

Silver's Bane

Living DEAD
BOOK ONE

ASHLI & TRISHA
EDWARDS

*Dedicated to
Harrison Paul Fidler
June 19, 1994—January 31, 2009*

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Prologue

1598, ENGLAND

"Juliana! Come inside, Juliana!" a voice called.

"O, she doth teach the torches to burn bright," young Juliana quoted. She giggled happily and turned over on her bed of grass to take in the darkening sky.

"Juliana Elizabeth Bristow!"

"It seems she hangs upon the cheek of night. As a rich jewel on an Ethiop's ear," Juliana continued quoting her favorite play by a man named William Shakespeare. Rumor was that this playwright's words would live throughout the ages. It didn't matter if they did or not; Juliana was almost as smitten with Shakespeare as she was with her fiancé.

"Juliana, come inside this instant!"

Juliana could almost see her Aunt Millie standing in the doorway with hands on her wide-set hips. Tossing her brilliant, auburn hair over her shoulder, she made no attempt to answer or showed any signs of compliance.

Well, Romeo, you do know how to leave a girl breathless, she thought to herself. "Have not saints' lips and holy palmers too?" She let out another giggle as she said aloud. "Aye, pilgrim. Lips that they must use in prayer."

“O, dear saint let lips do what hands do,” a familiar male voice quoted from behind her.

“Laurence!” Juliana jumped up from the ground and threw her arms around the brawny man she would soon marry.

“So where is my kiss, fair maiden?” he questioned with a small smirk.

“Right here, good sir,” she whispered in his ear, batted her lashes, and planted a gentle kiss on his lips.

“Juliana!” Aunt Millie had finally reached a truly exasperated state.

“You sure do have good, old Millie vexed again tonight,” Laurence commented, holding Juliana off the ground.

“She’s always upset with me,” she said matter-of-factly.

“Come.” He swung her around in his arms. “One mustn’t keep her waiting too long.”

Juliana stuck out her lower lip in a false pout.

“Go now. It is time for you to retire,” he ordered, kissing her again. “And goodnight.” He set her gently back on her feet.

“If you insist,” she replied with a playful grimace, but her smile returned quickly. “Goodnight, until it be tomorrow!” she said, turning on her toes and starting toward the old cottage.

Juliana smiled to herself. *Oh, I love him.*

She soon approached the cottage where she had been living with her Aunt Millie for the past year. It stood alone in the darkness, positively minuscule next to the

large trees on either side. She walked into the front door, kissed her flustered aunt on the cheek, and headed up the stairs to her tiny room.

Life had been so different since her family had gone away. After their parents' deaths, Juliana had drawn her happiness from her twin. They were opposites in personality. While Juliana was quiet and reserved, like all good girls should be, her brother was known for his recklessness. It was that recklessness that had gotten him killed.

Laurence had held Juliana together throughout the traumas she had endured of late. Gradually, she had grown to love him and he her. The most joy Juliana now felt was in thoughts of the shared future that lay ahead of them. He wanted to work for the church and she wanted a family. Their dreams fit together wonderfully.

When Juliana reached her room, she did not undress. She had no intention of staying shut up in the cottage, no matter what Laurence said. She couldn't waste this perfect night. She had to enjoy the serenity of her favorite clearing in the woods. It was her secret place. No one knew of it, not even Laurence.

Impatiently, she waited in her slowly darkening bedroom. It seemed like hours before her aunt's lamp went out and the obnoxious snoring started.

The shimmy down the oak tree outside her window was a dangerous exercise but something she had done many times before. Juliana suspected Aunt Millie knew about her late-night excursions because she had started

to mutter that her brother had died and left Juliana his lack of sense.

It took her a few minutes to get her feet firmly planted on the ground. One glance up at Millie's darkened window told her that she was free. After taking a deep, calming, breath, Juliana trotted happily toward the woods.

Upon her arrival, Juliana sat on her favorite stump and drank in the sounds of the romantic forest around her. Sitting there, clutching her well-used book in her hands, she sighed. Despite all of the loss she had experienced, she found that she was at peace.

After a long while, however, Juliana yawned several wide yawns in a row and decided it was time to head back home and slip into her soft bed. She had almost reached the house when she heard a shrill, penetrating scream that made her blood run still. *Aunt Millie!* Another scream pierced the darkness. Aunt Millie was not screaming out of anger. Reality hit like a boulder to the head. *Terror!*

Juliana took off running toward the house, but before she reached her destination, the screams were suddenly silenced. Her heart skipped several beats. As she approached, everything looked dark and peaceful, but something felt wrong; unsettling. Cautiously, Juliana peered in the front door. It was propped open. Looking down, she noticed a trail of large, muddy footprints on the floor, much larger than her own.

"Hello?" she whispered into the darkness.

Crash!

What was that?

Crash. *There it is again!* The disturbance was coming from the small kitchen at the back of the cottage. Just then, she saw a blur of a dark shadow speeding toward her. Her heart pounded under her ribcage. The shadow ducked around the corner and into the study. *It's as big as a man!* Scared but curious, she followed. It was like nothing she'd ever seen before.

"Hello?" she croaked, her mouth dry.

A low, sharp snarl echoed through the room, answering her call. Horrified, she turned to run but strong arms prevented her escape. She hardly recognized her voice as her own terrified scream pierced the air. A hand clamped over her mouth. The man hissed and bent over her trembling frame. An excruciating pain issued from the base of her neck. Her breath came in rapid spurts, but she could make no sound, due to the long fingers still covering her mouth.

Jules felt herself growing weak, slipping from consciousness as her blood left her body. She slumped to the ground, but the arms cradled her as she fell. Her head lolled back, exposing her face. She heard a sharp intake of breath that wasn't hers. "He said you were beautiful." The smooth voice mused. Somewhere far away, Jules heard a ripping sound. "He was right." Something smooth and cool pressed against her lips. "Drink." The voice commanded. The warm liquid tasted of metal and burned her throat.

Jules's eyes fluttered open, she saw the blurred outline of a face. "You are mine now," it said. He released her, Jules dropped to the floor with a thump. The man,

the shadow, was gone. Jules's hand reached for her throbbing neck, she felt two small punctures in her skin. This is when the real pain started.

Chapter One

WELCOME TO ABOIT, MAINE

Over 400 Years Later, America

Juliana Bristow raced through the darkened streets. Speed was her ally, the moonlight her friend. To the human eye, she would be a blur of red and white, and still, she stuck to the shadows. The sleepy seaside town was slowly tucking itself in for late evening meals and prime time television. This was one of the reasons Jules had chosen Aboit, Maine as a home. It was quiet, it was peaceful, and it was safe. Or so was thought. In Aboit, vampires ran free. Well, three of them did.

Jules stopped abruptly and took in her surroundings. She'd taken a wrong turn. Gabriel was going to gloat if he and Eileen beat her to their destination. She thought of the smug expression that would undoubtedly appear on her best friend's face and bolted toward the center of town. Jules's run was fierce. She rounded a corner like a cheetah on the heels of its prey. Deducing a quicker route than the one she was currently following, Jules launched herself onto a nearby rooftop. She sped across it, easily making the distance. One, to the next, and then the next.

Her feet moved soundlessly over the humans' heads. Each and every one none the wiser.

Long ago, after her first taste of blood, Jules had been appalled by what she had become. But now, over four hundred years later, she had come to embrace, but control, what she was. As Jules reached the first restaurant rooftop, she stopped to take in the view around her. She could see the bustling marina clearly from her perch. The cry of seagulls rang in her ears. She took a deep, unnecessary breath. Jules loved the smell of the sea. She then peered down into the dark alley beneath her. *Empty*. She had meant to drop to the ground in silence but instead landed in a puddle with a splash.

“What was that?” someone asked.

“Probably nothing,” said another.

Jules flattened herself against the stone wall and waited until they passed. She had reached the busy downtown area. At least what the people of Aboit considered busy. This seaside haven was sparsely populated when compared to the last city she'd lived in.

Jules sighed. It couldn't be helped. She'd have to walk the rest of the way. The sweatshirt she wore concealed most of her pale, freckled skin and she pulled her blue hood up over her radiant auburn hair for good measure. Shoving her hands into her pockets, she walked briskly, but not fast enough to draw extra attention. She was drawing enough as it was. It seemed, no matter how she tried to blend into this human world, being dead made her stand out. Jules's closest human friend would say that humans looked for magic in their lives and that

Jules's unearthly beauty made her feel like magic. Jules thought it was because humans craved danger, and there was nothing more dangerous than a predator that hungered for your blood.

Jules came to an abrupt halt when she reached Henry Park. Which, in reality, was more of a bench and flowerpot in front of the public library. She sat on the weather-worn bench and waited.

"You took the rooftops, didn't you?" Gabriel asked in a conversational tone, still at a distance that only her vampire hearing allowed her to hear. She smiled coyly but said nothing as he and Eileen reached the bench where she sat.

"Well, at least you didn't make us wait like last time." The jest was showing in his iridescent, silver eyes, which had just a hint of blue around the edges.

"Impatience constant in the mind brings unhappiness to the soul," she rebutted, looking up at him.

"You remember you live in twenty-first century America now, right?" Gabriel teased as she stood.

Gabriel was tall, strong and protective. Jules felt that his name fit him well, the angles of his face were near perfection and his blond hair reminded her of a halo. However, in actuality, it was his personality that reminded her of an angel. Gabriel had a passion for people. He was a teacher, a protector, a guide. His greatest joy was teaching new generations. Jules had found him after the Battle of Brier Creek. A new vampire fresh off the battlefield, unsure how to be what he was.

Jules had tried to teach him but, in the end, it had been he who had reminded her that human life was sacred.

For Jules, the temptation to kill was too great. So, together, they invented other ways to get the blood they needed: Red Cross, campus blood drives, even raiding the blood bank at a hospital when necessary.

Eileen, Gabriel's wife of near forty years, was as free-spirited as they come. Her black hair hung long, past her waist, and complimented her bronzed skin, native to this land. The silver of age had not overtaken the original black color of her human eyes yet. She was still an infant vampire.

It was always a risk, taking such a young vampire into the heart of human habitation. Eileen didn't possess the control that Jules and Gabriel had worked many years to attain. Regardless, Eileen had begged to accompany them to the Promenade tonight. Apparently, she saw an art show opening advertised that had sparked her interest.

Jules let down her hood as the three deadliest predators in Maine walked down a busy street to enter the small gallery a few shops away.

As they walked, Jules felt Gabriel's hand grasp her shoulder. Her head shot up. There was *one...two...three...* Jules counted six in the pack that was congregating outside Seaside Soda Shop.

They hollered and howled as they were joined by yet another. This one was bigger than most of the others and he had an Alpha's commanding presence.

"Werewolves," Gabriel hissed.

Jules placed a comforting hand on his arm. "Just keep going," she said quietly. "They've never attacked us before. This town is big enough for both species."

"But Jules," Gabriel protested as he placed himself between Eileen and the wolves. Eileen's hand went reflexively up to brush one of the long scars on her face.

Jules knew the unspoken treaty of the supernatural beings in Aboit had never set well with her coven. Past events had left them uneasy around members of this other supernatural species.

"I said, ignore them," Jules whispered and made to move on down the wide sidewalk. But just as she started to turn away, she froze. She had caught sight of one of the wolves. He was stunning, tall, and lean. He had tan skin, dark hair, brilliant green eyes, and features reminiscent of someone Jules had known long ago. His eyes locked with her own. She could not turn away.

"Jules?" Eileen's concerned voice seemed distant.

She heard Gabriel hiss again. This time it was directed at the pack, and yet, she still couldn't tear her gaze from the mesmerizing werewolf's.

The Alpha charged at them and Gabriel met the challenge. The two crashed into one another with supernatural force. But the scuffle knocked into Jules, pulling her focus away from *him*. As she assessed the situation, she noted that the other wolves had yet to join the fray. Jules knew she had to intervene before this situation escalated. Just then, the Alpha threw a full-fisted punch at Gabriel, who avoided it by sidestepping ever so slightly. Jules took advantage of the moment and

leaped directly between the two fighting men. She stood, arms outstretched to her sides. This move had the desired effect, the Alpha froze, mid-stride. Jules turned her full attention on Gabriel for just a second. “Back down,” Jules commanded with a hiss.

“Jules, move...” Gabriel said.

She silenced him with a glare. “I know what I’m doing.”

Gabriel conceded and moved back a few paces to stand in front of Eileen. Jules turned to confront the Alpha.

“Vampire scum,” the Alpha said, apparently having gotten over his shock that such a small woman would intervene.

Jules scowled. She couldn’t believe he was stupid enough to say that out loud. By now, the incident had drawn quite a crowd of spectators.

“Move, or you’ll be the one to die,” the Alpha spat, but this time it was only loud enough for Jules to hear.

Jules ignored the threat, but said, “you are the Alpha, yes? According to the rules of proper engagement, you must deal with me now.”

“You lead this coven?” the Alpha asked.

“I do,” Jules stated evenly, stepping into a stance that exuded the position and power of her years. Out of the corner of her eye, Jules saw that the other pack members had begun to encourage the crowd to disperse. She breathed a sigh of relief. At least she wouldn’t have to deal with being exposed to the local humans on top of this inconvenient confrontation.

"You?" the Alpha mocked. "A girl...what about that male of yours?" He gestured toward Gabriel.

"I may look young, but I wouldn't underestimate me if I were you."

"You're a child," he said, growling at her a bit as he said it.

"For an immortal being you seem to be unaware of how immortality works." Jules heard two of the pack member's chuckle. The Alpha's face grew redder.

So, lightening the mood to defuse the situation would not work. Jules changed her approach. "My coven should never have engaged you. And for that, I offer my apologies." This approach, however, did have the desired effect.

"Your apologies mean nothing to me," the Alpha spat. But his expression had turned smug, rather than murderous.

"I am sure this can be solved diplomatically," Jules said. "If my apologies are not sufficient, what do you suggest, Alpha?"

The Alpha seemed to be considering this question. After a few moments, he said, "this town is under my jurisdiction. You and your coven are no longer welcome here. You will leave tonight."

Jules sighed. This is not what she had intended. "We have coexisted peacefully in this town for years. Surely we can come to some other arrangement," she said as politely as she could manage.

"You will leave tonight," he repeated forcefully.

“You see, I know that we can live in peace. I’ve been alive much longer than this feud has had fire to fuel it. Some of the greatest Alphas of your species advocated for peace. Like Stephen Cain. Surely, you want to follow his example.”

This seemed to only anger the Alpha. “How dare you mention his name. You have no right.”

“I have every right. He was one of my dearest friends.”

“You’re probably one of the demons who assassinated him,” the man growled.

“It wasn’t me,” she said easily, making sure any sadness was concealed well. She watched as the large man, who towered over her, shook with anger. Diplomacy was failing. Jules knew this could go only one of two ways now. *The Alpha will attack and die, or he will back down.* He stepped closer to her, rage in his eyes.

“Be my guest...” she said evenly, “expose yourself right here. Right now. Wolf or man, this is not a fight you will win.” Jules prepared to strike if need be.

He growled audibly.

“Carson, back off!” someone called.

Momentarily taken aback, Jules looked over the big man’s shoulder. The voice had come from the werewolf she’d been captivated by earlier. She looked the wolf all the way up and down, from his floppy hair to his Converse sneakers. *The resemblance.*

“Stay out of this, Luca,” the Alpha, Carson, snarled, turning to look in the direction of the one who’d spoken.

Jules waited, silent but very deadly.

"We've already been too exposed," Luca added, seemingly undaunted by the glares of his leader.

The Beta?

"Don't you see how old she is? Look at her eyes," another werewolf added.

The Alpha spun and took a closer look at Jules's eyes. Solid, pure, silver. With a vampire's age came increasing strength and skill. She knew he was starting to lose confidence in his ability to win against her one-on-one. "As I said, our species have coexisted in peace for years," Jules said when she saw the Alpha's resolve begin to weaken. Long moments stretched out between the immortal creatures.

"Fine demon," the Alpha said, "you may go about your business."

Jules kept silent. But nodded all the same.

"But this is not over," Carson said under his breath as he turned to walk back toward his pack.

"I didn't think it was," Jules said under her breath as she took a few steps backward, still unwilling to turn her back on the Alpha. After a few moments, as she was about to turn away, she caught the gaze of the Beta, Luca, one last time. He seemed to be peering into the deepest depths of time and age through the windows of her eyes. She nodded at him and he at her, neither looking away for a long moment. Then they did, going their separate ways.

Jules returned to Eileen and Gabriel, who had hovered nearby during the confrontation. "So, shall we enjoy this art show?" Jules asked, her easy countenance

reappearing. Gabriel looked at her in disbelief, while Eileen was staring at her in wide-eyed wonder.

“Oh, relax, both of you.”

LUCA

Luca Cain looked away from the strange and beautiful creature. He'd never seen a vampire before, heard of them yes, but had never come into contact with one personally. She wasn't at all like the rumors suggested. Jules, *was that her name?* Wasn't a walking corpse. She may be technically dead, but she was also full of strong and fiery life.

“Luca, let's go!” his best friend Kyle called.

Luca turned, it was then that he realized the pack had moved on toward the parking garage. He'd been staring through the glass doors of the art gallery, watching the red-haired vampire as she chatted with the other female.

“Luca!” Kyle called again.

“Coming,” Luca called back and made to follow the rest of the pack.

“So, she was hot, you know, for a dead person,” Kyle said when Luca joined him. Kyle was a thirty-seven-year-old werewolf who had stopped aging in his late twenties. He was tall and lean, like Luca, but his dark hair hung to his shoulders when it wasn't pulled back.

“Have you ever seen one before?” Luca asked him as they walked a few paces behind the rest. Luca was in his eighties, yet he looked to be a few years younger than Kyle.

"A couple of them," Kyle said, "but none as hot as that."

"You two need to cut that out before Carson hears you," Ben said, falling back to reprimand them. Ben was yet another member of Carson's inner circle. He looked to be in his early thirties, but Luca didn't know how old he really was. *Old, like really old.* "Vampires may look enticing boys, but remember they are soulless, immoral beings. Trust me, I've known the worst of them in my years."

Kyle shrugged, and Luca nodded. Ben had a lot more life experience than either of them. He probably knew what he was talking about. Ben patted Luca on the shoulder and then moved back toward the front of the group.

"Cover for me?" Kyle asked when they'd reached the side-by-side parking spots that contained Kyle's sleek motorcycle and Luca's soft-top Jeep.

"Don't I always?" Luca asked rhetorically.

"Yep. I don't know why you put up with me," Kyle commented playfully. Then hopped on his motorcycle, leaving to go see his biggest secret.

GABRIEL

Gabriel Prentiss was still trying to resist running after those beasts and tearing them to pieces. He couldn't comprehend why Jules was being so frustratingly calm after what had just transpired. He glanced over to where she stood, taking in one painting and then another. Not only had she existed before the feud began, but she had been in the midst of its inception. In England three

hundred years ago, she'd seen firsthand what the werewolf packs did to their kind. She'd been faced with their threats for centuries, and still, werewolves didn't seem to set her on edge in the slightest. He, on the other hand, could never forgive what they had done.

Gabriel took a calming breath. His body didn't need this to survive of course, but he always found that this repetitive motion helped clear his mind. Gabriel left the girls discussing some arbitrary contemporary painting and moseyed to the back of the gallery, toward some of the more forgotten pieces.

He found one that struck him tucked away in the back corner. Hands clasped behind his back, he studied it intently. The accuracy tugged on his senses. He heard the gunshot in his mind and rushed his hand up to where the bullet had penetrated his body over two hundred years before.

He should have died that day on March 3rd, 1779. Like so many other Patriots had. Why Colonel Smith had saved him, and only him, had confounded him all these years. Why did Corporal Gabriel Prentiss deserve to survive when so many other souls were dead or dying? Gabriel could remember clearly, lying there on the wet ground, crying out that he didn't want to die. He remembered Colonel Smith leaning over him.

"Just breathe. It will all be over soon," he had whispered in Gabriel's ear.

But it wasn't over, Gabriel remembered his neck being pierced and the piercing pain that had surged through him after he, himself, had drunk from the

British Colonel's wrist. What followed, he could not remember. When he awoke, he was in the woods alone. There was a note in his jacket pocket that read:

When you wake, you will be feared by all men. You can never return home. You have a new existence. Live on. - a Vampire, and now, your friend.

Gabriel remembered the words as if he'd read them that very morning. He'd read them a thousand times, trying to figure out what it all meant. Not long after his change, he had met Jules. He could never thank her enough for being his friend, teacher, and ally.

"Are you ready?" Eileen asked, coming up behind him and slipping one arm around his waist. She rested her chin on his shoulder and gazed at the painting he was standing stoically in front of. Eileen stood at about five-eight. She was stately and beautiful. It wasn't until Eileen had walked into his life that he'd found real, true love. "I'm getting really thirsty," she said quietly.

