

Prologue:

(Gabriel)

*Lily has taught me many things - even about myself. Like the fact that while I am a vampire, at my core, I am still just a man. And it is very difficult for a man to love a woman yet not be able to protect her from all the things in this world that may hurt her - either physically or emotionally. It is especially difficult to love two women and not be able to protect either of them - exactly the maddening position in which I find myself.*

*I don't know where Savannah is. She is my sire, my friend - the closest thing I've had to family for almost a century and a half - and I don't even know if she is alive or dead. And the not knowing makes my blood boil - so to speak.*

*A man hates feeling helpless.*

*I want to be with Lily forever. I want to spare her the sickness and pain, suffering and death, that is the end of every human. But saving her from one kind of hell would only condemn her to another. I know because I live it.*

*A man hates feeling frustrated.*

*I want to make love to Lily - to show her with my body that she has made my cold, unbeating heart feel alive again. The fact that I can't trust myself to give her that kind of intimacy*

*without taking her life in return makes me want to rip the  
useless, bloody thing from my chest.*

*A man hates feeling out of control.*

*Yes, I may be a vampire, but these days I feel like nothing  
more than a man.*

"And to all who mourn, he will give a crown of **beauty** for **ashes**, a joyous blessing instead of mourning, festive praise instead of despair..."

~ Isaiah 61:3

Chapter 1: Let's not talk about it

(Lily)

"Let's get out of town for a few days."

I looked up from my laptop to see Gabriel standing in the doorway to the study, his hands on his slender hips, a look of sudden decisiveness on his face. The interruption was so unexpected I didn't know what to say, so I just raised one eyebrow in silent question.

Gabriel sighed, his dark head tipping forward, his broad shoulders sagging in defeat. "Young Nathan is driving me crazy," he admitted.

I grinned. "He hates it when you call him that."

"And I hate it when he calls me 'Gabe,' yet he does it every chance he gets." He paused for emphasis. "Gleefully."

I couldn't help but laugh at the peevish expression that looked so out of place on Gabriel's supernaturally-handsome face. Still, I took pity on him because the almost-painfully private vampire couldn't have known when he fell in love with me that Nathan Campbell - my overly protective, actively suspicious, and sometimes obnoxious best friend - would be part of the package. Add to that Nathan's jealousy when I'd rejected his romantic

advances in favor of Gabriel's, and, well - to say the relationship among the three of us was awkward would be a bit of an understatement.

No wonder Gabriel's patience was wearing thin.

Cautiously, I rose from my position behind the desk and moved to wrap my arms around his waist, holding my breath while waiting to see if he would pull away. He'd kept a certain amount of physical distance between us since having to take my blood three weeks earlier, and though I understood the reasons for it, I'd felt starved for his touch.

After only a moment of hesitation, Gabriel's arms slid around my shoulders and I sighed happily.

"Nathan will be leaving soon, anyway," I reminded him. "This is the weekend he's going to New York with Paige."

Paige was a fellow student in the University of Cincinnati's doctoral program in psychology, where Nathan and I both studied and worked. A few years younger than us, she had started out as an undergraduate student in our classes, had become a colleague and friend, and was, apparently, becoming something more than a friend to Nathan. The two had similar tastes in music and had planned a trip to the Big Apple to see one of their favorite bands in concert. Given my eagerness for Nathan to find romantic love somewhere else, I not-so-secretly

hoped the weekend getaway would solidify their budding relationship.

"Mmm-hmm," Gabriel murmured, obviously distracted by my proximity. "But *I* still need to go away for a few days, and I'd be much happier if you were with me."

I caught the slight emphasis.

"What's wrong?" I asked, immediately concerned.

"Nothing," he assured. "It's just with my having to feed more often I don't want to endanger the animal population here close to home. I think it would be best if I went on a little hunting trip."

