you. How do I know you, Ary, and Zach didn't make up that story to make me feel better?"

"You're ridiculous," he said, rolling his eyes. "You're the master of picking out lies, and you've always known when Ary was keeping something from you, thanks to your twin bond. If we were lying, you'd know."

I hated that he was right. "Did you ever think that maybe I don't want to forgive Arianna?"

"Mom did what she thought was best for you. Don't act like you had such a terrible life, Prince."

My hand clenched into a fist. I wanted to punch him, wanted to break his nose the way he'd broken mine all those years ago. But I knew it wouldn't do any good. Vic was stronger than I was. Of the three of us, I was the weak one. Ary, my twin sister, was stronger than Vic and I combined. Even before her husband, Zachary, became master of our coven, Ary commanded attention. The vampires around us know what she's capable of, and fear her. Once Zach took over, that fear kept the others in line.

Honestly, even I was afraid of her at times. She had a nasty habit of setting people on fire when she was mad. At least she hadn't done it to any humans. Yet.

Vic noticed my tightened fist and raised an eyebrow at me. "Gonna hit me, Corb? Go for it. I dare you."

I relaxed my hand. "Why the hell did you call me out here, Golden Boy?"

He rolled his eyes. "Look, I wanted to help you, but if you're going to act like this, then forget it." He pushed away from the counter. "Have fun," he said as he walked away.

"What is that supposed to mean?" I called after him. Vic ignored me, disappearing into the crowd of humans around us.

Before I could turn back to the bar, an empty beer bottle shattered against my head. If I was human, it probably would have knocked me for a loop, but being immortal, all it did was piss me off. I slid from the stool, raising my fists in anticipation of a fight.

A burly man in a leather jacket stood before me, a scowl on his face. Holding back my rage, I looked to the man. "What the hell?" He pulled his arm back and launched his fist toward my face. I ducked out of the way, grabbing his arm and twisting him away. "Trust me, you don't want to fight me."

The man growled. "She told me what you did."

My gaze fell on Elise, who stood against the far wall, watching us. A tiny smile teased her lips. If I hadn't spent the better part of the past fifteen years with her, I'd never have noticed it. My father was right, she was nothing more than a siren. She'd manipulated this man, convinced him I'd done something terrible to her, and made him fight. I felt my eyes burning, and knew they'd turned red with fury. "What did she say?" I asked the man.

He threw his elbow back into my stomach, pushing the breath from my lungs. I shoved him away from me, not wanting to play into Elise's game. Before I could turn to walk away, a group of four more men, all as large as the first, jumped at me. Fists flew in every direction. The crowd formed a circle around us, but no one stepped in to stop the men. Under normal circumstances, this would actually be a fair fight. But I was trying to appear human. If I dodged all their blows, which I could easily do, the entire room would know I wasn't one of them. And that would cause more problems than I wanted to deal with.

After taking several hits, I started swinging back, using only a fraction of my strength. These men were not acting on their own, and I didn't want to kill them. Still, I hated that Elise had drawn me into this game of hers. How could she possibly think that this would make me take her back?

One of them slashed at me with a broken bottle, slicing open my cheek. Damn. I would have to end the fight soon. It wouldn't take long for this wound to heal, and if they saw it, who knew what would happen.

Luckily, the bartender took control of the situation. Water rained down on us, and I heard the distinct sound of a gun cocking. "Next person to throw a punch gets shot." I glanced over my shoulder to see the bartender holding a shotgun over the bar, pointed directly at the first burly man. "The police are already on their way, James. Isn't this the third strike for you?" Grumbling, the man lowered his fist and backed away. He motioned to the others, and the five men headed for the door. The bartender tossed me a clean rag, which I pressed to my cheek. "You might want to head out the back."

"Thanks," I said. I headed toward the back door, moving as quickly as I dared without drawing more attention to myself. The moment I stepped outside, hands grabbed me, yanking me toward the dark alley. Thinking it was the men again, I balled up my fist and swung.

"Easy," Vic said, catching my fist. "So, how much of an ass kicking did you get?"

I removed the towel from my cheek. "You tell me."

Vic laughed. "You're whining about a scratch?"

I dropped the towel to the ground. "It was more than a scratch, and you know it."

"Yeah, but no one else would."

"So I'm guessing your comment about helping me means you saw this fight." He nodded. "You're an ass. You called me here just so I would—"

"Actually, I asked you here because I'm worried about you."

Raising an eyebrow, I asked, "Why?"

Sighing, he explained, "There's something coming after you. I can't tell who or what it is, but you're in danger."

"I'm immortal," I said, waving my hand.