Gabriel turned at this and gripped her hand. Eileen was so young. She wasn't skilled at resisting the temptations that the human presence brought. It was his job to protect her from the heartlessness of the kill, and thus far, he'd done this well. Eileen had never tasted fresh, human blood and therefore didn't know what she was missing out on.

"If you're ready, I'm ready," he told her. "Is Jules coming with us?" he asked.

"Nope," Eileen replied. "She left already."

Gabriel sighed. Jules insisted on getting her own residence when they'd relocated to Aboit. He didn't like it. Covens should live under one roof, especially in a town infested with werewolves. "Let us go then."

Together, they left the quaint art gallery and walked down the sidewalk that ran along the sea. A young couple on a moonlight stroll passed close by them. *Too close.* Gabriel increased his pace when he felt Eileen stiffen. She clung tightly to his arm, fighting the instinct to attack.

"You're alright," he assured her as they neared their destination.

They made it to the parking garage without further incident, but they were followed into the elevator by a group of young humans. Gabriel wrapped an arm tightly around Eileen and placed himself between her and the innocent teenagers. Eileen held her breath, closed her eyes tightly, and let her head fall back against his chest.

"See you tomorrow Mr. Prentiss," one of his students from the local high school called as he and Eileen exited on the third floor.

LUCA

Luca loved the drive that took him straight through the town's center. The calm of the shopkeepers closing for the night. The young couples that moseyed the sidewalks, defying the night's end. The smell of the sea as his drive paralleled the coast. Luca loved this town. But, he was seeing none of that this time. Luca's mind was racing as he processed the events that had transpired. Or rather, as he thought about the fiery,

petite, stunning, dead, vampire coven leader. There was something about her. Something he'd felt. He wondered if she'd felt it too.

Once Luca got back to the place he tentatively called home, he pulled passed the cars that belonged to various Den members and parked his Jeep on the side of the house, under his bedroom window. The Den was a six-bedroom, three-bathroom, two-story crap pile on the far side of town. In which, Carson crammed the six members of his inner circle. Luca and Kyle included. Luca looked up at his closed, second-story window forlornly. Sometimes, he preferred to jump directly into his room, rather than deal with the chaos that was life at the Den. Luca sighed and walked through the yard to the front door. On his way, he passed one of the two shutters remaining on the front of the house and ran a finger along the chipped, white paint. As he entered, the front screen door banged shut behind him.

"Luca," Carson called as he walked quickly passed the family room.

Luca backed up a few steps without turning around.

"Where's Kyle?"

"He went for a run," Luca lied easily.

"Are you sure?" Carson asked, one eyebrow raised.

"Yes." Luca nodded and then moved down the hall before Carson could ask him any more questions.

CARSON

Carson growled and resumed his pacing. Having Luca as his Beta was truly a pain in the ass, but it was Luca's

birthright. Not only had he been in line to inherit his father's pack before they were massacred, but he was a descendant of Stephen Cain's family line. Those facts alone gave Carson no choice as to who his Beta had to be. The fact that he couldn't entirely trust Luca was an annoyance that had to be swallowed.

As Carson paced, his anger only grew. Of course, Carson knew that there were a few vampires in Aboit. But until now, they had seemed to understand that this was his town. They had certainly never challenged him before. Defiance could not be tolerated; humiliation even less. The little vampire bitch had damaged his reputation with his pack. How could the pack trust him if they saw weakness in him? Something needed to be done to repair the damage that tiny, dead girl had inflicted. The vampires need to be dealt with.

"I am not fond of vampires," Ben complained as he joined Carson in the common room.

Ben was one of the only pack members that didn't make it a point of avoiding him when he was angry. Carson saw value in that. "Yes Ben, something must be done," Carson said, with fury in his voice and conviction in his heart.

Chapter Two

DEAD GIRL IN A COFFEE SHOP

The roar of the wind was all around Kyle as he flew through town toward her home. He came to a speedy stop in front of the old apartment building, just in time to see the love of his life walk from her family's apartment. She was being followed closely by her older brother, Adam.

"Dad doesn't always know what's best Adam!" she shouted when he grabbed her arm, spinning her around.

"Neither do you!" he shouted back.

Kyle turned off the ignition and dismounted but kept his distance. He relaxed against the motorcycle, waiting for the fight to fizzle out.

"Why is he here?" Adam questioned, catching sight of Kyle.

"Kyle's a part of my life, Adam. Deal with it." Hayley pulled her arm free and turned away from her brother.

"You barely know him!" Adam shouted after her, shoving his hands into his pockets and storming back inside the apartment.

Hayley ignored him as she reached the motorcycle.

“Do you two ever get along?” Kyle asked, wrapping her in his arms and pulling her against him.

“We have our moments.” She smiled at Kyle in a way that suggested she was no longer thinking about the quarrel she and her brother were just having.

“Hello, wife.” He smiled down and ran one hand through her long, highlighted, hair.

“Hi, husband.”

He bent down and met her in a kiss. A few weeks back, Kyle had done something that, when discovered, would not be easily forgiven. Kyle had whisked Hayley Reynolds, now Hayley Reynolds-Cooper, off to Las Vegas and married her. The marriage was legal by the United States standards, of course. However, pack laws were quite different. When the Alpha of your pack had his eye on a mate, marrying her was severely looked down upon. A little over a month ago, Carson had demanded that Hayley’s father grant him his daughter’s hand in marriage. Mr. Reynolds had not immediately complied, but Kyle would not take the risk that he would relent; damn the consequences.

“Get a room,” another one of Hayley’s brothers, younger and still attending Aboit High, commented as he walked passed them.

“Good to see you too Landon!” Kyle called after him.

He waved once but didn’t turn around.

“Let’s go somewhere we can be alone,” Hayley whispered.

“I had an idea about that,” he whispered back, rubbing his nose softly against hers.

JULIANA

On a long, quiet street directly across from the sea, sat Jules's little green house. She walked passed the car she'd neglected to drive to the art gallery and through the freshly painted front door. It was peaceful and charming and full of character, but mainly, it was all hers. Jules was four hundred years old. Her first hundred years as a vampire had been a life of extravagance and indulgence. She'd lived on an English estate, in a grand manor, which housed one of the oldest covens in existence. After her time there had come to an abrupt end, she'd spent many years drowning in loneliness. Until Gabriel. With him, and then Eileen, came an existence of family and hope. Even so, the last few years had caused her to thoroughly enjoy the solitude of living alone.

Jules walked through the darkened house, stripped off her sweatshirt and jeans, pushed back her covers, and dropped gracefully onto her mattress. She still had a few hours before she had to resume her current life as a modern-day American. She pulled her soft, feather blanket up around her shoulders and instantly drifted to sleep.

Jules tossed. She hadn't been prepared for her past to haunt her dreams this night and yet...

There she was, standing at the entrance to an opulent ballroom. She walked inside, her long dress swaying with her stride. Music set the mood as couples moved across the dance floor. She could see her friends happily

waltzing in wide circles. Gwendolyn, a primordial vampire, one of the first of their kind, and Stephen, her werewolf husband.

Jules could smell the blood that was served in large goblets. She could almost taste it. Jules licked her lips in her sleep.

“Dance with me Juliana,” a familiar voice said. The atmosphere changed, darkened, as he slipped an arm over her stomach possessively.

Jules thrashed in her sleep.

She turned and stared into the face that she dreaded most. An accustomed, cold smile shown on his primordial lips. *Hector*. “You’re mine, Julie.”

The dream shifted as she cowered under Hector’s glare, his hand connected with her face yet again. Another image, the bloodied and lifeless body of her friend laying on the riverbank. “Juliana, help me,” called the distorted and rotting corpse of Stephen Cain.

Startled awake, Jules sat up in bed. She pushed her matted hair from her face and took a few deep breaths. It was a human reaction to steady the nerves, but still relatively effective. Jules swallowed, her throat was dry. She was parched.

Jules pushed back the covers and walked to her sparsely stocked kitchen. Her cupboards had some plates and things for if she had company, but in this area of the home, her own need was extremely specific. She reached up and pulled one of her glasses from the cupboard. She squinted as she opened the refrigerator to retrieve a bag of blood with the hospital’s tag still on it. She had several

stored up from her last raid on the local blood bank. She ripped the bag open with her teeth and poured its contents into the glass. Throwing the empty bag in the sink, she walked to her tiny living room and flipped on the television. Some news program played as she sipped from her glass.

For a moment, Jules thought of nothing but the liquid seeping into her tissues as she drank. Everything inside her was consumed by the quenching of her thirst. She drained the rest of the blood in the glass. The ecstasy and rejuvenation that blood brought to her erased the pain of her nightmare. Her, now crimson-colored, eyes blinked as she regained her composure. Jules then set the empty, blood-stained glass down on her wooden coffee table and sunk back into her plush, velvet couch.

Her thoughts drifted to her life before the English coven had taken her in. It was a time when humans greatly feared but believed in such superstitions as vampires. They were considered demons on earth and she had just become one of them.

Once the physical pain of her death had receded, her heart stopped beating and the change was complete. She was strong but disoriented. Her senses were amplified. She could hear and see things from great distances.

She'd run faster than she'd ever thought possible to her fiancé, Laurence; ever her rock and protection. After being invited into his home, she'd told him what had happened. She had hoped he would try to see passed her demon face and into her heart. He did not. All he could

see was evil standing in the place of the one he was to marry.

She'd run from Laurence's cottage straight into the arms of Hector. He had taken her to his home, to his coven at Pelmoore Manor. There Jules met his sister, Gwendolyn, who was as sweet as she was mad. They had become instant friends.

Jules had watched as Gwendolyn fell in love with a young werewolf from the village. Stephen was strong and gentle. After they were married, life at the Manor couldn't have been more peaceful and jovial. Over time, the packs elected Stephen Alpha over much of England. Together, Gwen and Stephen ruled both species as one; equally.

However, when Stephen had stepped in to help Gwendolyn rule, their combined influence usurped Hector's authority. His early attempts to reconstitute his power over the vampires were futile. In hopes of disintegrating the alliance between werewolves and vampires, Hector had told Gwendolyn and Stephen that their people were beginning to fight amongst themselves. This was true, but only because of Hector's coaxing lies. The couple had decided to remain steadfast. They believed that the hate would pass in time. But they were wrong; it did not pass. And Hector's greed grew. Hector was a vampire of nightmares, even Juliana's.

Jules could feel the bitterness overtaking her. That night still haunted her, the one down by the river. The night of Stephen's death. *If only he hadn't been walking alone.* Hector had ended Stephen's life that night, but he

hadn't stopped there. He tore him apart bit by bit and sent the pieces to the neighboring werewolf packs. Instead of disheartening the werewolves as Hector had intended, this whipped the packs into a frenzy. They retaliated. Both sides lost many lives. Hector wanted war, and he got one.

Vampires began disappearing in droves. Jules found out later that the packs were burying their enemies in coffins, far underground. How humans had gotten and twisted that information, Jules didn't know. The races fought until the casualties were too great for both werewolves and vampires. Jules didn't know what had caused the cease-fire because, by then, she was far from England. After Stephen was killed, Gwendolyn's heart had grown cold and she had banished Jules.

Jules was pulled from the memory when she felt a single, thick blood-tear escape her right eye and slide down her cheek. She shook herself free of her thoughts yet again. When she wiped under her eye, the back of her hand came away smeared with blood.

The Manor and all those within were no longer a part of her existence. They hadn't been for centuries. Jules tried to focus on what the late-night newscaster was ranting about; some murder somewhere not far from Aboit.

LUCA

Luca woke abruptly as a door slammed and someone yelled, "get the hell out of this house!" It was Carson roaring in anger about something or another. Being a

normal occurrence, Luca rolled over and closed his eyes again.

“She was never yours, you bigoted brute,” Kyle shouted back, apparently finding a shred of defiance deep inside himself and acting on it.

There was a sound that meant one of them had gotten punched. Luca assumed that the soon to be bruised one was Kyle.

Luca sat up in bed, trying to shake himself awake. He wobbled a little as he stood and untangled himself from his sheets. He moved to the door, pulled it open, and walked down the hall toward Kyle’s bedroom. They met on the stairs. Kyle’s lip was bleeding.

“Did you know about this?” Carson shouted, upon seeing Luca at the top of the stairs.

“Nope,” Luca lied and followed Kyle to his room.

Kyle started haphazardly shoving his belongings in one of three large duffle bags he pulled from his closet. Luca stopped at the door and watched.

“Hayley’s brother told him,” Kyle explained, without turning around.

“Which one?” Luca asked referencing Hayley’s many brothers.

“How should I know?” Kyle snapped as he continued.

“Probably Adam,” Luca said.

“Probably.”

“Where will you go?” Luca asked, leaning against the doorframe.

"I've got a place," Kyle said, then smiled mischievously. "You didn't think I was gonna stay in this frat house forever, did you? I'm a married man."

Luca shrugged. He'd moved into the Den around ten years ago, Kyle had been here before that. Kyle leaving after he and Hayley had tied the knot hadn't really occurred to Luca.

"Come by the apartment later," Kyle said, picking up bag after bag and slinging each one over his shoulders. He looked like an overstuffed pack-mule as he walked toward Luca. "It's on the floor above Hayley's parents."

"I bet they'll love that," Luca joked.

"We're married now," Kyle said. "They'll get over it."

"You're sure?" Luca asked, rubbing his eyes, still feeling a bit groggy.

"Ehhh," Kyle waved his hand in a swiveling motion to indicate that the real answer was maybe. "Can I borrow the Jeep?" Kyle asked, looking down at his belongings.

Luca imagined Kyle trying to get himself and three large bags balanced on a motorcycle and chuckled.

Kyle shifted until he could dig the keys to his motorcycle out of his pocket.

"I'll bring it by Hayley's later," Luca said, catching the keys when they came flying toward him.

"It's my place too," Kyle chided.

Luca made a face.

"You're right, it's Hayley's." Kyle conceded. Despite being thrown out of the house he'd lived in for over a

decade, Kyle was in good spirits. Of course, he was generally in good spirits. It was just in his nature. “Throw down the Jeep keys,” Kyle said as he thudded down the stairs.

Luca walked back to his room. His bedroom was the largest room in the house, the master suite. Kyle said it was a fair bribe for someone with Luca’s lineage to become Carson’s Beta, instead of putting forth the challenge for Alpha. At first, Luca had laughed it off, but now he was thankful for the space to escape.

Luca shut his door behind him again and searched through old clothes and clutter until he found where he had dropped his car keys the night before. Housekeeping wasn’t Luca’s strong suit. Luca walked to the window, opened it, and tossed the keys into Kyle’s outstretched hand.

“Be careful with my Jeep.”

“Don’t crash my baby,” Kyle called back, looking forlornly toward the driveway and his motorcycle.

Luca laughed and pulled his window back down, turning to prepare for the day.

JULIANA

Unable to resume sleeping after the night’s dreams, Jules had dressed for work early and decided to take a stroll down her street. She’d chosen this street for its ambiance. The small cottages that lined the rocky coast were full of charm, and she could see the waves crashing

on the rocks from her back porch. Jules had rarely felt more at peace.

She loved to watch the morning routine of her quiet neighborhood. The woman next door rushing off to work and the family three houses down, herding their young children into a car, headed for school. It all reminded Jules why she had chosen to cherish human life.

As the time for her to leave for work approached, Jules walked back to her own house and started her car. It was still dark out, so she drove the few minutes to the coffee shop she frequented. Not because she drank coffee. She was dead, what good would caffeine do her? But because her best, human friend worked the early shift most days.

Per-usual, the coffee house was relatively empty inside while the drive-through was a mass of honking cars and impatient drivers. Jules saw Monica handing the same old man his coffee order. "Is there anything else I can get you, Mr. Boyer?"

"What do you think?" he snapped grumpily.

Monica smiled regardless and wished him a good day. Jules approached the counter as Mr. Boyer made his way back to his usual little table.

"Does he ever go home?" Jules whispered to Monica once she was close enough to keep from being overheard.

"Yes, between ten and noon," Monica said and they both giggled.

Monica was several inches taller than Jules, with caramel skin and brown hair that she wore soft and wild past her shoulders. Monica had graduated last year and

was in the middle of a gap year, which she'd promised her parents she was using to think about her future. Jules suspected it had more to do with the fact that her boyfriend, Seth, was a year younger and still trapped at Aboit High. Jules knew that Monica planned on going to college but wanted to wait for Seth, so they could take on that adventure together. Monica had her whole life planned out, down to the year and moment she wanted Seth to propose. Jules knew that life rarely worked out how one planned, but she hoped in Monica's case it would.

Monica picked up the water bottle she always carried and walked out from behind the counter. "I'm taking ten," she called to her co-worker, who was in the back.

"Okay!" they shouted in return.

"Are you still coming over tonight?" Monica asked.

Jules nodded as they sat down at their usual table.

"Good. How was your night? Mine was fine. Seth and I just hung out with my family. I got into a fight with Ethan because he didn't knock first, and Seth and I were making out. Thank God that's all he saw. So, what about you? Anything eventful happen last night?"

Jules smiled. The number of words Monica could get out in one breath was almost inhuman. "Actually, yes." Jules lowered her voice. "Gabriel, Eileen, and I had a run-in with a pack of wolves."

"Did anything dramatic happen? I mean, to be honest, we both knew that was going to happen eventually. But what do you mean 'a run in'? How many were there?" Monica said.

Jules just smiled and waited for Monica to take a breath. Monica had a familiar comfort about her. They possessed the ease of interaction that naturally developed out of a deep friendship. Jules had had a few human friends over the years, but Monica Martin was different. She knew what Jules and her coven were. To Jules's surprise, she'd guessed about a year after they'd become friends. Jules couldn't understand Monica's acceptance of vampirism and everything that came with it. She was relieved that she showed no signs of wanting to be turned into one. Monica's life plan required that she keep her heart beating.

"How'd Mr. Prentiss take it?"

Jules simply made a face at her.

"That bad, huh?" Monica asked. Gabriel had been Monica's English teacher sophomore year. She knew him personally now, through Jules, but couldn't seem to stop calling him 'Mr. Prentiss'. Even after she'd graduated high school.

"He, umm, got into a fistfight with the Alpha," Jules said.

Monica looked at Jules, shock on her face.

Before Monica could ask, Jules said, "don't worry. I took care of it."

"Wow. I mean, I'm glad it wasn't worse, I guess," Monica replied. "With what happened to Eileen, I'd have guessed he would've bitten one of them, then and there."

Just then, Monica's phone beeped and she pulled it from her pocket to check the text. She smiled as she returned it. Jules thought it was likely from Seth, due to

Monica's facial expression. "Oh, I have to get back," Monica said standing.

"See you after work," Jules said, standing too.

"Jules, I almost forgot," Monica stopped and spun toward Jules again. "You know how Saturday is Seth and my two-year anniversary, right?"

Monica had mentioned it on more than a few occasions, so yes, Jules knew. She nodded.

"Well, Seth kind of forgot. He made plans with a friend."

"Anyone I know?" Jules asked.

"Probably not. Anyway, Seth was wondering what you were doing on Saturday night."

"Monica. No," Jules said, taken aback. She knew what Monica was asking. She also knew that it was a very bad idea. "Can't Seth just change his plans to another night?" Jules didn't like the idea of any form of romantic connection with a human. Not even a blind date. Not even once.

"I asked that, and he suggested that you should come with us instead. I guess his friend is like twenty-three or something.

"Monica, you know I don't get involved with humans." Jules looked at her friend seriously.

"Of course I do, but Seth doesn't. I couldn't exactly say, 'yeah, she can't. She might eat him' could I?"

Jules chose not to respond to that one.

"Come on, Jules. You're my best friend. Please don't make me lie to Seth any more than I already am," Monica begged, sticking out her lower lip.

Jules contemplated this. She would only have Monica for as long as one lifetime allowed. So, she offered up a long, aggravated sigh and relented. She could handle one night of small talk with a human boy.

"Thanks. You're the best!" Monica grinned widely. "It'll be fun."

"It had better not be," Jules retorted as she left the small coffee shop.

KYLE

Kyle parked the Jeep in front of the two-story apartment building, grabbed two of his three bags, and headed toward the shabby structure. Some of Hayley's younger siblings were out front. They were all piling into the family vehicle, heading across town for school.

"Hayley inside?" he asked Landon, who was climbing into the driver's seat.

"Not that I know of," he replied, without making eye contact with Kyle.

Kyle shrugged and hauled both his bags inside the building.

"Seriously dude." Adam stopped Kyle just outside his parents' doorway.

Kyle couldn't resist. He dropped both bags with a loud thud and punched Adam square on the jaw.

"What the hell was that for!" Adam shouted.

Kyle ignored him, picked up his bags again, and walked up the stairs toward his new home. The apartment's door was standing open.

“Honey, I’m home,” Kyle called as he walked into the new living room. It was furnished with hand-me-downs and thrift shop finds. He’d spent the last week acquiring the furnishings, as a surprise for Hayley. It was already feeling more like home than the Den ever had.