"Oh," I said, realizing for the first time the difficult balancing act Gabriel had to maintain just to stay nourished while living in the city. Though his home was in Devou Park, a sprawling wooded oasis that sat atop the bluffs overlooking the Cincinnati skyline from the south side of the Ohio River, it was still surrounded by the densely-populated cities of Covington and Park Hills, Kentucky. Careful though Gabriel was, it was not the ideal place for a vampire who needed to feed regularly, but refused to prey on humans.

"Do you have anything particular in mind?" I asked.

"No," he admitted. "But give me an hour and I'll come up with something. Just tell me how long you can get away."

I thought aloud as I worked through my teaching schedule at the university. "Fall break is Monday and Tuesday. Today is Thursday. So, we could leave tomorrow afternoon and come back late Tuesday."

"Perfect," he said, dropping a kiss on my forehead before reluctantly letting me go to back out of the room. "I'm going to start early by kicking Nathan out right now."

"Be nice!" I called after him, unable to completely stifle my giggles.

"I'm always nice. I haven't killed him yet."

I couldn't help but laugh out loud then, and the sound was unexpected even to my own ears. There had been far too few moments of brevity in the three weeks since Gabriel had been forced to take my blood in order to survive an attack by a pack of vampire mercenaries out to kill his sire, Savannah. Unfortunately, in the same incident, Nathan had experienced a rather rude and abrupt awakening to the existence of vampires, and Savannah had been forced to kill the leader of the mercenaries - a ruthless vampire named Anton Falke - before learning who had sent him after her in the first place. Savannah, in need of answers about her forgotten past and afraid that staying in Cincinnati would place all of us in continued danger, had taken off for parts unknown, leaving Gabriel, Nathan,

and me to deal with the fall-out of the attack as best we could. And though we were all learning to adjust, it hadn't been easy.

In addition to the tension created by Gabriel's struggle with his awakened taste for human blood, we were all worried about Savannah, though we rarely talked about it, unwilling, perhaps, to give voice to our fears when there was nothing we could do to address them. And then there was Nathan's insatiable thirst for knowledge about all things vampire; tangible evidence of the paranormal was a dream come true for the psychologist-in-training, and he'd made such a nuisance of himself pestering Gabriel for information that Gabriel had finally thrown his hands up and said, "Read it all for yourself," giving Nathan the freedom to browse his vast accumulation of vampire lore at will, thus opening the sanctuary of his home to the curious wanderings of the "irritating youngster."

As for me, there had been no time to fully recover, either mentally or physically, from all that had happened the night of Falke's attack. I'd had no choice but to go back to teaching, as I'd had no believable reason to be excused from my responsibilities at the university. And in an effort to occupy myself and keep from driving Gabriel completely crazy by constantly clinging to him - as I longed to do - I'd buried myself in work on the dissertation. While I'd been fairly productive in that regard, I was tired in both mind and body, a

fact I was sure Gabriel had noticed. So, if he needed to hunt and wanted me to take a little getaway with him, I was certainly not going to argue.

There had been a time when I would have worried about my inability to contribute financially to such a trip, but Gabriel had, for the most part, stifled such worries. The issue had come to a head two weeks earlier when I'd protested his paying for my groceries. I'd made the comment that it was ridiculous for him to spend his money on groceries when he couldn't even eat, and was surprised by the look of hurt that had flashed across his face. When he'd asked, "Is it ridiculous for me to want to take care of you?" I'd whispered, "No," and had determined never to mention money again. Still, despite the fact that Gabriel was both a licensed medical doctor and an independent art dealer, he did not appear to work on a regular basis and my curiosity about that fact could not be stifled. Before I'd been able to silence my internal thoughts, he'd dryly responded, "Immortality gives new meaning to 'long-term' investments," and I'd left the matter alone after that.