"Corbin, this is serious."

"So am I. Bring it on. Maybe danger is just what I need."

"What the hell is that supposed to mean?"

"Oh, come on. You can't tell me you aren't bored with this life. You've been living like this for, what, seventy years or so now. It's dull. Every day seems exactly the same."

Vic rolled his eyes. "You need a woman."

I scoffed. "I had Elise for—"

"I said a woman, not a troll." I burst out laughing as he continued, "All she was good for was an easy lay. You know she's been with half the men in the coven."

I shook my head. "That's a rumor. She hasn't been a vampire long enough to be with that many."

"She has a hundred years on you, and she's a siren."

"Yeah, yeah."

"Besides, she's not the right woman for you."

Now it was my turn to roll my eyes. "Like you have any clue who the right woman for me is."

"Maybe not who, exactly, but I know the type. You're going to fall for a woman that will argue with you and frustrate you beyond belief, yet you'll still feel she's perfect."

I narrowed my eyes at him. "You've had a vision of my mate, haven't you?"

Vic shrugged. "Even if I have, I wouldn't tell you her name."

"You're a dick."

"So I've been told. Listen, we—" He paused, glancing behind me. At the same moment, I felt a tightening in my chest, and knew there was at least one vampire close by. "Shit," he muttered.

I turned to find not only the five men that had attacked me earlier, but four vampires I recognized from the coven blocking the exit of the alley. "Damn it, Elise."

"You think you can get away with whatever you want, just because of who you are related to?" one of the vampires asked me.

"What the hell are you talking about?"

The man named James stepped forward. "You force Elise to take your blood, to bond with you, and then you kick her to the curb. You're a sorry excuse of a man."

I laughed. "If she had my blood, she'd be dead."

"Yeah, sure."

Taking a deep breath, I looked to Vic. "Gonna help this time?"

"I don't think I have much of a choice."

"You wouldn't happen to have any silver on you?"

"Nope."

"Damn."

James smiled. "We're going to let these guys handle you this time, Corbin. We've got a date with Elise."

From the corner of his eye, Vic shot me a look that said 'I told you so.' Yeah, I got it. Elise was a tramp.

As the human males backed away, the vampires advanced on us. Vic smiled. "Guys, you really don't want to do this. You know who we are."

"Yeah, but we plan on making sure you don't walk away from this alley. The Mistress won't ever know what happened to her brothers," the tall bald vampire, whom I recognized as Marlowe, said.

"I wouldn't count on either of those," I said. "Ary knows everything."

"She's probably aware of this very conversation," Vic added.

Marlowe sneered. "Your sister isn't that good." He snapped his fingers, and the four of them launched themselves at us. Kicks and punches flew at blinding speeds, so fast that any passerby would never be able to keep up. Unlike the hits I took from the humans earlier, these actually hurt. Granted, I would still heal faster than they would, if we left them alive.

I felt the skin on my shoulder tear open, followed by a sickening scream that was not my own. I turned to see Lawrence, the youngest of the vampires attacking us, gripping his throat. Blood smeared across his mouth, and I knew instantly he'd bitten me. Lawrence dropped to his knees as his skin sank into his bones. Within seconds, he was a pile of ash.

The other vampires backed away. "What the hell?" Marlowe shouted.

Vic pointed to the remains of Lawrence. "As we said, if Elise had Corbin's blood, she'd be dead. She lied to you. There is no bond between them, and never will be. Now, for the last time, back off."

The three did as Vic said. Once they'd left the alley, I turned to my brother. "Next time you see some kind of danger in my future, why don't you just tell me about it over the phone."

Vic sighed. "Next time we meet up, maybe you should drink less, and try not to piss people off."

"Whatever." I rolled my shoulders, trying to loosen the tension there. "There's no way I'm making it to Erison tonight."

"You can stay at my place."

"Yeah, I don't think so. I'll just head to Alles."

"Acriema is only a half hour farther."

"I'm so beat right now, I don't know if I can make a two hour flight. I might not even make it to Alles."

He shook his head. "You'd be fine if you didn't—"

"You're my brother, not my father, back off."

He laughed. "Okay, okay." Vic looked to the sky. "Well, I'll fly with you, make sure you get there safely."

I groaned. "Don't patronize me. I'll be fine."

"If you say so."

The stars were beginning to fade from the horizon when I reached Alles. I flew straight to my room, not wanting to wake my surrogate parents, though I was sure they'd probably sense my arrival anyway. Without turning on the lights in my room, I stripped, tossing my bloody shirt and dirt caked jeans to the floor beside my closet. I then plopped face down on my bed, not bothering with the blankets, and was out cold.