“Yes, you are,” Hayley said, walking from the bedroom. Kyle dropped both bags on the floor and opened his arms for her. She ran at him. He lifted her off her feet, kissing her. She was average height, shapely, strong, opinionated, and adventurous. Everything he’d ever wanted in a spouse. Yes, she was young, but being raised with so many siblings had caused her to mature quickly.

“Just adorable.”

Still holding Hayley off the ground, Kyle turned toward the person who’d commented on their couple-cuteness.

Hayley’s little sister, Amy, continued, “I’m done organizing the bathroom.”

A horn honked outside.

“I think your ride is leaving,” Kyle told her.

Amy swore and ran out the door and down the stairs.

“Alone at last,” Kyle commented, looking down at Hayley and kissing her lips. “Are you ready to start our life Mrs. Reynolds-Cooper?”

“Yes,” she said as he put her back on her feet. “As soon as you put all that crap where it belongs. As in, not on the living room floor.” She pointed at the bags he’d dropped.

Kyle rolled his eyes.

“Is there more?” she asked, tapping him on the chest.

“Yeah, downstairs in Luca’s Jeep.”

“I’ll get it. You unpack.” Smiling, Hayley pulled the keys from his back pocket, smacked his backside, and walked from the room to bring up his last bag. Kyle watched her go. He was finally home.

JULIANA

Jules then got back in her car and drove in the direction of her job. She remembered meeting Monica like it was yesterday. Four years ago, the pair had stumbled across one another at the overstocked, resale bookstore in town. She’d reached for a book on the shelf, at the same moment that a young girl in braces and cornrows had snagged it from under her nose.

At that time, Jules was new to Aboit. She’d told Monica she was eighteen, no longer in school, and wasn’t looking for any new friends. Monica, however, wouldn’t take Jules’s ‘why don’t you go make friend’s your own age’ seriously and kept bugging her until she’d agreed to hang out. They’d hit it off pretty much instantly.

Jules reached Aboit High and pulled in to a parking spot marked for staff. The sun had risen fully during the short drive. Jules knew Gabriel would have played it safe with the sunny forecast. Thus, he would already be inside his classroom with the blinds drawn. Jules put on her dark sunglasses and grabbed her large black umbrella from under the passenger seat of her car. She cracked her door open and stuck it out of the top, like someone

desperately trying not to get rained on. Quickly, she jogged toward the building, trying to slip inside without being spotted. Once through the glass double doors, she stowed both in her handbag. The guards against the sun did their job well. Between the umbrella, sunglasses, long jacket, and tall boots, she had barely begun to sizzle. Her knees were a little worse for wear, but her quick healing had her back in perfect shape in just a few seconds.

Jules walked down the darkened hall, greeting her co-workers as she went. When she reached Gabriel's classroom, she pushed the door open without knocking.

He looked up from where he sat hunched over his desk, at the far side of the room.

"Lunch today, my office?" she asked.

"If I get these papers graded, sure," he replied, sifting through the tall stack in front of him.

"Do you want me to grade some for you?"

"No!"

"Just thought I'd check," she teased, letting the door close behind her and heading to her own work area.

She reached the far side of the quiet building and walked through the darkened library to her small office in the back corner. She pulled her hair back in a tight bun, placed the pins carefully, and reached into her bag for her prescription-less glasses. This, along with a cardigan, pleated skirt, and a change into kitten heels, was all part of the act. Like Clark Kent, she was a master at hiding what she truly was. Although, instead of concealing superpowers from another planet, she was

pretending that she hadn't died at seventeen, and didn't have the natural desire to drink the student's blood.

Chapter Three

THE LIBRARIAN DRINKS BLOOD

Transformation complete, she moved back into the library itself and flipped on the light. Slowly, she walked through the stacks of books, straightening as she went. At the far end was the computer area. One by one she pushed the power button on the machines, each one humming to life as she did so.

As the students began arriving for the day, lockers started to slam out in the hall. She glanced at the clock on the wall. She knew her Monday morning, student-aid would be arriving any moment. Just as she moved behind her rounded desk in the middle of the small library, he did so.

“Good morning Ethan,” she greeted as Monica’s fourteen-year-old brother walked through the door. He was one of the shorter boys in the freshman class, but Jules figured he’d be tall someday soon. His whole family was. His features were nearly identical to that of his sister, save for the light blue eyes he’d gotten from his father.

"You're dressed like my mother," he said in response and tossed his backpack onto her desk. Then he plopped into one of the nearby study chairs, his head dropping onto the round table in front of him. "I got to level twenty-six last night," he said, yawning.

"Without me? How did you survive?" she asked, putting his backpack on the floor beside her, sitting in her own desk chair, and rolling herself into place.

"Your sad gaming skills weren't bringing me down," he replied, looking up from his slumped position.

"I am aware that I keep dying, thank you," she flicked on her computer screen and started browsing her work emails.

"You mean you keep getting me killed."

She smiled over at the boy who had become like a brother to her in recent years. Jules had spent many a sleepover at the Martins' with Monica zonked out in her room, while she and Ethan played video games late into the night.

Ethan yawned again, his blue eyes droopy from lack of sleep.

"You shouldn't stay up so late," she said.

"Thanks, mom."

She chuckled.

"Miss Bristow."

Jules looked up from her computer to see a young girl standing in front of her.

"Can you help me find..." she looked down at a list in her hand. "Something on the suffragette movement?"

Jules chuckled at the inaccuracy and said, “let me look.” She typed in variations on the desired subject matter to find what books they currently had available. Satisfied with what she found, she pulled a piece of scrap paper from the pile and jotted down some numbers and titles. She stared down at the paper, knowing the section she needed. *Of course*. It was on the one shelf that Jules couldn’t get to during a sunny day. She didn’t even like to look at it. The sunshine stung her eyes. If she looked at the rays on the carpet long enough it would blind her.

Jules handed the scrap paper to the student. “Ethan can walk you over.”

“Oh, come on!” Ethan exclaimed.

“You volunteered to work here, didn’t you?” she asked as he reluctantly stood up.

“Yeah, because I thought I wouldn’t have to do anything for the first hour of school.” He took the paper from his classmate and studied the numbers on it.

“You’re not that special.” Jules winked at him and he scowled.

“You sure you don’t want to just look this up online?” he asked the girl standing in front of him.

“One paper source.” Her tone was as whiny as his had been moments ago.

“You have Mr. Prentiss too, don’t you?”

“Yup.”

LUCA

Luca had just gotten out of the shower when the banging on his door began. "Carson wants everyone downstairs."

Luca didn't respond to the demand. He could guess what this was going to be about.

"There's coffee in it for you!" yelled Ben.

"Okay!" Luca shouted back through the closed door.

Luca grabbed some clothes off his closet floor and pulled them over his dripping body. He walked down the stairs and was immediately cornered by Carson. "You knew about Kyle's betrayal, didn't you?" Carson accused.

"No," Luca said flatly and walked passed him into the Den's musty family room. He plopped onto the couch beside Ben, who handed him a cup of coffee.

"Thanks," he said, taking a long drink of the hot liquid.

"Caffeine makes the world go 'round," Ben commented, drinking from his own mug.

"Anyone seen Kip this morning?" Carson growled angrily. Kip was the tallest, brawniest wolf that Luca had ever met. He was also notorious for charming women; werewolves and humans alike.

"Kip's not here," Max told him as he entered the room. Max was a Den member that looked to be just out of high school but was actually close to forty. "He had a date last night."

"Typical," Carson snapped and turned to address the Den members who were present and accounted for.

The time when most students would be at lunch was the time of day that Jules retreated to her office. She shut the door and pulled the blind down over the glass window that looked out into the library, to ensure her privacy. She took the key off the chain around her neck and stuck it into the lock she'd fastened over her minifridge door. Having a lock on her fridge wasn't the most inconspicuous thing to do, so she had informed the principle that she was strangely paranoid about the things she ate. This was just another lie which was necessary to conceal what she really was.

Checking over her shoulder to be sure she'd locked her door, she pulled out one of the blood bags. She grabbed an opaque tumbler off her desk and filled it with the red liquid. She jumped at a knock on her door.

"It's me," Gabriel called from the other side.

Jules grabbed a second blood bag, swung the refrigerator door shut, screwed on the lid of her tumbler, and walked over the let Gabriel in. Behind him, she spied several sniggering girls, huddled close to her current student-aid.

"I swear they think we're having an affair," Gabriel said, chuckling as he shut the door behind him. He pulled out his own travel mug and filled it with the contents of the bag Jules had retrieved for him.

"Many teenagers have wild imaginations," Jules said as she slid back into her desk chair. Gabriel gracefully sat in the chair opposite her.

"And we are lucky they do. Those imaginations tend to create much more interesting explanations for our

abnormalities than we could ever concoct ourselves," he said.

"Yes, like me... in a relationship," Jules said with a snicker. After her last disaster of a relationship, she'd never opened herself up to another. Three hundred years of romantic avoidance and going strong.

Finally, Jules placed the mug against her lips and drank, sipping it at first and then taking several long gulps. Her eyes closed as blood flowed into her very being, awakening her; giving her unnatural strength and unending life. The blood coursed through her like a drug, she craved it. Needed it. She slurped a little and it was gone.

She opened her eyes and looked over at Gabriel, who had continued to sip from his mug slowly, little by little. His eyes, as red as hers, were still calm and steady. He tapped his finger to his mouth, indicating that she had a little something left on her lips.

"Thanks," Jules said, licking her plump bottom lip. Jules watched him with envy as he took another small sip. She was never able to master that level of control over her baser need for human blood. She supposed a hundred years of killing to get what she needed had negatively impacted her ability to drink with an air of decorum, but it could have been more than that.

Gabriel had told her once that by denying himself the experience of the kill from the beginning of his vampire life, he was able to maintain complete control. Jules thought it was simply because Gabriel was Gabriel and the thought of ending a human life was abhorrent to him.

Over the years, some things did become clearer. It was a simple fact that some vampires naturally possessed more control than others. To Jules's unending frustration, she was not one of them.

"By the way," Jules began when she could think of something other than the blood again, "I can't come with you Saturday night. I told Monica I'd go on a double date. Her and Seth and a friend of his..."

"A human friend? Really Jules?"

"It's for Monica," Jules explained.

"But you just said yourself that you don't do romantic relationships," Gabriel said, looking astonished that she'd even consider such a thing.

"It's not my romantic relationship I'm celebrating, it's Monica's. Besides, it's just one blind date."

"I don't know Jules," Gabriel said.

"I am aware that it's not the best idea. But it's important to Monica, so I'm going."

"I don't think it's a good idea."

"Well, I don't think punching a werewolf Alpha is a good idea, but that didn't stop you," she retorted.

LUCA

When Luca arrived at Kyle's apartment the front door was open and there was shouting coming from inside. *They've been married, what, a week?* he thought himself. "Knock, knock," he said aloud.

"Luca. Come in," Hayley said, spinning toward the door. "Please tell him he's an idiot." She turned back to scowl at her new husband.

Luca complied. "You're an idiot."

"Ha ha ha," Kyle grumbled, but his mood seemed to be lightening already. He wasn't one to hold onto an argument. "Preserve tonight?" Kyle asked as Luca sat in an armchair while Hayley plopped onto the couch next to her husband. She took his hand, all remnants of the fight seemingly forgotten.

"I can't tonight," Luca said. "I'm working."

Kyle rolled his eyes dramatically.

"Are you at least gonna go running with me tonight?" Kyle asked Hayley, while he played with a strand of her hair.

"Nope." Hayley made a face. "I promised my parents I'd babysit."

"Come on people," Kyle began, "first I get thrown out of the Den and now you two are abandoning me?" Kyle scowled.

Luca shrugged and took to looking around the small living room while the two of them conversed. It was charming, in a somewhat shabby way that worked for the couple well. Luca even recognized his old desk chair in the corner, the one he'd replaced because it wobbled whenever he sat.

"You could help me with my siblings," Hayley suggested.

"Your Dad won't throw me out?"

"Eh. If he doesn't, Adam and Landon probably will," Hayley said, smiling playfully. "Nice going punching Adam when Landon's the one who reported us. Now they're both mad at you."

Kyle shrugged. “What can I say? I don’t burn bridges babe.” Kyle smiled back. “I load them with dynamite and get the hell out of there.”

“Yes, you do,” Hayley said, leaning toward him like she was going to kiss him and then backed up quickly.

“Hey!” Kyle complained.

“What? I’m late getting downstairs already,” she teased. She then jumped off the couch and headed for the door. “Great to see you, Luca. You’re welcome anytime,” she said before disappearing through it.

“Almost anytime,” Kyle said, matter-of-factly.

JULIANA

When the school day ended, Jules had gone home to her darkened house, to wait out the rest of the daylight. Heavy drapes covered all outside access points. Being out in the daytime was not ideal, direct sunlight did kill vampires, though it was not instantaneous as some stories suggested. Non-direct sunlight just drained her energy, weakening her and giving her a pretty much continuous headache.

Once the sun had set and it was safer for her to enter the outside world again, she went to pick Monica up from her home. Once she arrived, Monica came bounding out of the house and settled into Jules’s passenger seat, chatting in that happy Monica way. Multitasking, she also changed the music to something on her phone and cranked it way up. Jules rolled her eyes at Monica’s choice of music. Monica rolled down the windows, letting

in the chilly night air. They both began to sing loudly while Monica bounced in her seat.

At the first red light, Jules stopped singing and glanced over toward the car on their left. Jules's hands tightened around the steering wheel. She moved her eyes to stare pointedly out the windshield but stayed attuned to the occupants of the car beside them.

"Jules? What is it?" Monica said. Her tone suggested that she had sensed Jules's tension level elevate. When Jules didn't respond, she repeated the question and turned down the music.

"Werewolves," Jules said, remaining calm but on guard. Normally, Jules wouldn't give this coincidence another thought, but she wasn't sure what the repercussions of last night's interaction might be. Also, having Monica with her if something was going to happen wasn't a factor Jules was overly fond of.

Monica followed her next glance at the three men, who were illuminated by the streetlights. They were all intently watching her.

"Yikes," Monica said. "They look... mean."

"Those wolves were with the Alpha Gabriel had his unfortunate confrontation with last night," Jules told her. "Since their Alpha is not with them, they may not follow," she calculated out loud.

Monica stayed silent but began to roll the heavily-tinted windows up. Blocking them from the werewolf's direct view. As the stoplight turned green, Jules sped forward.

“Are they following us?” Jules asked, focused on weaving through traffic carefully.

“Yes,” Monica said, sounding a little shaken now.

Jules glanced in the rearview mirror as the driver of the other car cut across traffic and almost hit an oncoming vehicle. Monica sucked in a breath, and Jules heard her heart begin to race.

“It’s going to be okay, Monica,” Jules said softly. Jules made another daring driving maneuver and hissed a curse when they matched her move. “We’re taking a detour,” Jules said. They turned and again were followed. “If I tell you to do something, don’t hesitate,” she instructed.

“You make that sound so easy,” Monica said with a strained smile. The rate of her heartbeat was tempting Jules, begging her to relish in the adrenaline flowing from the human beside her.

Jules shook herself, slamming the door shut on her temptations. *This is Monica*. Two more turns were made and duplicated. Jules slammed on the breaks. They were nearing downtown. *This can’t go on any longer*.

Monica let out a scream as Jules abruptly parallel parked. In one swift movement, she was in the space and the engine was off.

“Get out and head into the tea shop,” Jules instructed.

Monica did as she was told without comment. Jules entered the shop close behind her. The Alice in Wonderland themed shop was jam-packed with patrons, just as Jules had hoped.

“They won’t do anything here, it’s too busy. But if they follow us in, I need you to take my car and go.” Jules placed her car keys in Monica’s palm, wrapping her fingers around them. “Home, to the mall, I don’t care. Just go.”

“I can’t leave without you?” Monica protested. Her heart was still racing, and her breath was coming in quick spurts.

“Monica, I need you out of this equation. Don’t worry about me. I can run faster than they can.” Jules gave her a reassuring smile. “I’ll be fine.” Jules’s attention shifted when the door opened again. All three men stormed in but hesitated. Their presence felt contradictory to the frilly surroundings. “They will follow me. Take the car,” Jules instructed.

“Jules, I don’t like this...” Monica shook her head in protest.

“Here.” She shoved her phone into Monica’s hand. “Switch me phones. Call Gabriel. And get out of here.” Jules squeezed Monica’s shoulder.

Without looking back, Jules rushed through the shop and out the back door. She was right. All three men came rushing after her.

Chapter Four

THE BETA'S PREROGATIVE

Just in time to clock in, Luca entered his current place of employment. Panda Plate, the Chinese restaurant, was a small, family-owned, buffet, with a dining room that sat less than fifty customers. The back door automatically swung shut behind him as he entered.

“On time today then,” Mr. Yang said as Luca joined him in the kitchen.

“It appears so,” Luca joked as he pulled on an apron and took over what Mr. Yang was preparing.

“Hey,” Seth Yang greeted as he entered the kitchen from the front of the restaurant.

Luca nodded at him and continued to stir the contents of his pot.

Seth turned to his father and said something in Mandarin Luca couldn't comprehend, and then returned his attention to his friend.

“Thanks for agreeing to do that double date thing,” Seth said as he lounged against one of the stainless-steel counters. “According to Monica, I really messed up,” Seth said with a cringe.

"No worries, I'm happy to help," Luca said as the contents of his pot came to a boil.

"Two years is a long time. It's important to celebrate such a day," Seth's dad added while dumping ingredients into yet another pan. "Monica's not the only one who thinks my son messed up."

"Yeah, yeah Dad," Seth mumbled. "You and Mom have both made yourselves clear on that one."

Luca smiled as he watched father and son.

"Sometimes I think they like Monica more than me."

"Sometimes we do," Mr. Yang commented, although his son was no longer speaking to him directly.

Luca remembered interacting with his father with the same level of familial banter and ease. It was part of why he liked working here, in this family atmosphere. It reminded him what a family really was and made him remember his own.

The phone began to ring. Luca finished dumping the chicken in another pan, set it on the warmer, and walked over to answer the call. Scribbling down the order, he walked it back and stuck it to the metal bar over Mister Yang's head.

"Speaking of that favor," Luca said as he walked back to his own workstation. "Tell me, who is this girl I've agreed to go out with?"

"Well..." Seth joined him at the counter near the warmer. Luca began working on another entre as Seth spoke. "She's around your age. I think. It's kinda weird since she works at my school, but whatever. And don't

tell Monica that I said it but, she's super sexy but also, like, cute..." Seth paused, presumably thinking.

Luca laughed. "I meant her name."

"Oh," Seth looked a little embarrassed. "It's..."

"Boys," Mr. Yang called. "Work." He pointed to the warmer where the chicken was waiting to be taken out to the buffet.

"Okay, I'm going." Seth rolled his eyes, picked up the pan and walked into the dining room.

JULIANA

Jules turned the corner and headed away from the Promenade. The wolves were still on her tail. She could hear their labored breathing. *Come on! Give up!* She heard a howl from behind her. *If he turns now...* Her train of thought was interrupted by a hard smack on the back of her head. She spun, opened her mouth, and let out a threatening hiss.

The wolves stopped in their tracks. The one who had thrown the brick took one step back. They were in an abandoned alley now, she could attack. But instead, she turned and ran into a more open area, past a deserted bus stop then ducked into a highly populated restaurant. She hurried past the hostess toward the restroom in the back. The wolves entered just as Jules passed through the swinging door.

Once inside the restroom, she looked around. There were three stalls and a small window at the far end. She went for the window, jumping through it into the back alley. Then she turned and leaped onto the roof of the

neighboring shop to wait. Finally, she heard the sound of the restaurant door slam followed by angry voices. The wolves emerged one by one. *I may have lost them.* But she couldn't count on it. Just then, Monica's phone vibrated.

"Where are you, Jules?" Gabriel's voice was rushed, anxious.

"On top of the office building next to Seaside Soda Shop," she told him.

"I'm six blocks away. Head east," he instructed calculatingly.

The wolves had headed north-east so if she swayed just slightly to the south, she would probably avoid them. She walked to the far side of the building, away from the restaurant. She jumped off the roof, landed soundlessly on the pavement below, and bolted in Gabriel's direction.

Gabriel

Gabriel's car sped down the busy road. "Really Eileen," he said as she kicked him in the side of the head while climbing into the back seat, making the passenger seat available for Jules.

"You'll live," she said sarcastically. "It's Jules I'm worried about."

"She's going to be alright. I think she lost them." He controlled his tone, even though he was panicking internally.

Eileen let out a sigh of relief, obviously believing his deception.

"Keep a lookout, we should cross paths any second," he instructed. *Please be in on piece,* Gabriel thought.

“There!” Eileen shouted, reaching up past him to point out the windshield. Gabriel sighed audibly as he sped to a stop next to her.

Jules didn’t slow when she saw them. She was in the car in seconds.