In truth, I had basically moved in with Gabriel anyway. I hadn't spent a single night in my own apartment since Labor Day, and only stopped in on occasion to pick up clothes or check my mail. We hadn't actually discussed my living arrangements, but Gabriel had made it clear that he wanted me in his home, despite

the constant temptation I presented. I couldn't help but think that part of the reason he wanted me near was to prove to both of us that he did have the strength to resist me. But I knew the overriding reason was that, having been alone far too long, he desired my company, which made me as happy as I'd ever been despite the difficulty I'd had in adjusting to the sudden and drastic changes in my life since falling in love with a vampire.

Vampire.

Some days I still felt like I was dreaming. Even though Nathan and I threw the word around quite a bit anymore, sometimes I was still struck by the surrealism of it all. Not to mention the sudden and inexplicable awakening of my own psychic abilities in the lead up to Falke's attack, which I still didn't understand and couldn't quite bring myself to fully explore...

"Lily?"

Something in Gabriel's tone made me realize it was not the first time he'd said my name.

"Hmm?" I asked, blinking out of my reverie.

Gabriel's eyes, which darkened in direct correlation to the degree of his bloodlust and which never seemed paler than dark ochre anymore, were watching me in concern. I knew if he wanted to look into my thoughts, he could have seen what was on my mind, but he'd been trying lately not to do that. And while he still

slipped up sometimes, I appreciated his ongoing effort. I suspected it was part of his quest to be more human and thus - in his warped way of thinking - more worthy of my love.

"What's wrong?" he asked.

"Nothing," I said, shaking my head. Then I wondered how long I'd been standing there, lost in thought. "Is Nathan gone?"

"Yes," Gabriel replied with a relieved sigh. "I was finally able to convince him he wasn't going to discover anything in the next thirty minutes that I haven't in the past hundred and forty years that I've been a vampire."

"Why didn't he come say goodbye?" I asked curiously.

Gabriel looked slightly chagrined. "I escorted him straight to the door," he admitted.

I couldn't help but smile again. Despite the fact that Nathan and Gabriel often got under one another's skin, I knew they respected each other, and I was happy to finally not be keeping the reality of my relationship with Gabriel a secret from Nathan. But then, there was Paige...

My smile faded. Gabriel, Nathan, and I had all agreed that it was safer for everyone if Paige was kept in the dark about the existence of vampires, though we had different reasons for believing it. Nathan had seen firsthand the kind of danger that getting mixed up with vampires could bring to a human, and he was steadfast in his insistence that Paige be protected from

that. Gabriel, on the other hand, simply existed according to the rule that the fewer people who knew about vampires, the better - it was a deeply ingrained survival instinct that was stronger than his general like for Paige personally. I had conflicted feelings about the issue, but was willing to go along with any plan of action that would lessen the possibility of my ever seeing Gabriel look like a corpse again. Still, I felt in some ways as if I were betraying Paige's friendship, and that weighed heavily on my heart.

Gabriel's hand on my shoulder startled me out of yet another reverie. I nearly jumped under his touch.

"Talk to me," he said, a little fear creeping into his voice.

But I knew there was nothing to say. We'd made our decision, and I would simply have to deal with its consequences.

"It's nothing," I said again, and before he could call me on the lie, I continued. "Have you decided where we're going?"

Gabriel searched my face carefully, and I could tell he was thinking about pushing me - or just delving into my mind on his own. But finally, he sighed and I knew he was going to let it go - for the time being.

"Yes, actually. Have you ever been to Brown County, Indiana?"

I shook my head. "Nope. What's there?"

He grinned. "For me, a state park of over 15,000 acres."

"Ahh."

"And for you," he continued, "Lots of shops, galleries, wine tasting, and restaurants in the town of Nashville."

"That does sound good," I admitted. And then another thought occurred to me. "What's the weather like up there?"

"Over there," he corrected. "It's almost due west. But it may be a few degrees cooler than here. We can check the internet."

He was already moving toward the desk, so I followed and looked over his shoulder as he pulled up the weather forecast for Nashville, Indiana.

