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Opening extract from

Infinite Days

Written by

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Infinite
Days

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Rebecca Maizel

MACMILLAN

To Mom and Dad:
Every word. Every single one belongs to you.
You always light the way.
And my sister, Jennie, who always has the right words.



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Part 1

‘There’s rosemary, that’s for remembrance; pray you, love, remember.’

– Ophelia, *Hamlet*, Act IV, Scene V

Chapter 1

I release you . . .
I release you, Lenah Beaudonte.
Believe . . . and be free.

Those were the last words I could remember. But they were formless, said by someone whose voice I did not recognize. It could have been ages ago.

When I awoke, I immediately felt a cold surface on my left cheek. An icy shiver rushed down my spine. Even with my eyes closed, I knew I was naked, stomach down on a hardwood floor.

I gasped, though my throat was so dry I made an unearthly animal sound. Three heaving breaths then a *thump-thump*, *thump-thump* – a heartbeat. My heartbeat? It could have been ten thousand fluttering wings. I tried to open my eyes, but with each blink there was a flash of blinding light. Then another. And another.

'Rhode!' I screamed. He had to be here. There would be no world without Rhode.

I writhed on the floor, covering my body with my hands. Understand that I am not the type of person

to find herself naked and alone especially in a situation where sunlight shines down on my body. Yet there I was, bathed in yellow light, sure that I was moments away from a painful, fiery death – I had to be. Soon flames would erupt from within my soul and turn me into dust.

Only, nothing happened. No flames or imminent death. There was only the smell of the oak in the floor. I swallowed and the muscles in my throat contracted. My mouth was wet with . . . saliva! My chest rested on the ground. I pressed down on my palms and craned my neck to look at the source of my torment. Luminous daylight streamed into a bedroom from a large bay window. The sky was a sapphire blue, no clouds.

'Rhode!' My voice seemed to swirl in the air, vibrating out of my mouth. I was so thirsty. 'Where are you?' I screamed.

A door somewhere near me opened and closed. I heard a wobbling step, an uneven shuffle, then Rhode's black buckle boots stepped into my eyeline. I rolled on to my back and looked up at the ceiling. Gasping. My God – was I breathing?

Rhode loomed over me, but he was a blur. He leaned forward so his hazy features were within inches of my face. Then there he was, as though coming out of a mist, looking as I had never seen him before. The skin over Rhode's cheekbones stretched so tight it looked as though his bones would break through. His usually full

and proud chin was now a thin point. But the blue of his eyes – they were the same. Even in the haze of that moment they pierced me, down to my soul.

'Fancy meeting you here,' Rhode said. Despite black bruises that ringed his eyes, a twinkle, from somewhere deep within, looked back at me. 'Happy sixteenth birthday,' he said, and extended a hand.

Rhode gripped a glass of water. I sat up, took it from him and finished it in three large gulps. The cold water trickled down the back of my throat, flowed down my oesophagus and into my stomach. Blood, a substance I was used to, trickled, but its absorption into the vampire body was a lot like a sponge soaking up liquid. It had been so long since I'd had a drink of water . . .

In Rhode's other hand was a piece of black cloth. When I took it from him, the cloth cascaded out to reveal a black dress. It was lightweight cotton. I pressed up from the floor and stood up. My knees buckled but I steadied myself by throwing my arms out to balance. I stood there for a moment, until I was firmly planted to the ground. When I tried to walk, a small vibration shook me so hard that my knees touched.

'Put that on and then come into the other room,' Rhode said, and lumbered unevenly out of the bedroom. I should have noticed that he had to hold on to the door frame when he walked but my knees and thighs trembled and I had to try to find my balance again. I let

my hands fall back to my sides. My brown hair unfurled and, like seaweed, strands stuck to my naked body. Longer strands reached my breasts. I would have given anything for a mirror. I took a few breaths and my knees wobbled again. I looked around for a corset but there was nothing. How curious! Was I meant to walk around this place with nothing to hold me in? I slid the dress over my head and it stopped right above my knees.

I didn't look a day over sixteen, yet if someone had calculated my age on that particular day – I'd officially turned 592.

Everything was so crisp and bright – too bright. Beams of light trickled minute rainbows across my feet. I looked around the room. Despite waking up on the floor, there was a mattress in an iron bed frame covered by a black quilt. Across the room a bay window looked out at full leaves and swaying branches. Beneath the window was a seat covered in plush blue pillows.