“Hi there,” she said after she had slid onto the seat beside him. She wasn’t out of breath but leaned back in her seat anyway, looking worn.

“I can’t believe those animals actually chased you,” Gabriel spat.

Jules shrugged her shoulders as if to say, it’s no big deal. “Gabriel, I’m fine.” She lifted her head to smile at him reassuringly.

“No, you’re not. Your head is bleeding all over my seat. What happened?” Gabriel’s rage was getting the better of him. *They hurt Jules.*

Jules lifted her hand to the back of her head. “I’m fine. It’s already healed.”

“How are you fine?” he asked, glaring at her.

“There is a strong sense of relief that comes when one is no longer being chased,” Jules teased as she fiddled with her hair, presumably attempting to mask the blood in it.

“Jules, these beasts...” Gabriel began to agree.

“I’m sure were following orders,” Jules interrupted.

“So that makes it alright!”

“I didn’t say that, but...” Jules began.

Eileen cut her off, “Jules, Gabriel is right. We can’t just pretend we don’t have a problem.” Eileen leaned forward to be more of a part of the conversation.

"We don't know that we do," Jules said. "Obviously, they chased me and that's not promising..."

Gabriel started to say something, but Jules continued, cutting him off.

"It's not a great sign, but I won't do anything to escalate this. It might just fizzle out if we don't feed it and we are going to give it that chance," Jules said, looking back at Eileen and then at Gabriel to ensure compliance.

Gabriel nodded, but he was not happy with this course of action. However, she was his coven leader and he would respect her wishes. He just hoped that this decision didn't end up getting someone killed.

"Now take me home," Jules said, frowning slightly. "I should wash this blood out of my hair before I meet up with Monica."

Gabriel looked over at his friend. Jules was right. Even the brilliant red color of her hair couldn't camouflage the amount of blood that was in it.

JULIANA

In minutes, they were in front of Jules's little green house. Her car was parked to one side of the driveway.

"Monica must have come here," Jules commented.

Gabriel still looked uneasy, but she smiled at him brightly anyway. Monica often came to Jules's after a fight with her parents or Seth. It was one place Monica felt safe. *Ironically.*

"May I?" Jules asked Eileen, holding up a hat she'd found on the passenger seat floor.

“Of course,” Eileen replied.

“Thanks.” Jules pulled on the hat. She didn’t want to scare Monica unnecessarily. “See you later,” she said as she got out of the car and went to the front door of her house. She found it unlocked. She waved to Gabriel, suggesting that everything was fine, and entered the house.

“Monica?” Jules walked into her well-furnished living room and found Monica sitting on the couch, curled up, knees to her chest, wrapped in a blanket. She was staring silently at Jules’s cell phone.

“Monica,” Jules said again, getting the girl’s attention.

Monica looked up, shock and concern written on her face.

“Monica, it’s okay. I told you I’d be fine,” she comforted, sitting down beside her and wrapping her small arms around her friend.

Monica began to cry softly.

“You said you took care it. So why did they chase us?” Monica whimpered, but then sat up and tried to compose herself, wiping the tears out of her eyes.

“I may have humiliated their Alpha yesterday.” Jules smiled sheepishly.

“What does that mean?” Monica asked, her tone a mix of confusion, anxiety, and interest. But Jules could tell by listening to her heartbeat that she was starting to calm down.

"I didn't mean to, I just might have stepped on his pride a bit." Jules leaned into the couch and pulled her feet up, making herself more comfortable.

"If that's all, why'd they bother chasing us?" Monica asked, still slightly confused.

"I'm not sure. I know pride is a big deal to werewolves, especially Alphas. It could just be that. Or it could be because I brought up that there was peace before the war broke out. I suggested that we try to coexist peacefully like I did with my friends three hundred years ago."

"Sometimes when you talk, Jules, I remember you're a corpse," Monica teased, obviously feeling more at ease now.

"Thanks," Jules said sarcastically and both girls laughed.

Just then, Monica's stomach made a noise. Jules instantly felt guilty. Because she didn't eat human food, sometimes it was easy to forget that Monica did. She pulled Monica's cell phone out of her own pocket and passed through her contacts until she reached the number for Panda Plate.

"Thank you for calling Panda Plate, how can I help you?" asked the worker who had answered her call.

"Is Seth there?" Jules asked.

"One second," said the male voice. "Seth! Phone!" he shouted.

"Give it." Monica held out her hand for the phone.

Jules gave it to her.

“Seth? Hi.” Monica beamed with joy as her boyfriend picked up on the other end of the line. “Of course, my favorite. Yup, Jules’s house. Alright, see you soon,” she said, before hanging up the phone. “He’s off in half an hour.” She told Jules.

When Seth got there, he didn’t bother knocking. “Where’s my girl?” he called as Monica and Jules emerged from the living room. “There you are,” he said, wrapping his arms around Monica and kissing her.

Seth Yang was a slender, dark-haired, brown-eyed teen who was in the top one percent of his class and captain of the wrestling team.

“Can you stay?” Jules heard Monica ask as she walked into her bedroom to give them a moment of privacy.

“No, sorry,” he said, I promised my mom I’d help her with a project after work.

“I mean, helping your mother is a worthy excuse and all...” Monica began but she was cut off when Seth kissed her.

“I’ll call you later,” he said.

“I’ll hold you to that.”

“I know you will.” He squeezed her hand, kissed her on the cheek, and then left, closing the front door behind him.

The girls sat on the couch as Monica ate and Jules turned on a movie. They laughed at the crazy comedy. Comedy wasn’t Jules’s favorite genre, but she thought it would be better to keep the mood light that night, for

Monica's sake. She was right. The girls laughed so hard, Monica cried. It was nearly ten o'clock when Monica's phone rang.

"It's Mom," Monica said.

"Say hi for me," Jules said.

Jules could hear irritated chatter on the other end of the line. "Yes Mom, I'm headed home now."

Without a word, she picked up her keys and the girls headed for the door. Monica told her mom they were already in the car and on their way. Monica didn't live far, it took them only minutes to get there.

Before Monica exited the car, she said, "you're still coming on Saturday, right?"

Jules nodded. She couldn't say no now. Not after what she'd put her through today. Monica smiled at her one more time before slamming the door and running inside.

LUCA

Exhausted and smelling like spices and soy sauce, Luca parked under his bedroom window. *I really need to remember to leave my window open*, he thought. Begrudgingly, he walked around the house to go in the front.

"Luca!" Carson's voice called when he entered the house, screen door slamming shut behind him. Luca scowled and turned in the direction of the family room. When he entered, he realized he was joining the rest of the residents of the Den. Apparently, Carson had called some sort of emergency meeting. Kyle, of course, was no

longer among them. However, a sixth man, that Luca had seen before but never officially met, was leaning against a far window. He wore glasses, was lanky, and constantly seemed to fidget from one foot to the other and then back again.

“Luca,” Carson addressed him. Luca’s attention shifted to his Alpha, who was pacing menacingly in the center of the room. “I’ve asked Jed here,” he motioned toward the man Luca didn’t know, “to move into that vacant room.”

Vacant? Luca thought, *Kyle has only been gone for like twelve hours.*

All Luca wanted to do was go upstairs, shower, and fall into bed. But Max stood, leaving a space on the couch for their Beta. So, Luca moved to collapse beside Ben and waited for Carson’s rant to be over. He let his head flop against the back of the couch. *No telling how long this will take.*

“As I was saying, the vampire problem must be dealt with. Jed may be a bumbling fool but he’s the best tracker in this pack.”

Luca looked over at the poor man, who was being subjected to Carson’s insults. Jed’s cheeks turned crimson, but he remained silent.

“Why are we bothering with these vamps anyway?” Kip asked from where he sat on the floor by the wall, his legs stretched out in front of him. “It’s not like there have been killings every night or any night for that matter. Why bother?” The question granted him a glare

from Carson that was so powerful Kip seemed to shrink away from it.

"Why bother!" Carson repeated. "We bother because vampires don't deserve to walk this earth," Carson's voice raised, and he shook slightly.

Luca's fists clenched. He was in no mood for this kind of tirade. "It's a fair question," Luca said, standing. Only he had the power to oppose their Alpha. "Why start something with the vampires when we don't have too? They, at least their coven leader, didn't seem to want to start anything." Luca thought momentarily of the small, red-haired vampire that had captivated and intrigued him. It wasn't the first time his thoughts had drifted toward her since last night. He shook her from his mind and continued. "If they kill, they don't do it in Aboit."

Carson snarled at him, undoubtedly angered by Luca's defiance. His reflexes said to flinch under the Alpha's powerful command and yet Luca resisted.

"They all kill." Ben's voice was soft and controlled like it always was. "They hunt and they feed. It's in their nature."

Luca looked down at the old werewolf. He was leaning forward, elbows on his knees. His eyebrows pulled together, looking a little stressed.

"Instinct or not. I say we do nothing until we know more," Luca suggested.

Kip looked like he might agree with Luca but said nothing. Carson looked as if he might explode at any moment and still Luca pressed on. "We do nothing until

we have proof that they are a danger to the people of Aboit.”

“It... is... not...” Carson took a strained breath between each word. “Your place... to oppose me.”

Luca resisted the urge to clench his own teeth. “It is my right to present other courses of action, even if those ideas are different from yours,” Luca sighed. “I’ve said what needed to be said. Take my opinion into consideration or don’t. That’s up to you.” With that, Luca walked from the room, retreating up the stairs to his bedroom.

KYLE

“Don’t break that thing before we get it up the stairs,” Hayley chided as she squeezed past Kyle and Luca to go open the door to the couple’s apartment the next day. He rolled his eyes at his wife and took another step up the stairs. Luca stepped up and Kyle mirrored him, they were making their way quickly with a large box, containing Kyle’s new television, between them.

“Hayley door!” Kyle shouted after his wife swung the door shut behind her.

“Just kidding,” she said, smiled, and held it open for them. “You know I could have helped you with that box.”

“Yes, yes, my love. I know, women can do whatever men can do, but why should they have to when there are men around to do it for them?” Kyle asked.

Hayley shrugged. “Good point,” she said and then disappeared momentarily into the bedroom. Kyle smiled after her as he and Luca freed the electronic

entertainment device from its packaging and placed it on a rickety, old table.

"Can I ask you something?" Luca asked as he plopped down onto Kyle's new-to-the-apartment, old couch and sighed.

"That's a bad idea," Kyle said in response.

"How do you feel about Carson's whole vampire vendetta?" When Kyle didn't immediately respond Luca continued, "I just think we should have proof of wrongdoing before we start an all-out supernatural war in Aboit." He had been very distracted all morning by the meeting that Carson had called the previous night. Something just didn't feel right to him. There was too much hate without an obvious purpose behind it.

It was Kyle's turn to sigh. "Okay, honestly I think blood-suckers need to drink human blood to survive. This does make them dangerous to our town. However, I do see your point about wanting more information before we start a war over it. From what little I actually know about supernatural history; these types of wars can be messy, and a lot of our kind generally end up dying. But, everyone also knows that Carson always does what Carson wants and everyone around him had better do what Carson wants as well or things might also get out of hand. So, like, pick the lesser of two possibly shit-storm outcomes I guess."

"I know you're right," Luca said. "The question is then; is following Carson's orders really more important than murdering potentially innocent beings, of any kind?"

“Potentially is the key word there, Luca,” Kyle said as he began to stretch cords from the wall to the television. “It’s my understanding as well that all vampire’s kill. Even if they aren’t killing here, they’re probably killing somewhere else, maybe Fort Miles. You’ve heard of the uptick in homicides there recently, haven’t you?”

“True,” Luca said, sighing.

“It does sound like Carson has a solid argument,” Hayley added as she walked back into the room and sat beside Luca. “Murder is wrong, murders should be dealt with accordingly.”

Luca flinched.

“Hayley,” Kyle cautioned. He knew why Luca had flinched, but Hayley probably didn’t.

“She means non-remorseful murders.”

“Kyle,” Luca used the same tone on him that he’d used on Hayley.

“Why do you care about the vampires so much anyway?” Hayley asked, returning to a safer subject.

Kyle connected the last cord and picked up the remote to assessed his work. He then joined Luca and Hayley where they sat.

“Because he thinks the little one is cute,” Kyle said jokingly. He expected Luca to respond with a fake laugh or defend himself in some way. When he didn’t Kyle looked over. “Holy creepers, you do like her!”

Luca paled.

What! Kyle thought.

Chapter Five

DATE WITH THE ENEMY

As both girls entered through the front door of her family's home, Monica shouted, "I'm home!" Normally, human residences were impossible for Jules to enter. This house was the exception; at the Martins' Jules had a standing invitation.

"Hello girls," Monica's mother, Sherri, said as she exited the kitchen.

"Hi," they said in unison.

"Are you staying for dinner, Jules, dear?" Sherri asked.

"Yes..." Monica started.

"Um... no," Jules cut her off. "I'd better not."

"You're staying." Monica rolled her eyes. "We need to pick out dresses for our date tomorrow," Monica told her mother.

"Oh well, then you better get started. With your indecisiveness, you never know how long that will take," Sherri teased.

Jules laughed with her while Monica scowled. "Oh, come on," Monica said, taking Jules by the arm and pulling her down the hall to her bedroom.

“So, do you know where Seth is taking us?” Jules asked, perching on the end of Monica’s bed.

“No.” Monica walked to her closet and started pulling out dress after dress, throwing them down beside Jules. “But, he told me to dress up. Apparently, it’s kind of expensive.” She plucked a dress off the top of the stack, walked to the mirror, held it in front of her, and then discarded it on the floor. “That’s all I know.”

Jules stood and walked to Monica’s closet, rifling through the clothing still hanging there.

“By the way, don’t be a pain about it but,” Monica hesitated, “your date is paying.” Monica picked up another dress and turned to smile at Jules.

Jules rolled her eyes but smiled back. Monica knew her too well. Jules never let anyone spend money on her. Wealth was not something most vampires struggled with accumulating. Especially old ones. Between ancient investments, centuries of financial success, and holding onto belongings for hundreds of years, most vampires were generally pretty well off. In fact, Jules had some first edition novels in her home that were worth a small fortune on their own.

So, instead of arguing Jules asked, “why is this guy paying to take someone he’s never met on a date?” It sounded to her like a custom that had faded away decades ago. She didn’t mind. Actually, she appreciated the gesture.

Jules reached into the closet and pulled a long, slinky, black dress from the back to examine it.

"Because he wants to, I guess," Monica said happily. "Oh, you should definitely wear that!"

Jules looked up from the dress. "I don't know."

"Try it on," Monica begged.

Jules had just managed to pull up the zipper when Monica called, "Hey Toad, come in here!" Ethan moseyed to the door and pushed it open. "What do you think of this?" Monica asked him about the dress she had tried on.

"I don't know." He shrugged, lounging against the door frame.

"You're almost a guy. What do you think?" Monica had on a short, red, strapless dress that showed off her dainty shoulders beautifully.

"It's fine, I guess," he said and then looked over at Jules. "Now that's a dress!"

Jules was about to respond but before she could he blushed slightly, turned, walked to his own room across the hall, and swinging the door shut behind him.

Both girls laughed.

Jules's breath caught when she smelled it. *Blood. Fresh, dripping, human blood.*

"Jules, what is it?" Monica asked. She knew the signs that indicated Jules was in distress. Jules stood statue still, clenched her fists, pressed her lips together tightly, and stopped breathing. These were the precautions that kept her from bolting toward the source of her bloodlust.

"Stay here. I'll take care of it," Monica said. She walked around Jules and closed the door behind her.

Jules dropped to the bedroom floor, clamped her hands over her mouth, and whimpered. She knew she couldn't do what every instinct in her was screaming for her to do. Jules knew that if she gave in, by just a fraction of a thought, she would kill whoever was leaking out their life-source. It was likely that she would kill everyone in the house once the initial bloodlust was satisfied. And these people were like family to her.

Blood tears slid from her eyes and down her face, staining the white carpet near her knees. This was what Jules was. She was a monster by nature, but she was fighting it with everything she had in her.

After a few minutes, that felt like hours, the smell of fresh blood disappeared. Its memory still burned into Jules's mind. She took a few, steady breaths.

"Mom cut herself," Monica said, returning and closing the door. Jules nodded but didn't speak. "Oh Jules, it's okay." Monica grabbed a box of tissues off her desk and sat down on the floor in front of her. One hand pulled a tissue free and stretched out toward Jules, the other took Jules's hand and grasped it tightly.

Jules focused on Monica's touch. The human she cared about most, sitting in front of her, calling her back to the living world. "It's over Jules. You didn't hurt anyone. It's over," Monica continued softly.

Jules wiped at her eyes with the soft bit of paper, it came away red. Once she felt more fully composed she looked up at Monica.

"Yeah, that's still gross."

"What?" Jules asked, taken aback.

"You got a bit of..." Monica pointed beside her own eye to indicate the blood she'd missed.

"Oh," Jules wiped at it again while both girls chuckled softly.

"I'll be right back, I need to get something to clean my carpet," Monica said as she stood again. She stopped at the door and turned back around. "You did good Jules."

Monica was right. Once again, Jules had won a battle against her very nature.

CARSON

Carson had gathered those closely ranking beneath him to announce his decision regarding the vampire situation. He had taken enough time indulging Luca with the idea that he would consider his Beta's plea. Vampires did not deserve, nor would they ever receive, any mercy from him. A vampire was a killer, and that was that.

All his Den member subordinates were watching him intently, as his impassioned speech came to an end. Well, all but one. Carson scowled down at his Beta. "Do you have somewhere to be?" Carson snapped, as Luca checked his phone for the fifth time.

"I do," Luca said, offering no further explanation.

Having this entitled whelp as a ceremonial second was becoming more and more bothersome by the day. *If only Luca's lineage wasn't...* Carson halted that train of thought and returned to the task before him. "That said," Carson began again. "If any of you come in contact with one of these bloodsuckers, or any vampire for that

matter, you are to report their position immediately. A proper offensive will be formulated, and I assure you, the threat will be promptly dealt with. If you can, follow them to their dwelling, that would be ideal..." Carson stopped as Luca looked down at his phone yet again. Ben reached over and tapped Luca's leg to get his attention.

"Going to be late?" Carson snarled.

"I am now," Luca said, standing and making to leave the room.

"Luca Cain," Carson called. Luca's audacity was boarding on insubordination.

Luca's Beta status did allow him to be somewhat legitimately adversarial, Carson had to accept that. Thus, this behavior was simply a consequence of the position Luca held within the pack. So, in favor of not escalating this irritation any further, Carson swallowed his rage and said, "if you see a vampire..."

"I know what to do." Luca sighed and left the house, the screen door slamming behind him.

Carson continued, speaking more freely now that the thorn in his side was out of earshot.

JULIANA

Monica had arrived at Jules's house ridiculously early the next day to start preparing for their date. Jules understood that it was special to Monica but didn't understand why she'd chosen to be picked up from Jules's house and not her own. When she'd asked, Monica had rattled off some explanation about her parents being embarrassing and her little brother being annoying. If

this two-year anniversary was such a milestone in Monica's life, Jules felt like her family should have been included. However, it was Monica's choice, so Jules kept that opinion to herself.

While preparing for the night's events, Monica did Jules's hair twice. Jules had watched as Monica took her own hair down and put it back up four times. Now, she sat in front of her travel mirror with a pencil to her eye. Jules watched as she drew a perfectly angled line on her top eyelid. "Give me five more minutes, then it's your turn," Monica said.

"Oh, no. You don't have to do that," Jules began. "I'm fine going like this." Jules waved her hand over her own face.

"Come on, Jules. It's not like you can see to put it on yourself. I only want to do a little bit. I don't even need to use foundation. I mean, for being dead, your skin is perfect. Please, let me do your eyes at least," Monica begged as she finished applying eyeliner to her second eye.

For the most part, Jules was pretty much the 'no muss, no fuss' kind of girl. She never did anything to enhance her appearance, humans were drawn to her regardless, no need to help them see her as desirable.

"Alright," Jules conceded, "just this once."

"Yay!" Monica shrieked. Monica held up the mirror inspecting herself closer. "That is so weird," she commented allowed.

"What is?" Jules asked while playing with the strap on her dress.

“I know you’re back there. I can see my dress hanging in mid-air, but you just aren’t there.” She pointed to the mirror in front of her.

Jules shrugged, it’d been centuries since she’d seen what she looked like. “Punishment for being a walking nightmare, I guess,” Jules replied.

“You take that back right now!” Monica chided. “You are not a nightmare. You are awesome! Say it.”

“I... am... awesome,” Jules repeated, to appease Monica.

“Good, now come sit so I can put some eyeliner on those iridescent, silver eyes of yours.”

Jules did as instructed. She tried not to giggle when the blush brush hit her face, it was a weird sensation, being tickled by soft bristles. Monica was just putting the finishing touches on Jules’s face when the doorbell rang.

“They’re here,” Monica shrieked, almost dropping the mascara tube she was holding. Jules had been expecting Seth to walk in unannounced like always, but it seemed he was taking this anniversary as seriously as Monica was.