As I leaned over his shoulder, I became acutely aware of his physicality.

Just being in proximity to Gabriel - heck, sometimes just thinking about him - made my stomach flutter and my heart beat faster. At the moment, I could see the rock hard muscles of his back under the thin material of his white dress shirt, and the pale marble-like skin of his wrist and hand as he worked the mouse for the computer. Suddenly, I remembered what it was like to be plastered against those hard muscles, to have his powerful hands insistently caressing my body, his cool lips tracing icy patterns across my neck, and I felt a tightening in my belly,

and I wanted him so much I had to bite my lower lip to fight back a sigh.

Gabriel suddenly went perfectly still, those muscles I was ogling stiff with tension.

"Lily." His voice was somewhere between a groan and a growl.

"What?" I whispered, my voice maybe a little breathy, but pretty normal, I thought.

"Pheromones are pouring off you in waves," he gritted out through a tight jaw.

"Oh," I said, flushing with embarrassment, even though he hadn't turned around.

And then I knew why he wasn't looking at me. He wouldn't want to frighten me with the bloodlust in his black eyes.

"I'm sorry," I said, slowly backing away and moving to the other side of the room.

"I just want you so much," I muttered under my breath.

He did groan then, and it sounded like he was actually in pain.

"Sorry, sorry," I said again, moving toward the door and not looking at him as he carefully continued to not look at me.

"I'm just going to go to my apartment and get some warmer clothes for the trip. And you can..." I waved my hand in the air,

aware I was on the verge of rambling. "...do whatever you need to do."

I thought he might have made a noise of agreement, but I didn't hang around long enough to be certain. It wasn't that I was afraid of Gabriel; I had more confidence in his self-control than he did. But I knew this was difficult for him, and I thought my sticking around would be akin to waving a shot of liquor under a recovering alcoholic's nose. And since the last thing I wanted was to cause Gabriel any more discomfort, I hurried out to my beloved old Volvo, stopping only long enough to bypass the high-tech security system specifically designed to protect the great stone mansion from any potentially-nefarious intruder, human or vampire.

As I drove through the park and down the hill toward my drab apartment building, I noticed the wind was increasing, ripping more of the turning leaves from the trees. It looked like a storm might be blowing in with the falling dusk, and the thought made me shiver. For most of my life, I'd liked storms; I had appreciated the awesome power of God's creativity. But since the night I'd almost lost Gabriel in the middle of an early autumn storm, I hadn't been able to see them in quite the same way. And although I knew he had noticed how skittish I'd become to the sound of thunder, he had thankfully not said

anything. Which was good, because I wasn't ready to talk about it.

In truth, there were many things we hadn't talked about in the past three weeks, and the silence was beginning to weigh on us both. Yet neither of us seemed to know just what to say. We didn't talk about Savannah because doing so would only remind us of how useless we were in helping her. And we didn't talk about the increasing sexual tension between us because talking about it wouldn't do a darn thing to lessen it. And finally, we didn't talk about the fact that I was getting older with each passing day while Gabriel was not because that would only lead to me begging him to turn me and him stubbornly trying to talk me out of that desire.

So. There was nothing to talk about. And all the not talking had me feeling like I was about to explode.

Maybe that's why I burst into tears the moment I walked into my silent apartment.

I hadn't known I was about to cry, and the unexpectedness of it upset me even more, so that I was a sobbing, hyperventilating, blubbering mess in no time at all. Unsure of what to do, I just sank to the floor with my back against the front door. And then it occurred to me that the last time I'd been in that position, I'd been crying because I'd thought Gabriel had left me. Now, he was with me, but he wasn't really

*with* me...and that was the problem. To be near him, yet not be able to touch him the way I wanted to, to love him and yet not be able to make love to him, was its own kind of misery. All my life - and especially the past four years during which my memories of first meeting Gabriel had been repressed by his own powers of persuasion - I'd felt like I was searching for something. And when Gabriel had come back into my life - even before my memories had fully returned - I'd known it was him I'd been searching for. Even Gabriel had stopped trying to deny that we belonged together. Yet after all we'd been through, here we were, our very natures driving us apart like the repelling forces of two magnets.

