

Prologue

The Forest

She couldn't fly, not in her condition. Nor was walking an option. The raven-haired beauty even lacked the ability to crawl on hands and knees. The only alternative, to drag her lithe body over a dank woodland floor on her stomach.

Long nails protruding from slender, delicate fingers clawed at the pliant soil in a frantic effort to cover ground. *Must go faster!* Her breathing ragged, her energy spent, an unbreakable spirit drove her to keep moving. What choice did she have?

He relentlessly hunted her for centuries. Her carelessness, brought on by a blistering temper, allowed him to recapture her. But as always, she escaped. Would she elude him again?

The dewy night air carried the crisp snap of a dry twig. It startled her. She stopped slithering through the decaying debris littering the sylvan floor and listened. Nothing. Except for her breathy whisper of relief.

It's not him.

Or so she thought, because her kind never traipsed through forests in clumsy fashion, revealing their presence. Especially if tracking their prey of choice. Humans. Unless he deliberately taunted her.

Is that what he's doing?

Not waiting to find out, she continued to drag herself to

safety, sliding and gliding as quickly as her depleted strength allowed. Flailing arms swept aside rippling waves of dry leaves and brittle branches in a feverish attempt to escape. Footsteps caused her to stop thrashing. They were his.

¡Cabrón!

The bastard was teasing the virtuous young woman. He wanted to make certain she realized escape was folly. Her flaming ire materialized with scorching passion.

¡Hijo de la chingada!

Countless others called him a son-of-bitch and much worse. He deserved it. Another exhaled breath filled with hopelessness flowed from her lips. Did this mean her surrender?

Never.

Angry and frustrated by her weakened state, she accepted the inevitable. Escape was impossible. She hadn't fed in several nights. Hunger filled her stomach. He intentionally starved her to break her will and get her to do his bidding; give herself to him willingly. He loved her. Oh, how he loved her. However, now it went far beyond his pining heart.

She solely possessed information potentially devastating for humans, and he wanted it. Good luck with that. In his path, indestructible resolve and a mighty sense of justice, very much an integral part of her DNA. With her entire being, she defied him. And her defiance he would never quell.

Relaxing, she laid her head on the ground. Lengthy black

tresses covered her face and the forest floor that cushioned her head. Fatigue begged her to close her eyes. Rest. For a while. A little while. That's all. The pillowy forest floor soothed her body, willing her to slumber. She craved sleep. So, so tired.

No! I can't fall asleep. Don't fall a-

She disregarded risk, and shut her eyes though chances were good she might never awaken, ending a ludicrously extended life. Unlikely. He'd force her to feed on the sanguine fluid flowing through the veins of humans. Enough to keep her alive. Branches swooshed. Her dark eyes opened.

It's him. He's nearby.

Each step he took crunched twigs and leaves scattered upon the pliable woodland surface with sharp, brittle snaps. It was intentional. He enjoyed playing cat-and-mouse. She closed her eyelids, accepted the inevitable, and waited for him to appear.

La próxima vez será diferente, cabrón. Next time it'll be different, you bastard.

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A few miles away, on the shoreline of Big Bear Lake, stood a handsome young man observing the full moon. His name was Sam Clay. Sam spent the week with friends who introduced him to the girl he had to meet.

I wish they'd quit trying to hook me up.

Although she turned out to be articulate and charming, he didn't connect with her. Would that ever happen? A romantic bond

with someone special? Sam had his doubts. He wasn't even sure of who or what he was looking for. But he was certain of one thing. When she entered his life, he'd recognize her.

If she ever shows up.

He gazed at the stone-cold radiance of the water's surface glimmering with moonbeams, dimmed here and there by shadows cast from the stoic trees outlining the lake. During their lifespans, what mysteries did these voiceless sentinels witness? Of these, which were true, and which folklore? His attention turned to the stars twinkling against a flawless indigo sky. The flickering display mesmerizing.

The enchanted night saturated his soul with high spirits. A lover of life, he appreciated these moments which gave humans a sense of immortality, even if they were acutely aware they would someday receive a visit from Death, the supreme vanquisher. Then again, who really believed that day would ever arrive? In order to spare their sanity, not a single human being.

He skipped a flat rock over the glassy surface. The pebble hopped across the placid water and sank, not before releasing a surge of ripples fanning outward to disrupt the tranquility of the lake. Sam strolled to his gleaming silver Porsche parked in the distance. The expensive sports car was built for speed. He opened the driver's door and got in.

I'm a lucky guy.

His was a great life with true love the missing part of the

puzzle. Sam experienced varying degrees of it, but never a love that churned his stomach and challenged his knees not to buckle from the heat of a passionate kiss. That's why an emptiness came over him when witnessing couples in love, followed by undeniable loneliness whenever they professed devotion for each other with a wordless glance. He sighed with a sense of longing.

I guess I can do without it.

For real? If living on Earth has taught us anything at all, it's this. We are not the ones selecting our futures. The potent engine awoke, rumbling as it idled. What if Sam found someone he could not be without? Live without. What if he needed to, had to make a choice? Could he deprive himself of true love if pressed to pick between it and human existence? Or abandon the family he loved above everything else?

Life, Fate, God, you choose, soon planned to test him. He put the car in gear. As Sam sped into the night's darkness, he didn't realize he was about to embark upon the adventure of a lifetime with the girl he had to meet.