“Go answer it, Jules,” Monica pleaded. “I want to make an entrance.”

Jules smiled, resisting the urge to roll her eyes, and walked from her bedroom to the front door. She could hear hushed voices on the other side of the door as she reached forward to open it.

She smelled it before she saw him. “Hi Jules,” Seth greeted. “Monica inside?”

Jules didn’t respond but stood frozen in the doorway.

"Jules?" Seth questioned.

She nodded but didn't take her eyes off the man who was supposed to be her date.

"Have you two met?" Seth was looking from Jules to her date and back again.

"Not officially," he said. "I'm Luca." He held out a hand toward her.

Jules looked down at it, not sure whether to shake it or break it.

"Jules, Luca. Luca, Jules. Now you have," Seth said when Jules made no move to take Luca's outstretched hand. Seth shrugged and then stepped around Jules to enter the house and find his girlfriend.

After a few more long seconds, Luca pulled his hand back and dropped it to his side.

Jules watched as Luca's eyebrows drew together, he looked down at her with a concerned expression. She was surprised not to see the hatred of his pack reflected in his face. "Are you alright," he asked cautiously.

"Not..." Jules found her voice. "Not really."

He reached a hand out like he may try to comfort her.

She took a step back, her eyes narrowing as she appraised him. He was truly as beautiful as she remembered. He was perfectly muscled and very tall. He probably had eleven or twelve inches on her petite stature. But more importantly, he now knew exactly where she lived, and Jules had no way of knowing what he might do with this information.

She is just as beautiful as I remember, Luca thought to himself.

“Shall we go?” Seth said as he reappeared near the door with one arm draped around Monica’s waist.

“Monica I...” Jules began to say.

Luca cut her off, “of course,” he said. Smiling, Luca gestured for Jules to accompany him to Seth’s mother’s car.

The stunning vampire’s eyes widened, looking horror-stricken, but she did not speak. She seemed a lot warier of him than she had of his pack at the Promenade that night. This surprised him. She’d seemed so confident the last time he’d seen her. *Tiny and fierce*. Still, he couldn’t let her make up some excuse to bail on this date. What better opportunity would he get to find out more about the vampires in Aboit, to find out if they really were the threat that Carson, Ben, and even Kyle and Hayley seemed to think they were. If this vampire turned out to be just a gorgeous, soulless murder, then he’d follow Carson’s orders and report her. If not, and he was right about her, the possibilities were endless. Luca rolled that thought over in his mind and smiled to himself.

Monica and Seth walked a few steps ahead of them to the vehicle. Luca waited while Jules locked the door. He watched as the porcelain figure reluctantly stepped around him. Luca sped forward and opened the back door of Seth’s mother’s car for her, holding out his hand. Without meeting his eyes, or accepting the offered hand, she gracefully climbed in.

They rode in silence, but Luca continued to steal glances at the icy figure sitting as far from him as she could.

“Dang it,” Seth said from the front seat. This pulled Luca’s attention away from his date. “Sorry, everyone. We need to make a pitstop.”

As Seth got out to fill the car with gas, Monica rambled. “It’s so great of you guys to do this for us. Luca, do you know where we’re going?” But before Luca could tell her that he wasn’t telling, she moved on. “See Jules, I told you that it wouldn’t be so bad...”

Just then, Seth stuck his head back inside the car. “Stupid thing is telling me I have to see the cashier. I’ll be right back,” he said and then unexpectedly leaned across the car and kissed Monica on the lips.

Monica kissed him back, giggling and blushing simultaneously.

Luca thought he saw a smile flash across the vampire’s face, but he couldn’t be sure. It happened too fast.

Monica looked down and gasped, “oh! Seth may need his wallet.” She grabbed it off the seat. “I’ll be right back.”

“Monica, no...” Jules started to say, but Seth’s girlfriend was already gone.

“I’m only here for my friend,” Jules snapped quietly. “So, don’t...” Her voice was cool and threatening.

“We’re in the same situation, remember,” he said, stopping her.

“Are we?” She looked over at him accusatorily. He instantly hoped to never be on that side of her glare again.

“Look, before they come back, I need to say something,” Luca said. He watched as Seth shifted from one foot to the other while standing in line and Monica clung to his arm happily. “I don’t know about your friend, but Seth doesn’t know about me. I would really like to keep it that way.”

“Monica knows about me,” Jules said coolly.

“Really?” Luca asked, stunned. Monica couldn’t really understand how dangerous Jules was and still be comfortable around her, could she?

Jules nodded.

“Wow,” Luca said. If Jules was a cold-blooded killer surely she wouldn’t tell a helpless human her secret and let them go on living.

With that, they fell into an awkward silence and Luca’s thoughts wandered. He wasn’t sure what had inspired this coldness toward him. It disappointed him really. From what the vampire had said that night, the first time he’d laid eyes on her, he figured she didn’t judge werewolves the same way many of her undead counterparts did. It seemed now, that that sense of ease and acceptance was just a very well-played act.

Jules spoke after a few more moments of silence. “If you don’t try to kill me tonight, I won’t tell them about you.”

“That’s an easy deal to make,” he said, relief filling his expression. He stretched out his hand, to seal the

bargain. She just stared at it. "Oh, come on, at least act like we're both human here," he coaxed.

"But we're not," she protested. Her seriousness juxtaposed oddly with the smirk on her face.

"They don't know that." He smiled, his hand still extended.

She sighed and took his hand but pulled back almost immediately.

It is true, vampire skin is cool to the touch. It was probably not enough for a human to notice but werewolves ran on the high side of the temperature scale.

JULIANA

Luca's hand was warm in hers. She had forgotten the soft-fire feeling that occurred when the two species touched. Jules rubbed her fingers together. *Werewolves...* Jules's thought was cut short and her head jolted up when the front car doors opened; Monica and Seth reappearing

"At least you two are becoming friends," Monica said.

Friends? Since when did you become unobservant? Jules was slightly shocked that Monica hadn't noticed the awkward atmosphere in the backseat. However, there was a reason Monica was so preoccupied tonight, she was in love. *I can do this for her. It's one date.* All she had to do was survive the night, just one evening. After that, she'd go to Gabriel and together they'd decide what needed to be done.

As the car's engine sputtered to life, Jules looked over at the werewolf Beta. He seemed to have completely relaxed now. He was smiling, leaning toward the front seat, and looking enthralled by the current conversation. Seth was regaling Monica with a story of an adventure he and Luca had had while backpacking the previous summer.

Jules tried to listen as her mind raced, filled with anxious thoughts. *That feeling... desire. She hadn't felt true desire, outside the desire for blood, in centuries. This was not that, but strangely, felt similar.* Jules kept watching him. *Why is he so at ease? He is so beautiful.* Jules shook that thought from her head and let her mind wander to safer territories. Judging from the game of cat and mouse she had played with his packmates earlier in the week, she assumed he had orders from his Alpha. She had thought he would have reported her home's position by now. But he hadn't made any moves to pick up his phone since he and Seth had arrived. As the ride stretched on, it began to look like he wasn't going to. At least not immediately. Jules remained stiff and silent as her mind raced.

They had left Aboit and were heading for Fort Miles, the nearest large city. Jules looked over at the werewolf again. His dark eyes were alight with laughter. His dark hair hung in loose waves around his face. His build was strong; *I can see his biceps pressing against the confines of his jacket...* Jules froze. *What am I doing?* She turned away quickly, but not quickly enough. He had caught her studying him. Jules looked down and pressed her lips together. When she glanced up again, he was still

watching her. His black eyes were soft and inquisitive, not vindictive nor murderous like she might have expected.

By the time the van pulled up in front of the fancy Italian restaurant, Jules had finally stopped fighting with herself. It was a losing battle. She was attracted to the werewolf... *to say the least*. Both men stepped out of the car, walked around either side and opened the doors for their dates. Jules refused to look at Luca.

"It's okay," he whispered under his breath, holding out his hand. For some inexplicable reason, she believed him. Jules took the hand he offered. The heat from his skin warmed her own.

"Cain, four," Luca said to the hostess, upon entering the extravagant lobby.

Jules suppressed her surprise. *Is he a descendant of Stephen's family line?*

The hostess showed the two couples to a table on the balcony overlooking the dance floor and almost immediately a waitress came to take their orders.

"Um... I'm not feeling well," Jules said. "I'll just have some water." She had been so busy fighting off baffling thoughts about Luca that she had neglected to think up a reasonable excuse for not eating.

"Oh, come on. I'm buying." Luca smirked at her, a glint of a smile on his lips.

She would wager that he knew full well she didn't eat human food. "No," she whispered harshly.

"Well, then..." Luca studied the menu for a few seconds. "She'll have the shrimp. You like shrimp, right

honey?” He nudged his menu at Jules, playfully mocking her.

She glowered at him and Luca smiled, then he looked back toward the waitress.

“I’ll have the steak and tell the Chef that Luca said he wants his steak the way we like it.” He winked at the waitress. “He’ll know what I mean,” he assured her. “Thank you.”

The waitress looked skeptical but smiled at him.

“How do you both like it?” Monica asked Luca.

“Just rare,” he replied, shrugging.

“Reminiscent of a fresh kill that way?” Jules said, her voice inaudible to even the closest humans.

Luca’s eyes widened. He glanced nervously at Seth, then back again.

“Sorry,” Jules said quietly, lacking any real remorse.

When their meal finally arrived, Jules stared at her plate. What was she going to do with such a massive amount of smelly little sea creatures? She glared at Luca, wanting to extend her fangs and hiss at him, but she resisted.

Throughout the course of the meal, some of the shrimp disappeared as she dropped them one by one into the napkin on her lap. Luckily, Monica, who was sitting beside her, was all too used to the little ways in which Jules disposed of human food. Eating the food in front of her was not an option. She’d tried once long ago and spent the night with her head hung over the chamber pot.

Jules glanced up and saw that Luca seemed to be studying her carefully from across the table while keeping a steady stream of conversation going with Monica and Seth.

“Are you alright, Jules?” Monica asked, leaning over to speak in Jules’s ear.

“I’m fine,” Jules said, trying to smile reassuringly. “I just need to powder my nose.”

Monica made a face, reminding her that it was an outdated term.

Jules shrugged. Luca’s presence had thrown her completely off her game. Not only was she extremely attracted to him, but she also believed his pack was hunting her, and he seemed to be unaffected by this. This whole situation was very unsettling. As she stood, Jules slid her napkin in front of her and turned to leave the table. She heard Luca chuckle lightly and scowled.

Jules strode into a stall in the bathroom, dumped the little creatures into the toilet, and flushed them away. Checking that the restroom was still empty, Jules paused in front of the mirror and leaned on the sink. She didn’t bother looking up at her reflection-less form.

Jules took some deep breaths as she formulated her thoughts. She still hadn’t seen Luca reach for his phone. He probably would now that she had walked away but that couldn’t be helped. If the rest of the pack did come to his aid, she would have to run. She didn’t like the idea of abandoning Monica and Seth, but Jules believed that Luca wouldn’t let either of them get caught in the

crossfire. Of that much, she was sure. He seemed to be a good friend to her human companions.

Jules heard the bathroom door creak open and rushed away from the mirror toward the exit. She left the bathroom, lost in thought. She was so distracted that she ran face-first into Luca, her nose connecting with his muscled chest.

Chapter Six

THE DOG AND THE DEMON

Luca reached both hands out to steady her. She flinched and took a step back. “Are you okay?” he asked.

“No. I’m not okay.” Her tone was harsh and sounded like this fact was somewhat obvious.

“I thought you were supposed to be a friend to werewolves?” he said, trying to lighten the mood a little. He crossed his arms over his chest and leaned against the hallway wall, staring down at her.

“I was a friend... to your kin actually. The difference is that Stephen wasn’t hunting me.”

“And I am?”

“Your Alpha is,” Jules said while continuing to glare at him. “In my experience, the Alpha’s desires are the desires of the pack.” She kept her voice low to assure that he was the only one that could hear her.

“That’s not true.” Luca’s voice was soft. “Well, maybe it is kinda true, but I do have my own mind. I don’t let Carson make my decisions for me.”

“Are you sure about that?” She snarled.

Luca sighed. There was some truth to her words. He had never felt the Alpha's insatiable desire for control under his father's reign. However, but as Carson's Beta, he did feel very pressed to ensure his actions and opinions aligned with Carson's. Not that they ever did. "I suppose you are right," he admitted. "Carson does have the final say on things."

"And your Alpha is targeting me." Her voice was low and sharp. "So, I suppose you are too."

She stepped a little closer, not taking her eyes off his as she did so. The fierceness he'd seen in her had returned at full strength. Her eyes displayed her years; with years came strength. She could probably kill him then and there and he'd be powerless to stop it. He should have taken a step back for his own safety, but he didn't. Instead, he dropped his arms, utterly baffled. "What are you talking about?"

"Don't pretend you won't do it." Jules clenched her fists as if she was trying to rein in her emotions.

"Do what?"

"Report my location to your pack if you haven't already. Admit it, your orders are to bring me to your Alpha, or kill me. I bet you'd put Monica and Seth in danger for your precious Alpha." Jules's tone was low and full of venom. She looked up probably gaging his expression. "You're telling me those aren't your orders."

Luca was a little taken aback. "Um...you're actually pretty close. My orders are to follow you home and report your home's position..." Luca started to say but stopped when the look in her eyes grew feral. *Where did this*

conversation go wrong? “Which I’m not going to do.” He lifted his hands in a surrendering gesture. “I promise.” Luca felt the desire to reach out and take her hand, to assure her he meant her no harm, but he wasn’t sure she wouldn’t bite it off if he did. Instead, he spoke again, “I don’t want to hurt you, Jules.”

“And your Alpha?” Jules sighed, pulling her gaze away from his face.

“He does,” Luca said. “But I’m not going to help him do it.”

“Why?” Jules asked. The silver eyes that met his seemed shocked and uncertain.

“You know why,” Luca said.

“I don’t.” She looked miffed but not so angry anymore.

“I think you do,” Luca said.

She looked back at him with a puzzled expression.

“Tell me you didn’t feel what I felt the first time I saw you. Like there could be something between us. I felt like you were someone I had to know.” He admitted.

She studied him for a long moment and her expression softened “I can’t do that.” With this she moved around him, walking back in the direction of Seth and Monica.

The long breath he’d been holding escaped. Luca went into the bathroom, leaned over the sink, and splashed cold water on his face. He stared at his reflection as water dripped from it. *She felt it too.* There was something between them, a connection he couldn’t

shake. After a few moments, Luca dried his face on a soft white towel and went to rejoin the others.

“Where’d they go?” he asked as he approached the table where Jules sat alone.

Jules pointed to the dance floor below. He walked to the banister and watched as Seth and Monica moved somewhat stumbly across the floor. When Seth dipped Monica low and nearly dropped her, Jules laughed out loud. “Sometimes I envy them,” Jules admitted sadly.

Luca squared his shoulders, came around the table, and offered her his hand.

“No,” she said almost too quickly.

“One dance.” Luca waited patiently, his hand outstretched, a soft smile playing on his lips.

Jules rolled her eyes but finally accepted. He placed her hand on his arm and led her down the stairs to the dance floor. He began to spin her slowly. To him, it felt as if no one around them existed. Jules hummed quietly with the live band. Her crystal voice didn’t miss a note of the old tune.

In this moment, nothing else seemed to matter. Not Carson. Not the pack. Not the differences in their species. Not even her diet. Never in all the years of his life would he have imagined himself dancing with a vampire. Let alone one as cute, sexy, and temperamental as this one.

As the song ended, Luca placed his warm hand on the back of her neck, sending her into a dip. She let him lean her all the way back. As he pulled her up, he saw her lips part slightly. Their eyes met, Luca never wanted to look away again.

JULIANA

After their meal, Seth and Monica wanted to take a romantic evening stroll through the city. The night air was a bit balmy, perfect for a walk. Seth left the car in the restaurant's valet parking and the four of them set off.

Luca leaned down and whispered in Jules's ear as they walked. "Seth has something planned for Monica." His breath caressed her face.

She looked up at him.

He winked.

As the night sped on, Jules found that she was becoming more comfortable with being in Luca's presence. He seemed genuine. He was funny in a gentle way. He seemed kind. And he was completely intoxicating. Jules had to admit it, there could be something between them. She had felt it.

"Here we are," Seth announced.

They approached one of Jules's favorite places in the city. An elderly man in a top hat rode toward them atop an old-fashioned carriage. The kind Jules knew well, it reminded her of a time long past.

Seth motioned toward the carriage.

"For me?" Monica asked in mock shock.

"Just for you." Seth offered a hand to help Monica up. He climbed in after her and then motioned for Luca and Jules to join them.

"Come on Jules, it was your idea," Seth coaxed.

"I knew it!" Monica smiled.

"Traitor," Jules teased Seth.

She saw Luca's eyebrow raise.

"What?" she shrugged. "He asked for ideas."

"Are you coming or not?" Seth asked.

"No, you two go," Jules answered for them both.

"You sure?" Seth asked.

"We're sure," Luca answered.

"Your loss is my gain." Seth shrugged and put an arm around Monica. She rested her head on his shoulder as the carriage pulled away to circle the gardens.

Luca slid his fingers into hers and Jules let him. He started to lead her toward a secluded path, but she hesitated.

"Trust me," Luca said.

"That's a lot to ask," she said, only half teasing.

"It doesn't have to be." He smiled softly at her. Jules met his eyes once more. She narrowed her own, decided, and then moved to his side.

"See, that wasn't so hard," he said, his pace slowed to fit hers.

"You have no idea."

He glanced sideways at her retort. "I don't. But I think I'd like to."

"Nope." She clamped her lips tightly.

"Past secrets?"

"Something like that," she admitted.

"Okay." He didn't press her farther, which she greatly appreciated.

A comfortable silence stretched between them as they passed various flowers, their sights and smells overwhelming the senses. They entered the interior

portion of the beautiful garden and found that they were surrounded by roses of all sizes and colors.

"Which one is your favorite?" Luca asked, referencing the roses.

"I like the white roses. They're so... pure," Jules answered.

He leaned down and picked a perfectly blossomed white rose. "For you." He bowed slightly, handing it to her. "May its beauty attempt to measure up to yours."

Her eyes narrowed.

"Too cheesy?" he asked, smiling awkwardly.

"Maybe a little," she admitted but smiled back regardless.

"So..." He seemed determined to keep the conversation going.

"So, what?" she asked teasingly.

"Do..." he started but then apparently decided to rephrase. "How old are you, really?" Luca asked finally.

"Old."

"Yes, I'd worked that one out for myself," Luca said with a smile and waited for her reply.

Jules sighed. "I became a vampire at seventeen and I am now over four hundred. Next question," she added playfully.

"Someone turned you at seventeen?" Luca's shock was apparent. "Who would do that?"

"I never found out. And he killed my Aunt." Jules tried to keep her bitter emotions from coloring her voice. "Next question," she added softly.

“Okay, we’ll circle back to that in a few years,” he chuckled.

“Years huh? That’s optimistic.”

“Would you prefer pessimism?” He asked, clasping his hand behind him as they continued to walk.

She playfully studied him for a moment. She felt more at ease in this moment than she had in centuries. Whatever this werewolf was doing to her was quietly turning her world upside down. “I’ll take this version thanks.”

He smiled, probably pleased with himself. They moved out of the rose garden and into a flurry of brightly mixed colors.

“Good. Did you really know Stephen Cain?”

“Yes I... I knew him,” she paused, remembering. “He was a good friend. Are you related?”

“I’m told that I am.”

She rose an eyebrow at him.

“My great great, well many greats, grandfather was his brother I think.”

“Oh, David. I met him a few times but didn’t know him well,” Jules admitted.

Luca gasped.

“What?” She stopped, turning to look up.

“You are so old.” He smirked.

“And how old are you?” she asked, pretending to be slightly offended.

“Just turned eighty.” It was hard to tell with werewolves.

“Such a baby.”

"You know it." He smiled and looked down at her for a long moment. Then they started to walk again.

"And you stopped aging at twenty, twenty-two?" This time it was her desire to keep the conversation going.

"Yeah, right around there somewhere. Werewolves are funny that way. We never know when it will happen but at some point, we just stop aging. But you probably already knew that."

"I did." She watched sideways as he rolled his eyes. She smiled. "When did your parents stop aging?"

"Both in their thirties. Mom was slightly older than dad; which endlessly frustrated her."

Jules stopped. "Where are your parents now?"

"They're gone. They died many years ago in a fire." His voice had a slight tremor in it, but he recovered quickly. "Are your parents vampires?"

"Thankfully, no. They died before I was turned. I would hate for them to see what I've become." She could hear the slight hints of self-disdain as she spoke, she guessed that he could hear it as well.

"Jules, I have to ask you something," Luca said quickly as if he didn't want to say what he needed to say.

"You've asked me quite a few somethings," Jules said with a smile.