But I wasn't going to give up. Even if Gabriel himself fought me, I would never give up trying to find a way to be with him. Because even though I was tormented by our situation, there was one thing I couldn't deny. I was happier with Gabriel than I'd ever been without him.

Eventually, the tears subsided as I talked myself down from my emotional high wire. And then, with determination, I went to the tiny bathroom to clean up, pulling my long blonde hair up into a ponytail to wash my face, even using Visine eye drops to clear the redness from my crystal blue eyes, unwilling to leave the slightest trace of my outburst to make Gabriel feel guilty when he saw me again.

Then I sorted through the mail, trashing the junk and collecting the bills to take with me so I could pay them online. Next, I ran the feather duster around the tiny apartment, mostly since I couldn't remember the last time I'd done so. Finally, I grabbed a big garbage bag out of the kitchen - since I'd left Gabriel's house in too much of a hurry to get my suitcase - and went to select a few warmer outfits for our trip.

And that's when it occurred to me that maybe the trip wasn't such a good idea after all. Maybe it would be better for Gabriel to go by himself, to slake his thirst without my distracting presence. Maybe after my lack of self-control in the study, even he would agree with that.

I spent some time debating what to do, even sitting on the futon and flipping on the TV for a while, hoping the mindless distraction would help me relax long enough to come to a rational decision. Because my heart wanted to be with Gabriel, but my head was telling me it might be a bad idea.

I'd made it through two re-runs of *The Office* when the landline rang, the unexpected sound scaring me half to death. Of course, I knew even before I picked it up who was on the other end.

"Are you okay?" Gabriel asked.

"Sure," I lied, trying to think happy thoughts just in case he was peeking. "How 'bout you?"

"Better," he said, but I could hear the shame in his voice, and I knew he'd had to go feed to quell the bloodlust I had unintentionally stirred.

"Don't, Gabriel," I said, softly. "It was my fault. I just...let my imagination run away with me."

He sighed. "The worst part is I would really like to know what you were imagining. But don't tell me," he quickly added.

I chuckled. "Probably nothing you haven't thought about a hundred times yourself."

"Try a thousand times a day. At least."

I wasn't sure if he was kidding or not. Which led me to broach the subject that had been on my mind.

"Look, Gabriel, I don't want you to take this the wrong way. Because I really want to be with you. But...are you sure it's a good idea for us to take this little trip *together*? I mean, your house is big, and we can kind of avoid each other when things get awkward, or I can come back down here for a while. But if we're staying in a hotel room together...I mean, unless you were going to get separate rooms. I guess I hadn't really thought of that. But then it wouldn't really be like being together at all, 'cause at least here I know you come into the bedroom at night sometimes when I'm sleeping, and..."

I finally trailed off, realizing to my embarrassment that I was rambling.

And then I heard him chuckle, and I blushed even though he couldn't see me.

"Gabriel!" I groaned.

He started laughing out loud then, and I was about to get mad when he finally calmed down and said, "God, I love everything about you, Lily."

And that made my heart start beating triple-time. Because nobody had ever made me believe that they loved me - quirks and all - the way he did.

"I love you, too," I whispered, getting choked up again despite my best efforts.

Gabriel suddenly went silent, and I knew he could hear the emotion in my voice as well as if he'd been sitting right beside me.

"I'm sorry, sweetheart," he said. "I know you were being serious."

"Yes," I replied, my mouth curling up in a little smile because he'd called me "sweetheart," something he'd taken to doing recently.

He sighed. "I understand what you're saying. I've been thinking about it, too," he admitted.

But before I could ask what he'd decided, he was telling me.