I ran my fingertips against the textured wood of the walls and couldn't believe that I could actually *feel* it. The wood was layered and I felt the raised and jagged parts under my smooth fingertips. My existence as a vampire meant that all my nerve endings were dead. Only by remembering what things felt like as a human could my vampire mind understand whether I was touching something soft or hard. The only senses a vampire retained were those that heightened her ability to kill: the sense of smell was linked to flesh and blood; sight was

super sight, detailed down to the minutiae, its sole purpose to find prey within an instant.

My fingers fluttered over the wall again – another rush of shivers rolled up my arms.

'There will be time for that,' Rhode said from the other room.

My heartbeat echoed in my ears. I could taste the air. As I walked, the muscles in my thighs and calves seemed to burn, twitch and then relax. In order to stop shaking, I rested my body weight on the doorway and crossed my hands over my chest.

'What century is this?' I asked, closing my eyes and taking a breath.

'The twenty-first,' Rhode said. His black hair, which had reached halfway down his back the last time I'd seen him, had been cut short and now stood up in spikes. Round his right wrist was a white medical bandage. Rhode gripped a side table and lowered himself into a crimson-coloured lounge seat.

'Sit,' he whispered. I sat down on a pale blue couch that faced the lounger.

'You look terrible,' I whispered.

'Thank you,' he said with the barest glimmer of a smile.

Rhode's cheeks were so sunken that his once masculine carved features now clung to his bones. His usual golden skin had yellowed. His arms quivered as he lowered himself into the chair, holding on to it

until he was almost fully sitting down.

'Tell me everything,' I commanded.

'Give me a moment,' he said.

'Where are we?'

'Your new home.' He closed his eyes and leaned his head back on to the chair. He gripped the armrests and I noticed that the rings that had once adorned his fingers were now gone. The curling black snake with emerald eyes, the poison ring for emergencies (which meant it was always filled with blood) were missing. Only one ring remained on his pinky finger. My ring. The ring that I had worn for five hundred years. Only then did I notice that my own hands were bare. It was a tiny silver band with a black stone – onyx. 'Never wear onyx unless you want or know death,' he once told me. I believed him. Besides, up until that moment, I was confident no vampire enjoyed creating death more than I did.

I tried to avoid his gaze. I'd never seen Rhode so weak.

'You're human, Lenah,' he said.

I nodded once in acknowledgement, though I looked at the lines in the hardwood floor. I couldn't respond. Not yet. I wanted it too much. The last interaction I had with Rhode, before waking up in that bedroom, was about my desire to be human. We had an argument, one that I thought would last for centuries. It had, in a way, the argument had happened a century before that moment.

'You finally got what you wanted,' he whispered.

I had to look away again. I couldn't stand the cool blue of his eyes appraising me. Rhode's appearance was so altered – changed – as though he was withering away. When he was at his fullest health, his square jaw and blue eyes made him one of the most beautiful men I'd ever seen. I say man but I am not sure of Rhode's age. He could have been just a boy when he was made into a vampire, but through the years he'd clearly seen and done so much – it had aged him. Vampires, as they move into the maturity of their existence, become so ethereal in appearance that it is nearly impossible to guess their age.

Making sure to keep my eyes away from his, I examined the living room. It looked as though he had just moved in, though the atmosphere of the room felt like Rhode. Despite a few boxes piled next to the door everything seemed to be in its proper place. Many of my possessions from my vampire life decorated the apartment. Specifically, items from my bedchamber. On the wall, an ancient sword was held to a metal plate by golden clasps. It was one of Rhode's favourite pieces, the longsword from his days with the Order of the Garter, a ring of knights under Edward III. It was a special sword, one that was forged by magic, outside of the brotherhood. It had a black leather grip and a thick base that tapered down to a deadly and distinct point. The pommel, the wheel-shaped counterweight on the top of the

sword, had an engraving circling its perimeter: *Ita fert corde voluntas*. The heart wills it.

On the wall, on either side of the sword, iron sconces made to look like roses linked by vines and thorns held white unlit candles. White candles should be burned in a house wishing to dispel evil spirits or energy. Every vampire had them for protection against other darker magics. Yes, there are worse things in the universe than vampires.

'I forgot your human beauty.'

I looked back at Rhode. He wasn't smiling, but his eyes sparkled and I knew he meant it. Seeing me now in my human form was a personal fulfilment. He had done what he had set out to do hundreds of years before.