"Your answer may change the tone of the evening," he admitted, "and I really don't want it to."

"Luca, whatever is it, just ask me."

He took a deep breath and shut his eyes as he spoke. "Do you kill humans? I've heard that all vampires do."

That it's in your nature, but you seem to be such good friends with Monica and I just don't..."

"You're not wrong," she said, cutting off his long-winded, unnecessary explanation. "It is in my nature," Jules said. "I have killed in the past."

Luca stopped walking and his head dropped like this had caused him pain.

Jules tentatively turned and took a few steps toward him. She looked up, directly into his perfect face, making his eyes meet hers. "But I don't now. I haven't taken a human life in over two-hundred years. And my coven members have never taken one, neither of them."

He looked directly into her eyes. His expression unreadable.

Jules stood silently pleading with him to accept this answer. She so desperately wanted him to understand that who she used to be was not who she was, in so many ways. For some unexplainable reason, he had to understand.

"You don't kill," Luca reiterated, seemingly wanting her to be completely clear about that.

"Every human life is to be cherished," Jules said. "I fight against my nature every day to make sure that every human around me remains as they are." It was the hardest thing Jules did from day to day, but it was something she'd never change. "In fact, I haven't even fed directly from a human in centuries." She left off that that was because she had more trouble stopping once she started than most vampires did. It was too soon for that.

Jules was momentarily taken aback when he reached forward and pulled her into him. He wrapped his arms around her cool, thin shoulders in a hug. "You have no idea how relieved I am to hear that."

LUCA

Luca's heartbeat sped. She didn't kill. She had in the past. But she seemed as remorseful about it as he was about what he had done in his past. That was the last piece of information that he needed. Jules was a vampire, yes, but she didn't even feed off humans. She was strong, beautiful, compassionate, and seemed to value human life more than most humans did. She may be undead, but she was alive in so many ways, save one. He was positive now that the myths about vampires couldn't be true. At least, not always true.

"What was that for?" Jules asked as he released her.

"From what I can see," Luca said, "you are not the monster my pack thinks you are."

"Drinking people to death is a deal breaker then," Jules said, but she seemed to be teasing him at her own expense.

"It's not hard to say that it is." He chuckled.

Jules followed suit, giggling softly. Her eyes once again met his.

He bit his lower lip, his eyes traveling down her face.

Smirking a little, she turned away from him. Taking his hand in her own, she led them back toward the entrance of the park.

“Wait.” Luca stopped walking, forcing her to stop as well. “If you don’t drink human blood what do you drink?” he asked.

“No, I still drink human blood, I just get in from other places. Blood drives, blood banks and such,” she explained while looking off to the side like she might be embarrassed.

“But you can drink from people and not kill them, right?” Luca asked.

“Most vampires can,” she admitted. “I don’t have that kind of control. I never did. So, I chose to remove the struggle altogether, that’s all.”

“That’s a good plan,” he said, his voice teasing.

“Thank you,” she said, smirking up at him.

As one, they began to walk again. Luca glanced over at Jules. The bright moon seemed to reflect softly off her pale skin. He wanted to offer her his jacket, but he knew she wasn’t cold. She would never be too cold. He caught her stealing a glance at him and they both looked away nervously. Being with her made him feel like a teenager again. They were supposed to be enemies, but they were the same. They both pretended to fit in amongst humans and they were both lonely because of it.

Sharing his true identity with someone other than the pack was a relief. He found that it was surprisingly easy to care for her, to want to spend time getting to know her, to enjoy listening to her voice. He reached down and brushed a stray hair off her cheek. The more their skin touched, the more the fever inside him cooled.

His eyes traveled to her lips. "I really want to kiss you right now."

"Luca I..."

Luca's phone vibrated in his pocket. "Sorry," he said as he retrieved it. "It's Seth," he told her.

Luca hit the voice to text and replied. "Seth chill. We'll be out front in ten minutes." He said aloud, double checked that it had translated correctly, and hit send.

"Shall we go then?" Jules asked.

"We shall." He held out his elbow like a gentleman. She placed her hand in the crook of his arm and again they walked forward.

Luca wasn't ready for the evening to end. There were so many things he wanted to know about Jules. However, of one thing he was certain. He would do what he must to keep his pack from hurting her.

Chapter Seven

BECOMING STAR-CROSSED

Back at home, Jules laid frustratingly awake in her bed. She'd tried reading a book that she'd been interested in before now but was having trouble reading past the first line. She'd flipped on the television but turned it back off almost immediately. No matter what she tried, she couldn't stop seeing the night's events play in her mind. She didn't know when she'd see Luca again, or if she would. She hoped she would. Jules had seen the shocked look on his face when she'd stood on her toes, planting a kiss that brushed the corner of his mouth. She'd lingered in that moment as long as she could and then went through her front door and closed him behind it.

They should leave it there. Being together was bound to rip both of their worlds apart. Despite that inevitability, Jules couldn't shake the desire to try. She found it easy to trust Luca. Because of her past, she thought trust and romantic attachment would never again be possible for her. However, Stephen Cain and his Beta best friend were two of the kindest and gentlest men

she'd known in her life. Luca, it seemed, was no different.

"This is hopeless," Jules said aloud. She pushed the covers aside and stood. Jules walked out the back door of her house and through the grass. She gingerly padded down the path across the rocks; worn from years of use that came before her life here. When her bare feet hit the sand, she started to jog.

She didn't have a destination in mind. She just kept moving, but slowly enough that if some night owl was watching the water they wouldn't see anything other than a young girl running on the beach. Jules didn't slow for miles, five maybe ten. She didn't slow until she reached a cove of rocks that she hadn't seen before. The series of large rocks and caves jutted into the sky above her. Sitting alone on the highest cliff was a lone figure. The moonlight silhouetted his tall and lean frame. She knew him instantly.

Before he could spot her, she was on the cliff behind him. "Did I just discover your thinking spot?"

Luca twisted at her question. Concern, surprise, and then happiness flashed through his eyes as she walked up and sat on the rock next to him.

"Not my only one," he said once he'd finally found his voice. "But it's the closest one to you." He nudged her with his elbow.

She giggled quietly.

"Couldn't sleep either, I take it?" he asked, shifting on the rock to face her.

“You know, I really tried...” Her voice trailed off as his hand came up to the side of her face, fingers just barely brushing against her skin.

Her hand cupped his.

“What have you done to me?” he asked, leaning across the small space between them.

Instead of speaking, she shifted closer yet. With her hands on his neck, her lips met his. Soft and warm, this kiss, this moment, was the most human experience she’d allowed herself since her death. His hands dropped to her waist, pulling her closer by the hips. She backed out of the kiss before it had a chance to deepen. Her forehead rested on his. “This is a bad idea,” she admitted.

“I don’t care.” His voice was just above a whisper.

She didn’t either. She didn’t want to think of the consequences this stolen kiss with Luca could have. She didn’t want to think about past troubles, the complication of the present, or the uncertainty of the future. All she wanted was right here. Right now. With this wolf she’d just met, and yet, felt like she’d known all the years of her long existence.

LUCA

The night hours passed while Jules and Luca kissed, swam in the sea, talked, and kissed some more. In his eighty years, Luca had had girlfriends and flings but what he felt for Jules was different. This moment with Jules felt more real than any had before. Ironic, considering Carson’s apparent vendetta against the object of his

affection. Luca kissed Jules on the forehead and then followed her into sleep on the sand.

The next morning as the sun began to rise, Luca woke. Jules was wrapped gently in his arms, still deep inside her dreams. Luca's arm was tingling from the pressure of her head. As slowly as he could, he shifted out from underneath her. Jules stirred but did not wake, instead, she rolled over in her sleep.

Luca smiled down at her and then walked to the sea. Waves hit higher and higher as he continued into the surf. Once deep enough, he dived into the frigid water with a splash. The chill washed away the remnants of sleep. Where a human might have found the chill of the water debilitating, his werewolf skin soaked in every frosty degree.

Refreshed and fully awake, Luca headed back to the beach. When he returned, Jules was awake and sitting just inside one of the larger caves. "Good morning," he said, drying his hair with his previously discarded shirt.

"A sunny one," she replied.

"It's nice isn't it," Luca said, enjoying the soft rays.

"Vampire." Jules pointed out, shrinking into the shade a few more inches.

Luca looked up at the fully risen sun, and then back to Jules. "Oh, right. Whoops."

"To say the least," she replied and turned her back to the sun. He dropped down beside her.

"What do we do now?" The thought that he might want to wake her and take her home last night had never

occurred to him. To him, she was just Jules, the vampire aspect would take some getting used to.

“Well, I will retreat as far into this cave as I can, and wait here until nightfall,” she said matter-of-factly.

“Is that dark enough?” he asked, pointing at the far wall of the cave.

“It should be,” she nodded, moving to stand.

“Then I’ll wait with you,” he said just as his stomach growled, protesting.

“Will you?” she asked sort of suspended between sitting and standing.

He made a facial expression that conveyed his worry and apologies.

She laughed, seeming light-hearted about having to be left on her own in this cave.

“I’ll be quick,” he promised as he began to pull on the appropriate amount of still dry clothing.

Jules dropped back down, her knees in the sand. “Take your time.” She reached up and pushed wet hair out of his face. “I’ll be right here.”

He leaned forward and kissed her quickly.

She giggled and reciprocated. “Go,” she ordered.

With this, Luca stood, helped her to her feet, kissed her once more, then ran up the rocks and out onto the road. He jumped into his Jeep and drove to the nearest gas station, grabbed a water and several packages of jerky, paid, and walked back out to the gas pumps.

“Luca?”

Luca spun at Hayley’s call. She was seated on the back of Kyle’s motorcycle while he pumped gas into it.

"Hey," he called back, trotting over to join them at their gas pump.

"What are you doing out here?" Hayley asked.

Luca opened his mouth to answer honestly and then closed it again. He had always trusted the couple before, but he wasn't sure if he could trust either of them with Jules's life.

"Hiding from Carson. That's what you're up to, right?" Kyle asked, the first indication that he even knew Luca was standing there talking to his wife.

"It's necessary from time to time," Luca replied, letting the assumption stand.

"Especially when you're his most hated golden boy," Kyle continued.

"Hated?" Hayley asked skeptically.

"Well not by anybody but Carson," Luca responded for Kyle. "At least, I don't think I am."

"It's a safe bet that you're well-liked," Hayley said. "You are a Cain, after all."

"And no one will let me forget it either." Kyle's whiney impression was a little over-dramatized, but not that off from the way Luca had said this to him many times before. Somehow, he felt different about living in that legacy now. Maybe it was that Jules had said the famous ancestor whom he was known for was, in fact, deserving of his reputation. Or the fact that being a Cain connected him to Jules in ways he'd never have imagined, he didn't know.

“Where are you two headed?” Luca asked, noting that they were on a side of town that they didn’t usually frequent.

“Beach day with my babe,” Kyle said, winking at his wife.

“Little chilly for a day at the beach,” Luca commented. The sun was out, yes, but the spring air still had a bite to it.

“That’s what I told him,” Hayley said.

“Oh, pipe down both of you! It’ll be fun.”

“Do you want to join us?” Hayley asked.

“No, that’s okay.” But they had given him an idea. Luca waved to them and he watched as they drove in the direction of the public beach.

Where he’d left Jules wasn’t strictly a private beach, but the locals tended to leave it to the people that lived there.

Luca drove a little farther into town and pulled into a middle parking spot at the local mall. He plopped his phone on the passenger seat for good measure, locked the door, and started the trek back to the cove of rocks. If a pack member saw his Jeep in the lot and his phone locked in the empty vehicle, they’d have to spend hours inside the mall looking for him. The perfect alibi. *It’s better to be safe than sorry.*

JULIANA

Jules retreated as far into the cave as she could, taking care to face the back wall, instead of the sunlit sand and water. She didn’t have any way of calculating

how long he'd been gone. Her phone was back at her house. It was then that she realized what a terribly vulnerable position she'd put herself in. Sitting here in a satin sleep shirt and shorts, all it would take was a couple of strong werewolves to drag her into the sun and end her existence forever. She should have been more cautious. Gabriel always said she was too relaxed about the dangers of the sun.

Jules heard footsteps on the rocks above. She began to feel panicked. It was most likely Luca but, just in case, Jules stood and faced the entrance to the cave, her eyes squinting against the pain. She waited several seconds, listening for the footsteps to stop.

"Jules?"

"Here," Jules answered Luca's call with a sigh of relief.

"I forgot which cave I left you in," he commented as he trotted up to her. He was drenched in sweat and carrying a plastic bag full of something called jerky. "I didn't mean to take so long. I ran into some friends."

Jules sat back down cross-legged, facing the cave wall.

"What are you doing?" he asked. His voice full of genuine interest.

"The sunlight hurts my eyes," she said simply.

Luca didn't respond, but instead, sat down right behind her, his tall frame casting a shadow that covered her petite one. After a few moments, she leaned back against his chest. He held them both up with one arm

stretched out behind him and used the other to play with a strand of her sand-sprinkled hair.

“Did you tell your friends about... this.” She used her hand to indicate the pair of them.

“I didn’t. I do trust them. I just didn’t want to take a risk I didn’t need too.”

“That’s probably for the best.” Jules snuggled a little closer to him. “Luca, if we do this it’s going to be very dangerous for both of us.”

He listened silently as she spoke.

“We should just part ways and move on with our lives...” She let her statement fade away.

“Do you want that?” he asked after a few more silent seconds. He looked down and met her gaze.

She bit her lips, thinking through multiple scenarios. “No, I don’t. I mean, I don’t want to disrupt your life... or mine. But I don’t want to end this... us either.”

“Please, blow mine up and let little pieces rain down around me.” He sat up a little straighter and wrapped both arms around her. “I feel more, right here with you, than I have in a long time.”

His words mirrored how she felt perfectly. She didn’t know how it happened, but in the matter of one night, her reluctance to let someone in romantically had faded away. For the first time in centuries, she had hope for the future of her heart.

“I’ve lived too long to turn away something, or someone, who can make me feel like you do.”

“How’s that?” he asked

“Alive,” she said quietly.

He leaned down to kiss her again, but she put a finger to his lips instead. He smiled, and she dropped her hand. She smiled despite herself but then she put on a serious expression and said, "if we are going to do this, Luca, no one can know. Not now. Not until the tension between your pack and my coven has settled."

"Then we'll keep it a secret," he said, and then kissed her deeply.

GABRIEL

Gabriel scowled and set his phone down on the coffee table in front of him. His living room was bright with artificial light. The thick curtains were drawn to protect him and Eileen from the bright Sunday sunlight.

"She's still not answering?" Eileen asked, moseying from their bedroom and slipping onto the couch next to him.

Gabriel shook his head.

"She is capable of taking care of herself you know."

"Of course, she is," Gabriel agreed. "However, she was my best friend for a hundred years before you came along."

"I know." Eileen snuggled closer to him while they talked. "It just feels like you worry too much sometimes," she admitted.

"Sometimes, I do," he admitted. "But Jules has had it rough over the years. She has a lot of baggage, a lot of demons," he explained. "And she takes too many risks."

Eileen said nothing, so he continued. "You," he turned to face the love of his life, "are the most amazing

women I've ever met. I love that I don't have to worry about you taking unnecessary risks."

"Only that I might accidentally drink someone dry and therefore know the thrill of the kill," Eileen said softly, leaning toward him.

"Yes, only that," he teased back. He traced the long scar on the left side of her face, it trailed down onto her neck. "Someday Jules will meet someone who can be there for her. Someday I will be replaced, but until that happens, until she finds love again, I can't just abandon her." Gabriel said this because he knew that, at times, Eileen struggled with the depths of his friendship with Jules.

In reality, he didn't believe Jules would ever let anyone in again beyond friendship. She was too damaged from her previous relationship to embrace that level of trust romantically again.

"I just don't..." Eileen's voice trailed off.

"What?" Gabriel asked. The look on Eileen's face gave him slight cause for concern. "What is it?"

She sighed. "Okay, I was watching a show the other day and it brought up a question that I just don't know the answer too and..."

Eileen watched too much television. Gabriel knew she had nothing to do all day while he was at work, but he still felt that she spent too many hours watching that modern form of entertainment. "What's the question?" he prompted.

"If we were both going to die, and you could only save one of us.... if you had to choose between me and Jules... who would you choose?"

"That will never happen," Gabriel said, confused as to why such a concept had arisen.

"But if it did," Eileen prodded.

"My love," Gabriel said, putting one hand in her hair. "You. Of courses, it would be you. Jules is my friend, but you will always be so much more."

"You're sure?" She asked skeptically.

"Eileen, I could live in a world without Jules in it. But I wouldn't want to exist at all in a world without you," Gabriel said, knowing in his heart that it was true. The woman before him was his perfect companion, his light, his joy, his everything. "Satisfied?"

"Kiss me," Eileen said, smiling. Without speaking, Gabriel complied, closing the gap between them.

KYLE

Kyle lay sprawled on the sand, music in his ears. The chilled sun was beating down on his skin as he dozed. Hayley tapped Kyle on the shoulder with her foot. Kyle stirred, pulled one earbud out, and looked over to where she sat. She looked so beautiful, looking down at him, the watery horizon framing her outline. The perfect view. She'd stolen his jacket long ago and had her long dress tucked down around her feet, but she looked happy. Or she had the last time he'd looked at her. Now, she looked confused.

"What's up," he asked.

“Did Luca seem off to you?”

“Off how?”

“Like he was hiding something,” she explained.

“Not really,” Kyle said. “Same old Luca to me.” He hadn’t really thought about it, if he was being honest.

“I wonder how his date went last night,” she said conversationally while scrolling through something on her phone.

“What date?” Kyle asked. Wondering how or why Hayley would retain such information.

“You told me about it!” she almost scolded, her phone forgotten beside her.

“I mentioned it,” Kyle clarified, “in passing. Haven’t thought of it since.”

“You’re such a great friend,” she said sarcastically.

“I am actually. Luca doesn’t like when people pry.”

“I wouldn’t call this prying. I’d call it interested.”

“Oh, you’re interested in Luca are you.”

“Inescapably,” she said, teasing him now. Her smile was irresistible. Without warning, Kyle pulled her toward him.

She laughed and let her body drop onto his carelessly. The wind was knocked out of him when her elbow struck him in the stomach. He groaned.

“Serves you right, now my feet are cold,” she said. She then tucked them between his legs and the sand.

“All better?” he asked, playing with a strand of her hair as she looked down at him, her face expressing the same amount of love he felt.

"Everything's perfect now," she said, then kissed him softly.

JULIANA

Just after dusk, Jules walked with Luca back toward her little house. The left side of her body was pressed against Luca's side, his arm stretched down to reach her waist. Her arm rested comfortably above his hips.

They were taking a risk, even now, walking down the secluded beach together. But, when he'd asked if she wanted company on her walk back, Jules couldn't bring herself to say no. The day behind her felt out of time and place in Jules's life. Today she wasn't just living, she was alive.

"So how does this whole secret romance thing work?" he asked as they approached her back door.

"I've no clue." She made a face. "I've never had one before."

"That's so weird," Luca said, coming to stand in front of her. "Neither have I."

"I guess we make it up as we go," Jules said, leaning against him.

His hands cupped her neck and he bent his face toward her. She stood on her toes and met him in a kiss.

"Goodbye then," he said, panting a little.

"Good night," she said.

Luca looked up toward the darkened sky. "Goodnight for me. Good morning for you."

It was true, she had slept much of the brightest hours away, due to sunlight exposure causing lack of strength.

She was feeling rejuvenated now, in the early evening darkness.

They laughed lightly together. He kissed her once more on the forehead and then pulled himself back a few steps and began to walk back to the path across the stones.

“What now?” she called.

He looked back at her over his shoulder. “Now, I go get my Jeep.”

“Where is it?” She leaned against a pillar on her back porch.

“In the mall parking lot.” He sighed.

That’s miles away, Jules thought. “Come on.\ I’ll give you a ride,” she said.

He looked back out toward the sand and then back at her. “What about keeping this a secret?”

“I have very tinted windows.” She winked.

THE FORT MILES PHANTOM

His lack of self-control was his greatest weakness. The Phantom Killer is what they were calling him now, this alone proved it was true. He should move on from this city and become a new city’s nightmare. And yet, something told him to stay.

He didn’t set out to murder people, he never did. There were hundreds of humans around him nightly that lived to see another day. The unfortunate few that didn’t, were the sacrifice that he would inevitably make to satisfy his thirst for blood.

He was a vampire and he lived in a way that being a vampire suggested. He'd heard of vampires through the years who didn't give in to the hunt. Who refused themselves the ecstasy that only comes from draining warm, fresh, pulsing human blood but he couldn't comprehend the reasoning behind this choice. Not to kill humans he supposed. Many he knew drank from the source without killing the host. Once in a while, he wished he had that kind of self-control. But that thought was always a fleeting one. He was only vampire, after all.