"If things get too difficult, I can always get lost somewhere in the middle of those 15,000 acres of wilderness

until they get better. And the truth is, after everything we've been through, I'm just not ready to be apart from you again. Not even for a few days."

I swallowed hard at the vulnerability I could hear in his voice. Finally, we were talking about something important.

"I don't really want to be apart from you either," I admitted. "I keep having to fight the urge to just cling to you until the world stops spinning so fast."

He was silent for a long moment.

"I wish I could give you what you need right now, Lily. You don't know how much."

"Yes, I do," I quickly assured him. "I see it every time you look at me. And that's enough, Gabriel."

I didn't know which of us I was trying to convince more, but he seemed to.

"Lily," he said, hesitantly. "I promised you I would never leave you. And I won't. But if this is too much for you...if you want a relationship with a normal man..."

"Stop it!" I snapped. "Don't you even finish saying it. I don't want *anyone* but you, and I don't want you to ever mention it again."

He could hear the anger in my voice.

"Okay, relax," he said. "I just wanted you to know that..."

"I mean it! Not one more word."

There was dead silence for a moment, and then, "Lily, would you please come home now?"

I smiled at his acquiescence.

"Does that mean you still want me to go with you to Indiana?"

"Very much," he said. "You need a change of scenery as much as I do."

I knew he was right.

"Okay," I replied. "I'll be there soon."

#

"So, how did you learn about Brown County?" I asked as Gabriel's silver Jaguar coupe sped through the Indiana countryside, which mostly consisted of brown, dried-up cornstalks for miles, with splashes of red, yellow, and orange trees in the distance.

"Are you familiar with the artist Glen Cooper Henshaw?" he asked.

"No," I admitted. My knowledge about art, though greatly expanding thanks to Gabriel, was still a tiny drop in the bucket compared to his.

"I'll show you some of his work when we get to town," he said. "Anyway, he was born in Indiana in the 1880s. He studied art in Paris and London, and by the time I met him in Chicago in the 1930s, he was very well-known."

I was trying to pay attention to the story, but kept getting distracted by the fact that Gabriel was talking about the 1930s as if they were, like, five years earlier.

"We got to be friendly," he continued. "Even though..." he paused. "Henshaw was one of the most reticent and shy people I've ever met. In my *entire* life."

I whistled.

"Yeah, exactly. But anyway, he moved to Nashville, Indiana in the early forties, and he invited me to come down. I was ready for a change of scenery, and I knew about the artist's colony that T.C. Steele had established there and I'd been wanting to see the area. So, I came down from Chicago in the summer of '43 and stayed for a while."

"Oh," I said, intrigued. I knew a little bit about T. C. Steele. "You actually lived there?"

"Just a few months," he said, with a small shrug. "I stayed at the Pittman Inn, which is where most of the visiting artists stayed in the summers."

"Is it still there?" I asked, excited by the prospect of seeing the place Gabriel had lived so long ago.

"No, sorry," he said, aware of my excitement. "But believe me when I tell you the suite I've booked for us is a *lot* nicer than it was, anyway."

"Still," I said, unable to keep from being a little disappointed. "It would have been cool to see."

Gabriel shot me a look that clearly said he couldn't quite believe I was that interested in the minutia of his past, but was pleased about it anyway.

"Some of the buildings are still there," he assured. "And I'll show you pictures and paintings from those days."

"Okay," I said, appeased. And then I thought of something that made me sit upright in the Jaguar's comfortable seat.

"There won't be any pictures of you will there? I mean, that would be dangerous, right?"

He smiled. "If so, I'll just say what I always do. 'Isn't it cool that we found a picture of my grandfather Gabriel back when he was my age?'"

I blinked once, slowly, as I thought about it, and then started laughing.

"Yep. Pretty cool."

#

"What are you thinking about over there?" he asked forty-five minutes later, as I sat staring blankly out at the never-ending fields of corn.

I was thinking about Savannah, wondering where she was and if she was well, but I didn't want to admit it.