A soft ringing woke me. I groaned, reaching for my phone on the nightstand beside my bed. Without looking at the screen, I lifted it to my ear. "What?"

Zachary's voice sounded through the receiver. "It's almost ten. Don't tell me you're still in bed."

"I live the bachelor life, Zach. No responsibilities."

My brother-in-law sighed. "When are you going to grow up?"

I yawned. "What do you want?"

"I need you to watch Zoe for a few days."

I scoffed. "You're kidding, right? She's twenty. She doesn't need—"

"Not yet, she's not. Besides, she has a human friend staying with her, and there is danger coming. Ary has seen it."

"And you need me because?"

"We have to go to Palatine."

"So take her with you."

"We can't. We're going to get Patrick and his son."

Frowning, I sat up, and ran my hand down my face. "Look, Vic says there's danger coming after me. I may not be..." I paused, thinking. "What about having Vic watch her?"

"Corbin, I'm asking you to do this."

"Still pissed at him, I see." When he didn't respond, I added, "You'd think after twenty years you'd be used to his sarcasm."

"Just get your ass over here." The phone clicked off before I could argue more.

I sighed. Arguing wouldn't do any good anyway. Zachary was the master of our coven, our leader. Whatever he said, I had to do, whether I wanted to or not. Granted, he didn't abuse his power. The only time he asked me to do things for him was when it had to do with his daughter, Zoe. Zach was paranoid when it came to her.

I climbed from bed and stretched. My body still felt stiff from the fight a few hours earlier, but I knew my wounds had healed. I trudged to my closet and yanked a pair of jeans

and a black cotton shirt from their hangers. I tugged on the jeans, then pulled the shirt over my head as I headed for my bedroom door.

The moment I stepped outside, I bumped into Evelyn, my adoptive mother. She raised an eyebrow at me. "I thought you'd be staying in Erison while you're finishing your house."

"I was in Galac last night. Alles was closer."

When I yawned again, she shook her head. "When did you get here?"

"Just before dawn."

"And you're up already? That's not like you."

"Your son woke me."

She sighed. "Corbin, we've been over this..."

"It doesn't matter. My master commands me—"

"All right, enough! Honestly, act your age."

"I am," I argued. "Well, the age I look, anyway."

She turned away from me, walking down the hallway toward the staircase. "Would you like some breakfast?"

I shook my head. "I don't really have time. Zach wants me at his place as soon as possible." As I followed her toward the stairs, a thought came to me. "Did he ask you and Dad to watch Zoe?"

She glanced over her shoulder at me. "No. Is that what he wants?"

"Yeah. I guess Ary sees danger coming after her and a human friend of hers."

Shrugging, she said, "If it's a danger that he wants your help with, I'm guessing it has to do with Wyatt. Your father and I wouldn't stand a chance."

I frowned. "You're an Elder, and Dad is Wyatt's son. He can't—"

"He can, and he would," she interrupted.

"I've never known either of you to back down from a fight."

"No one said we were backing down, Corbin."

I rolled my eyes. "Whatever you have to tell yourself."

She clicked her tongue. "You were never this sarcastic until Vic came around."

Suppressing a chuckle, I asked, "Are you regretting your decision to let him stay with us while he remodeled Arianna's house on Acriema?"

"Of course not. He's family. You all are." She paused on the steps, turning to face me. "Speaking of family, when are you going to get around to starting one?"

I groaned. "Mom, really? This again?"

"It took three hundred years for me to get a grandchild out of Zachary. You had better not make me wait just as long!"

Sighing, I admitted, "Vic saw my mate, but he won't tell me who she is."

Evelyn smiled and clapped her hands together. Her smile faded a moment later when she asked, "Please tell me it's not Elise."

"Definitely not. But speaking of her, I will be asking Zach and Ary to expel her from the coven."

"Why? What has she done?"

"She convinced a group of humans to attack me at a club last night, and then four vamps from our coven."

She shook her head. "Which four?"

"Marlowe, Lawrence, Brennan, and Curtis. Lawrence paid for the attack with his life, and now the others are aware that my blood is deadly."

“Well,” she sighed. “Are you seeking their exile as well?”

I shrugged. “I think they’ve learned their lesson. But they will be on warning. If you see Zach before I do, could you let him know about this?”

“Of course.” She turned and continued down the stairs. “Are you sure you don’t want to eat?”

“I’ll grab something later at Zach’s. I’d better get going, before I get in trouble for disobeying my master.”

“You know how he feels about the sarcasm,” she cautioned.

“Yeah, well, he should get used to it. We’re a sarcastic bunch.”