As he walked the city streets, on his way to the home of a lover he'd taken to fill the night hours, a couple of drunken college kids fell from a bar and stumbled down the sidewalk in front of him. He moved passed them without contemplating it farther. A mother and her young child waited on a bus. He left them there. And gentleman late into his allotted years bumped into him. He righted the man and walked on.

He was almost to his destination when he smelled it. The unmistakable smell of fresh, human blood. Like a shark in an ocean of people, he followed it. His throat began to dry. His nose began to burn. He was getting close to the source. He heard it dripping. It wasn't far now. Unable to continue at this slow pace, he closed the distance between him and the dripping blood in moments.

In a blur, he was in the alley and there, just past a big angry-looking man, was his pray. The large man that had obviously let the blood out of its human container fell at his feet, his neck broken, bloody knife clattering to

the pavement. He didn't register the face of his pray, all he saw was the trail of blood running down her neck and into her cleavage. She whimpered only once more before his fangs were in her throat. He drank. Her last scream faded across the open alley as she fell into her killer's arms. With each passing second, the thirst inside him was satiated. The intoxicating smell of fresh blood diminished as he consumed it.

"Let go of the girl!" a low voice said from behind him.

When the body was empty of every last ounce of blood, he pulled his fangs out of the cold, dead neck and licked the last drop off his bottom lip.

"Get your hands in the air, vampire," the voice growled.

He released the now empty vessel, the body falling to the alley floor with another thud. Raising his arms, he turned toward the interrupting voice. It only took him a moment more to grasp the reality of his situation. "Really?" he said. "A gun, wolfcifer? What is a gun going to do to me exactly?" he asked the werewolf officer of the law.

The brawny man flinched, realizing his mistake.

"Too slow." He rushed forward with vampire speed. In less than a second, he'd overpowered the dog-man, his hand buried deep in the werewolf's chest. He watched as the officer strained to look back at his cop mobile.

"Run!" the werewolf shouted at the same time that his heart was ripped from his chest. The body fell just as

the passenger door of the car opened, and a teenage boy ran for his life.

Chapter Eight

HOWLING AT THE MOON

Ben stopped Luca just as he was approaching the front door of the Den. “Luca, where have you been?” he asked.

“Around. My phone died.” Which was true in a sense. Its battery had died sitting on the seat of his Jeep.

Just then, the screen door opened, nearly hitting Ben in the side of the face. “Be forewarned, Carson’s very unhappy with you,” Kip whispered, poking his head through the open doorway.

“What else is new?” Luca asked, rolling his eyes.

“Luca!” Ben scolded. “It’s that lack of respect that has you on such rocky ground.”

“I think it’s a difference of opinion that has me where I’m at with our Alpha, the attitude is just a byproduct,” Luca half-teased.

Ben looked at him sternly. Apparently, he was in no mood for jokes. He didn’t say anymore.

“You worry too much,” Luca said, clapped Ben on the shoulder and entered the Den.

"Luca." Carson cornered him the second he walked through the front door. "You are my Beta. Being unable to reach you is unacceptable."

"Dead phone. No charger." He held it up as if to prove that it was in fact dead.

Carson stormed toward him, his face inches from Luca's. "Next time, buy one," Carson snarled between gritted teeth.

Luca didn't back down. "What did I miss that was so important?" Luca asked, keeping his voice even, unaffected by Carson's threat.

Carson stared daggers at him, but still, Luca didn't submit. This was hard to do, but not impossible like it would have been for any other wolf under Carson's command.

Carson backed down before it could look like it wasn't his decision. He squared his shoulders and said, "now that you're here, maybe we can start the meeting I called for before noon."

"Five minutes and I'm all yours."

Carson growled audibly.

"Thanks for the notice," Luca said and then took the stairs two at a time, laughing to himself as he went.

Luca headed for his bathroom. In six minutes he was showered, dressed, and walking back out of his bedroom door. When he arrived downstairs once again, the pack had congregated in the family room. Carson was pacing menacingly, not unlike most nights. "Well, now that the Beta has finally graced us with his presence, we can

start,” Carson snapped as Luca took a seat on the dilapidated couch.

“Who has good news?” He looked momentarily, manically gleeful.

No one spoke.

“Are you telling me that no one has any information on the vampire problem?”

Luca looked away. Luckily, some of the others did too, out of guilt at being unsuccessful no doubt. Luca looked at the floor, hoping that his expressive face wouldn’t give him away.

“No one has found their location?” Carson asked, glowering at the group. “That is unacceptable. This leader of theirs has evaded us once already. That will not happen again.” Carson’s tone confirmed that orders were going to be to kill Jules when they did catch her. Kind, strong, sweet Jules. His Jules. If he could call her that. He nearly smiled but caught himself. Luca’s jaw clenched tightly.

Jed finally spoke up. “I’ve been unsuccessful at finding the coven’s location.”

Luca tried not to sigh due to the relief he felt.

“But I have ascertained that the red-headed female lives somewhere near the coast. Also, I believe she lives separately from the others,” Jed continued, turning Luca’s emotions upside down. They were too close to her.

“But I’ll keep looking.”

“See that you do!” Carson snapped.

Max sniggered.

Luca scowled over at him. There was no need for Carson's temper to be indulged.

As the lack-of-progress reports continued, Luca had to bite his tongue. He wouldn't let them harm her. He would do whatever he had too. To keep from giving himself away, however, he planted his feet on the floor and tried to keep the finger tapping to a minimum.

After what felt like hours of discussion, Luca was convinced that, other than Jed's information, no one had learned anything else he needed to know to keep Jules safe. Carson's rant, however, was dragging on.

"Now, who's with me?" Carson shouted.

This got a rise out of everyone except Luca.

"We don't have enough cause to attack. We have no proof that they kill. We are rushing to uninformed conclusions," Luca stated evenly.

His point was met with utter silence.

He then abruptly stood and left the room. Reasoning with this Alpha, or his pack, was a waste of time.

Luca strode furiously into the yard heading for his Jeep until he realized that he'd left the Jeep key's upstairs. So, he paced angrily in the yard instead. He desperately wanted to storm back in and defend her. To tell them all that he knew she didn't kill humans, didn't even feed from them. To convince them that they were wrong about her but that desire was utterly illogical. What he was doing with Jules was a betrayal Carson would never forgive. In fact, Luca thought that if Carson knew the extent of his betrayal, he would kill Jules just for spite. But that didn't really matter, because Luca was

pretty sure Carson intended to kill Jules no matter what. It was clear that their relationship had to remain a secret. Revealing his feelings for her to anyone endangered them both.

“Luca. Luca! What was that about?” Ben asked, running up beside him.

Luca ran his tongue over his teeth, deciding how much he could say without throwing Jules, and likely himself, under the bus. “I don’t know.” Luca shrugged. “This vampire. She didn’t attack us. She’s the one who stopped the fight.” He spoke very carefully. “And we don’t have proof that she’s hurt anyone. Why is Carson so intent on killing her?”

“Killing?” Ben raised one eyebrow. “She’s already dead. You understand that, right?”

“You know what I mean.”

“We can’t risk letting those monsters roam around innocent humans,” Ben said.

“What if she doesn’t kill?” Luca asked.

“They all kill,” Ben stated bluntly. “Luca, you’re a young wolf. You haven’t seen the terrors that I have. The tyranny they’ve enforced over our race throughout the years is unacceptable. Every being on earth will be better off with one, or three, less of those things in existence. You get that don’t you?” Ben asked, jabbing Luca in the ribs. He guessed Ben was trying to lighten the mood.

Luca faked a chuckle. “I know, but...”

Ben took him by the shoulder and steered him back toward the Den. “Luca, you’re young. I know you don’t understand fully. Be assured that they are the enemy.

And that they are dead, soulless beings. To destroy them would be to put them out of their misery.”

“How?” Luca stopped walking and looked at Ben.

“Only one thing is as deadly to them as silver is to us. The sun,” he stated simply.

Luca offered a fake, lighthearted, eye roll. “I know that. But how else do you destroy them?” He was treading on thin ice, but if there was another way, he needed to know.

“Yes, Luca, everyone knows that sunlight kills vampires. But just as...”

Luca waited patiently. Ben’s explanations sometimes took a while, but his knowledge was vast.

“...silver has to circulate in our bloodstreams to kill us,” Ben continued, “vampires have to be in direct sunlight for prolonged periods of time for the sunlight to be fatal. Vampires are quite strong, so this can be hard to accomplish. Our ancestors devised another way. Years ago, we used to bury them alive. It is likely that many are still buried deep in the ground. Their locations forgotten forever,” Ben’s voice trailed off like he was remembering something.

“We bury them?” *That doesn’t sound so bad*, Luca thought.

But Ben continued, “not in this age. Today’s technology makes killing them much simpler.”

Luca waited, impatiently now, for his real question to be answered.

“Now, we have UVB lights we can carry to weaken them for the kill. Then, removing their heads works quite nicely.”

Protecting Jules from this fate had just become Luca’s number one priority.

JULIANA

The next thing Jules knew, she was tapping snooze on her alarm. She woke from a dreamy haze with images of Luca and memories of his touch coaxing her gently. As she hit snooze for the third time, she noticed a couple of waiting messages from an unknown number. She read the first one. “Hi, it’s me.” And the second. “I assume you know who me is.” And the last. “They are closing in on you. I know you can take care of yourself, but please, be cautious.” She smiled, saved the number under the contact name L.C., and punched in a quick response.

Jules pulled herself out of bed and dressed for work. She didn’t know if it was wise to stop at the coffee shop. She wasn’t sure that she could keep a secret like this from Monica. After a short amount of contemplation, she decided to stop in anyway.

When she walked through the door, Monica beamed at her. “I know something good,” she teased.

“Don’t tell me.” Jules knew it probably had something to do with Saturday night, and that would send her straight into an immersive Luca Cain spiral.

“Okay. Then, spill. Why didn’t you answer any of my calls yesterday? You did promise me you’d explain everything.” Monica wore a faux scolding expression.

Jules had contemplated how much to say on the drive over. She didn’t like the idea of creating a wedge between herself and the human who knew her best. “I really can’t tell you,” Jules said and smiled sheepishly.

“Jules!” Monica came around the counter, neglecting the customer waiting to order. “What do you mean you can’t tell me?”

Jules pointed toward the waiting woman.

“I’m taking ten,” she shouted to the back. No one responded. Monica rolled her eyes. “Don’t go anywhere.” She pointed an accusatory finger at Jules.

Jules walked a couple paces away and stared aimlessly at the television over her head. “The Fort Miles Phantom has stuck again. A local police officer and two civilians fell victim to this madman in an alley on State Street. The civilians’ identities are being kept confidential until the families can be notified. Officer Micha Harrison’s family was unavailable for comment.”

Jules looked over as the door dinged, announcing the now very angry customer’s departure.

“Come on.” Monica walked passed Jules, motioning for her to follow her outside. Monica rushed over to one of the metal tables set up for customers who preferred the open atmosphere and sat quickly. Jules slid into a chair opposite her. She glanced up, it was going to be a blessedly foggy day.

“Now can you tell me?”

Jules sighed. "It's not that eventful really. I went for a run Saturday night and didn't keep track of the time. I spent all of Sunday in a cave on the beach..." Jules hesitated, "by myself."

"And your phone was?"

"At my house."

"Jules, I know you. You're hiding something."

"Maybe." Jules's face scrunched into a supremely guilty expression.

"See, the last time you looked at me like that you were trying to friend-dump me for my own good. Now look at us, we're better friends than we ever were before I knew your crumbly secret."

Jules sighed.

"What? Is it Luca?"

Monica smiled giddily when Jules failed to respond. "He likes you. I could totally tell that he likes you." She was seeping excitement.

"Yeah," Jules said. "I caught that too." She pressed her lips together, unable to say more.

"So, then what's the problem? Mrs. Prentiss was human once."

"She was." This was irrelevant to Jules and Luca, but she ran with the excuse anyway. "And Gabriel had to turn her into a vampire."

"And is she unhappy?" Monica asked.

"No," Jules answered honestly. Jules didn't like this. She wanted to be honest with Monica. She wanted to tell her everything that had happened since the anniversary double date had come to an end. She desperately wanted

to tell her how being with Luca had changed things inside her. How she felt more hopeful and alive. However, the secret had to be kept, for her safety and for Luca's.

"But you do like him, don't you?"

"I don't... not like him."

"So, what? Because you're..." Monica didn't say undead, but Jules knew she was thinking it. "It means you can't ever find love?"

Jules's phone beeped. It was a message from Luca. Jules couldn't help but smile.

"You're smiling. Who was that?" Monica asked.

"No one. I have to get to work." Jules stood.

"Jules! There is still something you're not telling me."

Jules hesitated and then spoke. "Yes," Jules admitted, "and I promise to tell you what it is when I can."

"That is very frustrating." Monica scowled.

"I know. I'm sorry, please trust me."

"Fine. But this conversation is not over." Monica stood, taking a few steps closer to the coffee shop.

"Agreed." Jules smiled at the annoyed look on Monica's face. They'd be alright. And as soon as she could, Jules would tell her everything.

GABRIEL

Gabriel left his classroom door open. He was hoping to see Jules pass by on her way to her office. She'd been ignoring his calls and texts since Saturday and he was fed up. Minutes ticked by, students began to arrive, and still, Jules had not passed. He watched the clock and checked

his phone for missed messages. *Nothing.* Jules was careless with the sun, it had to be up by now. He peeked through the blind. Confirming that it was going to be a foggy morning, he twisted each blind open, letting in the dull morning light.

“Mister Prentiss?”

Gabriel turned toward his door at the student’s call. Behind the girl, he saw Jules.

“I’ll be just a moment Kara,” he told the girl and walked passed her. “Jules!”

Jules stopped but heisted before turning around. “Gabriel.”

“You’ve been ignoring me. Why?” It came out more of an accusation than a question.

“I needed time,” she said.

“Time for what? I was worried the...” he hesitated, knowing they were a stone’s throw away from a student in every direction. He lowered his voice to barely a whisper, “wolves may have found you.”

Jules sighed. “You’ll just have to trust that I can take care of myself. You set them on this path Gabriel. The consequences are yours to bear.”

Gabriel was stung. He knew he’d reacted impulsively when the Alpha had threatened them, but he hadn’t realized how much his actions must have been bothering Jules. She rarely spoke to him like this. If she’d only done what he wanted to do years ago.

He’d asked Jules to relocate, once they’d discovered the extent of the pack presence in Aboit. But she had refused. By then she had befriended Monica and to her

leaving wasn't worth sacrificing their growing friendship.

"We can't talk about this now. You know that." Jules's tone was harsh, authoritative.

"We can't just not talk about it either," he said, under his breath. He knew Jules, that was her way. When she didn't want to deal with something she pretended it wasn't a problem for as long as she could. "I have to run study hall today. Come to our place tonight, we can talk about it then," he suggested.

She considered a moment longer than was reasonable and then nodded.

Satisfied, he turned back to his classroom and the waiting student. Kara was peaking around the doorframe whispering fervently to a friend.

"We're not having an affair, girls. Get to class." The pair scampered off, Kara's question seemingly forgotten.

LUCA

Luca had been in relatively constant contact with Jules throughout, this, their first day together while apart. He read her latest message before he started the Jeep.

"I'm spending the evening with my friends. I probably won't respond for a while." Luca had gathered that she meant she'd be with her coven tonight.

He punched in a reply, "perfect timing. I'll be away from my phone for the next few hours. Full moon."

The Jeep's engine roared to life as the key turned. He was not looking forward to all the inquiries concerning

his behavior of late. However, if he was late this time, Carson may actually have his head. Still, it was comforting to know that Jules was safe for the night. All the wolves would be preoccupied.

Luca's phone beeped. "Oh no! I completely forgot that little detail." She was poking fun at him for overlooking the fact that vampires can't go into the sunlight.

He smiled widely. At the next stoplight, he replied with, "sure you did." Luca glanced up through the windshield. The moon was already on the rise.

The next message he received winked at him with the addition of, "have a good hunt!"

Luca put his phone down without replying. He had arrived. He pulled up to the fence at the local preserve, which was already lined with cars. This was the night of the full moon, tonight the animal would take over. Werewolves could, of course, turn at will. But during the apex of each full moon cycle, the animal inside was forcibly, wonderfully, released.

The patch of gravel next to Carson's vehicle was left open for the pack's Beta. Luca parked the Jeep there and climbed out. With a running leap, he launched himself over the chain-link fence, landing with a thump on the other side. Luca wasn't sure how Carson managed this, but every full moon, the pack that Carson called his own, gathered to pay their respects to their Alpha and run as one.

A few young wolves howled as Luca approached one of several groupings of werewolves. "Hi Luca," said a female wolf, batting her eyelashes at him.

He smiled cordially but moved farther into their midst. Some wolves bowed slightly toward him when he passed. Luca saw many familiar faces, some he did not expect to see tonight.

Kyle playfully barked in his direction. Hayley, standing next to him, smacked him on the back of the head. Luca joined them near the center of the gathering pack.

"I'm surprised you're here," Luca commented.

"I am too," Kyle admitted. "However, our almighty Alpha informed me that I was to be here, or else."

"What do you suppose that means?" Hayley asked worriedly. She took Kyle's hand and made a face at Adam, who had scowled at her.

Luca shrugged. He didn't want to worry Hayley, but, he figured it probably had something to do with whatever punishment Carson had decided Kyle deserved for his insubordination.

Kyle ran his hand down Hayley's long, silky hair, kissing her on the side of the head. "It'll be fine."

Watching them together made him think of Jules. Of his new-found passion for her. Of his need to protect her. Everything seemed to bring his mind back to Jules.

Carson's howl pierced the darkening night sky. And it was met with more howls, Luca, Hayley, and Kyle did not join them.

“Once again, it is pleasing to see you all,” Carson began.

Some wolves continued to stand in their human form. Some of the more feral wolves crept from the woods in their wolf form. Luca, Kyle, and some others began to sit on the grass, knowing Carson’s speeches tended to run long.

“Looking at all of you shows me the inspiring strength I have behind me...”

“Here we go,” Kyle muttered.

Hayley kicked him lightly.

Luca suppressed a snicker.

“A lot has progressed since the last Moon Hunt, but first and foremost I must announce a cause for celebration.”

Kyle looked at Luca, who was silently hoping Carson hadn’t had Jules killed in the last ten minutes of radio silence.

“A wedding has taken place,” Carson continued.

Luca’s eyes grew wide.

“Kyle Cooper, Mrs. Cooper, please join me.”

Hayley hesitated but was nudged forward by her father. She reached out her hand to Kyle, who took it, pulling himself off the ground.

Luca worriedly watched as the couple walked, hand in hand, up to where their Alpha stood.

“We celebrate with this couple that, with my full blessing, have been joined together as one.”

Luca balked. *Like hell they were.* He looked at Kyle, who seemed to be very confused, if not a little unnerved by what Carson was saying.

“Her father and I talked at length before I allowed this union...”

Luca knew that Carson had talked to Hayley's father, but to demand her hand for himself, not grant it to somebody else. Luca looked at Joe Reynolds. Hayley's father looked rather subdued. What had he given or promised Carson, to ensure that Hayley and Kyle were safe? Luca shuttered to think of it. Owing Carson that kind of a debt was bound to unravel a few nerves.

“After tonight's hunt has concluded, a celebration will be held at my home, the home of your Alpha. All are welcome.” At this, he gave a sweeping gesture, but the statement was untrue. If you were not one of Carson's favorites, you were not actually invited. This was of common understanding amongst the pack. This suggested inclusion was just for show.

Luca suppressed an eye roll as he half-listened to Carson prattle on. Luca let his mind wander after Kyle and Hayley had safely rejoined in him the grass. He listened for the word vampire to pull him back to what Carson was saying, but it never came. Carson didn't say a word about the current threat to Aboit, or the pack. Luca found this odd but was relieved all the same.

As Carson's voice continued to wreck the peace of the evening, Luca spied something a bit odd. Looking over Carson's shoulder, Luca focused in on a pair of late arrivals. Being late to the Moon Hunt was not a normal

practice. It was a woman Luca had never seen before and a teenage boy. The woman was tall and beautiful, stately even. The boy wore tight jeans and a t-shirt that dripped with irony, a stocking cap covered most of his dyed black hair, and he looked like he pretty much permanently had something better to do with his time.

Once it must have become apparent that the majority of his pack was seeing something he wasn't, Carson turned to look behind him. Luca prepared himself, this kind of disrespect was generally considered a punishable crime. But Carson made no move against them.

The woman spoke without waiting to be addressed. "Micha is dead. Carson, we need your help."

"Demetria Harrison," Carson said invitingly, which was odd.

A few of the wolves near Carson, who had been hanging on his every word, jeered at the audacity of interrupting their Alpha's speech.

Carson rose his bulky arm to silence them. "This woman has come back home, we will welcome her," Carson instructed. "Ben, Luca," he said, then motioned for them to join him by the woman's side.

Max bounded up beside them, but Carson held out his hand, sending the over-eager wolf away.