"I was wondering what Nathan and Paige are doing right now."

Gabriel didn't seem to know I was lying because his response was a comical grimace. "I'm not sure I want to know."

I smiled. "I know what you're thinking. And actually, that's *exactly* what I hope they're doing. Mushy stuff and all."

He laughed. "Yeah, it would be good for Nathan to release some pent-up energy. Maybe he'll be more tolerable when he gets back."

"He's just excited," I said in defense of my best friend. "Your very existence validates some of his ideas."

"Actually, it's *your* existence that more closely aligns with his theories," Gabriel pointed out. "I mean, he wasn't theorizing about vampires. He was theorizing about other-sensory perception in *humans*."

The topic made me uncomfortable. But I knew it was past time that we talked about that, too, so I soldiered on with as much detachment as I could muster.

"True. But now that he knows about vampires and their abilities, he's become convinced the two are related."

"Mmm."

"What do you think?" I pressed.

Gabriel frowned, and I could tell he was gathering his thoughts.

"I don't know," he finally admitted, and I was reminded of how that was his least favorite phrase.

"I mean, there are documented cases of humans with heightened sensory perception," he continued. "You know, a blind person has great hearing or someone with a particularly discerning palate becomes a food critic."

I nodded, listening intently.

"But even in those cases, the level of perception is nowhere near that of a vampire's. And that doesn't even touch on the idea of some sort of extra perceptive abilities like a so-called 'sixth sense' or the ability to sense something beyond what is actually happening in a person's current environment, which is really what we're talking about with you."

As a teacher myself, I recognized he was getting into lecture mode. It was clear he'd spent a great deal of time thinking about the issue.

"There have always been rumors of people with abilities like that, but nearly all of them have turned out to be fraudulent. Which is why so many people in the academic community - even good people like Dr. Staunton - have been skeptical of the viability of Nathan's research interests."

Dr. Staunton was the chair of UC's psychology department and a beloved mentor to me. But as highly as the aging professor thought of me, his feelings for Nathan ran much cooler, a direct result of the clash between his own traditional research interests and Nathan's radical theories.

"Which is also why it's killing Nathan to know that his best friend may be able to provide evidence that his theories are true, but he can't say anything about it," I said.

Gabriel sighed. "Yes."

We were silent for a long moment, each of us thinking about the complexity of the situation.

"This sucks," I finally blurted out, startling Gabriel with the intensity of my outburst.

He looked at me cautiously, as if not sure how to respond. And I was too embarrassed to help him out.

"I can't imagine how difficult this has been for you," he finally said, his voice gentle.

"It...I..." I felt like I needed to say something, like the door leading out of our silent world was finally open, but I didn't know how to step through.

"I know you've been angry," he prompted.

I looked at him in surprise. "No, I haven't," I said.

Gabriel looked at me so long I thought he would wreck, but then he turned his gaze briefly back to the road.

"Yes, you have," he argued. "Not at me, but at the situation."

Maybe he was right. Maybe my tension wasn't all fatigue.

"I feel like I have no control over my life anymore," I admitted.

"I can understand that," he said, his right hand reflexively gripping and releasing the steering wheel.

And I realized then I must have sounded like a big, whiny baby, considering everything Gabriel had been through in his long life.

"Sorry," I said. "I don't mean to be such a pansy."

His head whipped around to me, an expression of disbelief plastered across his face.

"Is that what you've been thinking about yourself?!"

I shrugged, unwilling to meet his gaze.

Suddenly, Gabriel braked hard and the Jaguar came to a halt in the middle of the rural two lane highway we were on.

I turned to him with wide eyes. "What are you doing?!"

"I want your full attention," he said, his eyes flashing in anger. "And you'd better hear me when I say this."

I nodded at him dumbly, some little voice in the back of my mind whispering how sexy he looked when he was angry.

"You are - without a doubt - the bravest person I know," he said slowly.

"I..."

"Ah-ah," he interrupted, pointing a finger at me to shush.

I obeyed.

"I always knew you were brave," he continued. "The fact that you didn't walk away from me once you knew what I was proved that."

I wanted to protest that I hadn't walked away because I knew he wouldn't hurt me and that wasn't particularly brave, but he was looking at me in such a way that I knew an interruption would not be welcome, so I kept my mouth shut.

"But what topped it off was when you ran into that clearing full of vampires, for no other reason than because you thought I needed you."

I blinked. I hadn't thought about it like that.

"And then," he continued, "you allowed an injured, blood-thirsty vampire to walk you through offering yourself up to save another injured, blood-thirsty vampire's life."

He was watching me intently, making sure his words sank in.

"And that was incredibly brave."

I no longer wanted to interrupt. I just didn't know what to say.

"The fact that you're struggling with all these changes - that you're angry, and sad, and frustrated - is completely normal. You, of all people, should know that."

He sounded like Nathan, then, and I couldn't help but smile a little.

"Nathan says I make a lousy patient."

"Well, for once, Nathan is right about something," he retorted, and that made me laugh.

Gabriel's anger seemed to fade then, and he smiled back at me, but it was touched with sadness.

"We should have talked about this before," he said. "I've been trying to give you the mental privacy to deal with this, but I guess I should have pushed."

"No," I replied, shaking my head. "I wasn't ready. And hanging around in my head wouldn't have made things any easier for you."

"I suppose not," he admitted, looking out at the Indiana countryside, a slight frown on his face.

"Gabriel," I said.

"Hmm?"

"Are we going to sit here in the middle of the road all day?"

He looked at me in surprise, as if just remembering where we were.

"No," he laughed, putting the car back in gear. "I suppose not."

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"Since we're being all open and honest, can I ask you a question?"

Gabriel looked at me in surprise.

"Of course you can."

"How are you doing?" I asked. "Really?"

He sighed and looked for a moment as if he'd regretted telling me I could ask. But his good graces wouldn't let him back out of answering.

"It's been hard," he admitted.

I nodded, waiting.

"I've had to feed a lot more often than I expected I would."

I hadn't known that.

"But it helps?"

He looked uncomfortable. "It takes the edge off."

"But?"

He sighed, casting a quick sideways glance in my direction. And I thought it ironic how much attention he paid to the road when it suited him, but I didn't call him on it.

"I still want your blood," he admitted.

"Just mine?" I asked.

"Mostly. I mean, I crave human blood generally, but I still remember what yours tastes like."

That made my heart start beating faster, and I was sure he could hear it.

"How does it taste?" I asked curiously.

He groaned. "Even better than I'd imagined."

Unconsciously, I touched the still-healing wound above my left breast.

"Does it hurt?" he asked, his voice pained.

"It's just a little tender," I assured. "And it itches sometimes as it heals."

He nodded, but his jaw was clenched so tightly it looked like it might break.

"Gabriel?" I asked, my eyes roaming over his beautiful profile. "Can I confess something to you?"

He was surprised again, and for a moment his jaw relaxed.

"Yes," he said, his voice hesitant.

"I'm really sorry that this has been hard for you. I would never want to cause you discomfort. But..." I trailed off, suddenly unsure of myself.

"But?" he prompted, obviously curious now.

"But I like having your mark on my body," I admitted.

"It's like I've been branded as yours."

"Lily," he gritted out through clenched teeth, his hands gripping the steering wheel tightly.

"Are you mad?" I whispered.

"What?" His dark eyes shot to mine, and then back to the road. "No. It's just..."

He paused, swallowing hard.

"That's the sexiest thing I've ever heard."

I felt myself warm all over at his admission.

"Gabriel," I said, my voice husky.

"Lily," he interrupted in a strangled voice. "Please don't say anything else right now."

I sighed, but held my silence, turning my attention back to the endless fields of corn.