"Tell me what happened, Demetria," Carson instructed, almost softly.

"I didn't see it happen but my son Ricky did." Demetria motioned toward the teenager.

Ricky glared back.

"Tell our Alpha what happened, baby," Demetria instructed the boy sweetly.

Ricky rolled his eyes and paused. "It was a vampire," Ricky said finally.

Carson's eyes grew brighter, hungrier.

"How do you know? What did it look like?" Ben asked.

"I didn't get a great look, but...fangs, pale skin, red hair..."

"Female?" Carson nearly shrieked.

"No, it was definitely a dude."

Carson's face fell.

"When did this happen?" Luca asked.

"Last night." Ricky didn't say more.

Luca flinched. *Poor kid.*

"We've been living in Fort Miles," Demetria said. "Micha, my husband, was looking into the sting of murders there. They were vampire killings, he was sure of it. He must have closed in on the demon. When it attacked, it overpowered him, but he fought hard. His sacrifice gave our son a chance to run," Demetria's voice cracked as she spoke. She reached out for her son's hand. He yanked it away before she could take it.

Carson rested a hand on her lower back. The gesture was a bizarrely intimate one.

"Demetria, I'm so sorry. Where are you staying now?" Ben asked.

Luca was starting to put things together. This woman must have been part of this pack's past. A past that took place before he had come to Aboit.

“Nowhere yet. We grabbed the important things and came straight here. I didn’t want to take the risk that that monster would come back to finish the job.”

“I understand,” Carson said. “You and the boy can stay with me. At least until you get back on your feet. I must say, it will be nice to have you back with us.”

“I’m truly grateful, Carson.” Demetria smiled at Carson like he had just rescued her from certain death.

“It’s not a problem in the slightest,” he assured her, putting one hand on her shoulder, close to her neck. “It’s my job as Alpha now, to take care of you. Do you have a car?”

“We do.”

“Let’s go now, so you can get settled before the pack arrives,” Carson decided.

“Are you sure? The full moon...” Demetria looked around at the many pack members hovering nearby, pretending they couldn’t hear the conversation being had. Luca couldn’t believe she had blatantly questioned him.

“Of course, I’m sure. We can be back to the Den by the moon’s apex, and my Beta can lead the hunt tonight,” Carson said smoothly, motioning dismissively toward Luca.

Luca’s fingers twitched, it was a lot of power to hold, leading the Moon Hunt.

“Your troubles are over, dear one.” Carson brushed Demetria’s cheek with one finger. “You are no longer alone; you have me now.”

Demetria blushed.

Ricky rolled his eyes but said nothing.

“Wolves!” Carson demanded the pack's attention. “Your Alpha must take his leave. Your Beta, Luca Cain, has command.”

Demetria's eyes grew wide at the announcement of his surname. Several wolves muttered their approval. The boy, Ricky, Luca noted looked mildly interested, but only for a moment.

Carson began to propel Demetria in the direction of the preserve's entrance.

“I want to run with the pack,” Ricky announced, not following his mother.

“I don't know Sweetie. I...” Demetria began, turning to face him.

“Demetria, dear, let him. After what he's been through, the hunt may be just what he needs. Besides, this way you and I can catch up.” Carson instructed, but Luca seriously doubted there was any concern for the boy in Carson's motives.

“He can catch a ride back with me,” Luca offered.

Demetria looked from Luca to her son and back, then she conceded. “I'd like that,” she said to Carson. She was now looking up at Carson like he'd hung the moon.

With that, Carson and Demetria walked towards the entrance to the preserve. Luca turned away from their receding forms.

“Find me after the hunt,” Luca told Ricky, then moved to address the pack. It was obvious that he held the position of power now, all faces turned obediently toward him.

During the following minutes, Luca allowed the pack to prepare for the change. Some wolves began to remove their clothing, some simply their outerwear. Some of the teenage girls tucked their phones in their bra's. Whatever a wolf changed with stayed with them, became part of them. So, how one chose to run was seen as a highly personal decision. Luca always found that the less you had tying yourself to your humanity the more freeing the run, the more animalistic his werewolf nature became. This is how he preferred it. This is how he let the wolf fully take over, to leave everything behind.

After only a few more minutes, Luca knew the time was right. The moon had risen high in the night sky. But most importantly, Luca could feel the pull of the animal inside him intensify. "With the moon, with the hunt, with our pack, let's do this!" Luca shouted, building their anticipation with his own. The need to run as one was taking over his senses.

Kip, Ben, and Kyle appeared at his side. Ben glared at Kyle. "You lucky dog," Kip whispered to Kyle while glancing over at Hayley, who stood next to her family, prepared for the change from woman to wolf.

Luca's insides twisted, the moon's power pulling the change from inside him. Normally, when Luca shifted into wolf form, he was still himself inside. Even as a wolf, he was in full control of his thoughts and actions. Tonight, things were different. Tonight, like all other full moons, Luca would lose the part of him that made him human. Tonight, the wolf would run free.

Luca's shoulders bent forward, his body curling in on himself. It was time. He turned his back to the pack and let out a great howl, which started a chorus of responses. Luca focused what was left of his concertation, he bounced on his heels a moment longer and then bolted, in human form, farther into the forest.

He could hear the footfalls of the pack taking off behind him. Once his adrenaline was pumping, his mind was clear, and his pack was paces behind him, he launched himself into the air. In a flash of light, he turned from man to beast. His swift paws landed soundlessly on the forest floor. The man he was, now fully buried inside the animal.

Luca was lost in the hunt, fueled by heightened senses, and gathering strength from those who ran with him. He sniffed, the scent of deer came to his nose. He turned, leading the pack in a new direction. The wolf ran as fast as he could, his heart pounded in rhythm with his pace. He was liberated from his conflict with Carson, from his concerns for Jules, all of it. For this moment, he was consumed by the freedom of the pack. He howled as he closed in on his prey, the moonlight glistening off his silver coat.

Chapter Nine

LIVING WITH THE DEAD

Jules pulled into Gabriel's driveway. His front door opened before she could knock. Eileen stood in the entryway, smiling widely. "How is he?" Jules asked.

"A bit grouchy to be honest," Eileen replied, none too quietly. Eileen turned back into the house, Jules following behind her.

"He's fine," Gabriel said from where he sat on the sofa, his nose in a history book he'd probably read a hundred times.

"He says that and yet he's being grouchily defensive," Eileen teased. "Come, get something to drink."

Jules followed Eileen to the kitchen where she pulled a pre-poured glass from the refrigerator and handed it to Jules. Jules felt an overwhelming need at the smell of it. She took the glass and drank. The red liquid surged through her, soothing the thirst. She closed her eyes, soaking in the immediate calm. All her troubles seemed so far away. Nothing mattered, just the ecstasy of the blood.

"Jules, what's wrong? You seem a little stretched?" Gabriel's voice came from just behind her left shoulder. His question pulled her out of her blood-induced trance. "What happened Saturday?"

"Not yet." Jules heaved a breath of air, then another, and wiped her mouth after drinking the last drop. Now, she felt ready for almost anything. The pair returned to the living room. With a relaxed sigh, Jules dropped onto the green couch, curled her feet underneath her, and stretched her neck back and forth.

Eileen stayed in the kitchen, most likely cleaning the glass Jules had just emptied.

"Are you ready to tell me now?" Gabriel asked, a tinge of annoyance in his tone.

"Stop badgering her Gabriel," Eileen commanded as she rejoined them, sitting on Gabriel's lap in the armchair. "She can have secrets, you know."

"Do you have secrets from me?" he asked, almost playful.

"Not at the moment, but who knows, maybe I will someday. And, if that day comes, I expect you to honor my right to have them." Eileen's voice was unwavering. Gabriel hugged her waist tighter, seemingly appreciative of her opinion rather than angered by it.

Jules watched them closely. Eileen and Gabriel were born a century apart, and yet, the idea that a woman would speak to her husband that way hadn't come around until the time when Eileen was growing up. Jules was glad to see Gabriel had adjusted to Eileen's ideals,

rather than the other way around. Jules's homicidal ex preferred a firm hand to an open mind.

"My wife is right, of course. And normally you are allowed to have secrets, but right now it's too dangerous."

Jules offered a sigh of exasperation. "Gabriel, you may be one of my dearest friends, but my existence is my own."

"But that doesn't explain why you weren't returning my calls," he said. "At least tell me you are okay, that you are not in danger."

"I'm not in any danger. I'm perfectly fine. Okay?" Of course, this was not at all true. Especially if the Alpha ever found out about her and Luca. "I silenced my phone for the day. I just needed some space. Is that so hard to believe?" Jules felt angry and guilty all at the same time. Angry at him for making her lie to him, and guilty because she had never lied to him before. But Luca's safety was worth this lie.

"If that's all, why didn't you just tell me that? Or better yet, let me know ahead of time."

"It wasn't a plan, it just kind of happened. But everything is fine, so can we just drop it," she said, keeping her voice calm but feeling quite irritated.

Gabriel did not look overly pleased, but he nodded in agreement, backing down.

"Now that that ridiculousness is over, anyone up for a movie?" Eileen asked. "I saw this great one the other day!"

"You two go ahead. I'm going to get some reading in," Gabriel said, picking up the book he'd discarded. He tapped his phone several times and classical music began to play throughout the house's surround sound.

"Unbelievable!" Eileen flung herself off his lap and onto the couch, head coming to rest on Jules's legs.

"Romantic Comedy in the guest room?" She asked Jules, looking at her upside down.

"Actually," Jules pulled a book out of her bag. "I'm almost on the last chapter," she said with a sheepish smile.

"Fine. Be boring, both of you. I'll be in the guest room with Kristen Bell."

Jules giggled as she watched her go. Eileen slammed the door a little harder than necessary. Jules and Gabriel smiled down at their respective pages. They sat in comfortable silence, the disagreement between them forgotten. The soft tones of classical music fostered the peaceful atmosphere.

Many nights had passed like this, in the joint calm and comfort of a book. But tonight, Jules sat there pretending to turn page after page. When, in reality, she wasn't retaining a single word. Everywhere she looked today, something or someone had reminded her of Luca. She couldn't resist thinking about him. Not that she wanted to. She saw a man with his stature entering the coffee shop as she was leaving the outside table. One of the students she helped had hair like his. Another was wearing sneakers like the ones he wore the first time

she'd seen him. She couldn't help wishing that she would turn around and see him right now, in this moment.

Jules glanced up from her page, looking at the top of Gabriel's blond head. She could just see his sharp nose over the top of his book. He had been her rock. She'd leaned on him for centuries. She couldn't bear the thought of betraying Gabriel and Eileen. Gabriel was a brother to her. The only one she had now, but she couldn't help how she felt. Or who she was falling for. Once Gabriel discovered her secret, she knew he'd feel betrayed. She could only hope that it wouldn't separate them entirely. With this, she pushed Luca from her mind. For now, at least, she wanted to be in this moment with her dearest friend.

LUCA

As Luca's humanity regained control, he brought the hunt to a close, hours earlier than normal. Some of them had a surprise wedding reception to attend. The rest of the pack followed his example reluctantly. Some of them, very reluctantly. It took him several minutes to locate the wolfy-form of the teenage boy he'd offered a ride too. Luca suspected that Ricky was in no hurry to start his new and abrupt life crammed into a place called the Den. Not that Luca could blame the boy for wanting to leave the wolf in control of his mind. He just saw his father murdered; Luca knew what he was going through. It took the Beta's command for him to relinquish the animal inside.

After a few minutes of awkward silence and Ricky fiddling with the radio, Luca decided to voice something that had been nagging at his mind. "I'm sure your mother has asked you this, but, are you okay?"

Ricky's hand fell from the dashboard. He froze, staring forward. "She hasn't actually. She went into panic mode when she found out Dad was dead and hasn't stopped since."

"I'm sorry," Luca said honestly. "Seeing a parent murdered is a hard thing to bear."

"What would you know about it? You're a Cain. I'm sure everywhere you go people worship the ground you walk on!" Ricky's anger was understandable, Luca didn't take offense.

"I am a Cain, you are not wrong." Luca sighed. "I also saw my father murdered when I was sixteen. He and the rest of my family were killed on the same night." It was a harsh reality and, to this day, hard to admit aloud. However, Luca felt that if someone had confided that they too had experienced his pain, it would have helped him process his grief sooner.

Luca glanced over. Ricky was staring at him. "Oh." Ricky blushed scarlet; clearly embarrassed by his misplaced anger. "That sucks."

Luca's phone beeped. He ignored it as he continued. "It really does. It still haunts me. But, if you ever want to talk about what happened to you, now you know I'll understand."

"Yeah, I guess so." Ricky chewed on his lip. "Who's Juliet?"

Luca glanced over and saw that Ricky had picked his phone up off the center console.

“Nobody. Put that down,” Luca instructed.

Ricky rolled his eyes but did as he was told.

“This is where you’re taking me?” Ricky almost laughed as Luca pulled onto the grass beside the Den.

“This is home,” Luca said, “for now.”

“Wow.” Ricky’s tone suggested that this was not said in wonder but in disdainful disbelief.

“Come on then,” Luca prodded. The sounds of revelry were already coming from behind the privacy fence’s chipping paint.

Ricky followed steps behind Luca as he entered through the front screen door. Luca spied Hayley through the back screen door, leading to the back porch. She was in the yard talking to her mother. She had somehow acquired a short white dress between the run and this backyard barbeque celebration.

“My girl looks great, doesn’t she?” Kyle asked while throwing an arm across Luca’s shoulders as he and Ricky entered the backyard. She did, of course, her hair fell in soft waves to one side and she wore the smile of real love.

“Do you really need me to answer that?” Luca retorted.

“Nah, my opinion matters more anyway,” Kyle shot back.

Ricky snorted.

Luca had monetarily forgotten he was there. “Ricky, this is Kyle, the groom.” Luca pointed at Kyle and then Hayley.

"Awesome, another of the Alpha's flying monkeys."
Ricky rolled his eyes.

"Well you're a bucket of cheerfulness, aren't you?"
Kyle quipped.

Ricky glared in Luca's direction.

"Actually, I am neither flying nor a monkey if you must know," Kyle added with a smile, tossing his hair.

Ricky narrowed his eyes.

"I'm just lucky my wife is celebrating a wedding tonight instead of preparing for my funeral."

"Really," Ricky said. It's wasn't a question.

"Our Alpha is kind of an overbearing control freak that may be losing his mind at this very moment..."

"Kyle!" Luca silenced him, motioning with his eyes toward Ben who had just walked through the back door.

"Anyway. This guy is our Beta and he's a thumping good one." Kyle whacked Luca on the shoulder. "Get it, 'thumping?'" he asked playfully.

"Shut up," Luca replied, but he was teasing.

Ricky may have cracked a smile, whether with Kyle or at Kyle Luca couldn't be sure.

Just then, Ricky's mother approached them, jogging up the four wooden steps to the back porch. "Did you behave yourself tonight?" she asked, moved to ruffle Ricky's hair.

Ricky yanked his head away and glared at her, blushing. "I'm tired. Where am I sleeping?"

"Carson has made up beds from us..." Demetria began.

"Where?"

“My apologizes Beta.” She nodded, a sign of respect.

Luca shrugged.

“This way.” Demetria led her son into the house.

Luca didn’t watch them go. Instead, he was distracted by a tugging on his hand. The girl who had greeted him at the preserve was pulling him toward the makeshift dance floor, as music boomed from a large stereo. “Not tonight,” he said, pulling his hand back.

“But you’ve danced with me before,” she whined.

“Not tonight.”

“Your rejection is to my advantage, thanks dude,” Kip whispered to Luca as he passed him.

The woman giggled as Kip scooped her into his arms.

Luca walked over to sit on the picnic table bench. He glanced up. The sunrise was a smearing of vibrant colors painted across the sky.

“He looks happy, doesn’t he?”

“Huh?” Luca asked, focusing on Hayley, who was sitting next to him.

“Luca, are you alright? You seem...” Hayley started.

“Distracted. I know. It’s nothing,” Luca replied staring past the partying pack.

Hayley patted his arm.

There were many times over the years that Luca wished this pack had never found him. He needed a pack, all wolves did, but he sometimes wished he wasn’t under Carson’s thumb. His obsessive, controlling personality was a lot to live with. But that was the price he paid, and it was well worth the cost of having Kyle and Hayley in his life.

CARSON

Carson scowled as he watched Hayley walk over and introduce herself to Demetria. Hayley was a young wolf, and Demetria had been away from the pack for many years. *Hayley would have been such a radiant queen*, Carson thought. Not only was she exceedingly beautiful, but she was also a pure-white wolf. This was extremely rare and, in fact, why he's chosen her in the first place. But maybe his long-forgotten ex-girlfriend was his salvation. With Demetria at his side, Hayley jilting him could be easily buried. *Even if she does have a brat child with her.*

Max bounded up next to Carson, delivering the beer he'd instructed him to retrieve ages ago. He grabbed it from him and dismissed the hyperactive spaz with a wave of his hand.

Carson's scowl deepened as Kyle wrapped his arms around the beautiful young wolf and whispered in her ear. She giggled and the pair headed to the dance floor.

Carson had decided to stay Kyle's punishment because he felt Luca's loyalty waning. He couldn't afford to lose such a reputable Beta. Even if he was the freak who'd lost his family in a fire, he was a Cain, that meant something in pack life. He would allow this marriage to stand and grant the traitor mercy, solely to regain Luca's obedience. "Such a waste," he said aloud, still looking Hayley Reynolds up and down.

"You did a good thing," Ben said, approaching Carson's from his right. This man should be his Beta, he was loyal. However, he was also mysterious. He refused

to talk about his past. All Carson had gathered is that he was old and that he hated vampires, which was enough for him.

“Did I?” Carson sneered as Kyle kissed the woman he’d had no right to claim. He’d taken her from Carson. It stung, but his pride would never allow this fact to become public knowledge. Kyle’s punishment would come one day, this slight could not go unanswered forever. However, before he could exact justice, he’d have to see Luca’s friendship with the traitor came to an end. Luca needed to fall back in line. *Now.*

RICKY

Ricky shifted off of a loose spring on the couch after only a few hours of sleep. The cot that had been made up for his mother had not been slept in, even though the noises of last night’s party had died down hours ago. He yanked the headphones out of his ears as the alarm on his phone continued to blare. Blinking, Ricky looked at the time. 7:00 A.M. He hadn’t remembered setting his phone alarm last night. In fact, he distinctly remembered turning off his school alarm since he obviously wouldn’t be going to Fort Miles Preparatory Academy anymore.

Hopeless that he would be able to get any more sleep, Ricky stood and began aimlessly walking through the house. He opened the front door and looked out. Most of the vehicles were gone. Just four remained. He bypassed the stairs where the bedrooms, undoubtedly, were when he heard his mother’s voice coming from the kitchen.

His mom was standing in front of the stove and the stupid Alpha's massive arms were wrapped around her. He said something in her ear and she giggled. Just then, his mom turned to retrieve something from the refrigerator but stilled upon seeing him.

"Breakfast is almost ready sweetie," she said, being way to cheery considering the circumstances.

"You know Dad died two nights ago right?" he asked, glaring from his mother to Carson and back.

"You'd better get dressed or you'll be late for your new school," his mother responded, completely ignoring that she ever had a husband apparently.

Ricky's anger spiked. In a matter of moments, his life had been completely obliterated. His father was dead, and his mom was acting insane. Did he really have to change schools too? He liked Fort Miles Prep, he had friends that knew him for what he was. There, he knew where he fit in the scheme of things and he liked it that way.

"Carson made a call to the superintendent of Aboit High this morning, you're all good to go."

"You are unbelievable," Ricky commented flatly.

"Don't speak to your mother that way," Carson said. Ricky thought that Carson was attempting to appear calm, but he also thought he saw something strange in the look in his eyes. Something unsettling.

"Who the hell do you think you are..." Ricky snapped.

Carson took one threatening step forward. Ricky thought Carson might just haul-off and hit him. But Demetria held up her hand and Carson chose to stay by her side.

“Ricky enough,” Demetria commanded. “This is our life now. You have to go to school here, in Aboit.”

“Fine.” Ricky turned and walked back to the family room. He heard his mother apologizing for her son’s behavior. Ricky couldn’t stand it in this dump anyway. So, he found her purse, dug out her keys, picked up his phone and charger, and walked out the noisy front door. As he was digging through their mess of belongings, Demetria joined him on the driveway.

“That was uncalled for, young man. This is our home now, and we owe this Alpha our loyalty and respect.”

Seriously, he thought but didn’t say aloud. Instead, he threw her a glare and continued digging through what was left of his old life. He found his skateboard and schoolbag buried deep in the trunk and yanked them both free.

“Do you want me to walk you? The school’s only a few blocks east of here.”

“Yes, because I’m in kindergarten,” he snapped, slammed the trunk shut, hopped on the skateboard, and pushed off.

“Check in at the front desk when you get there!” she shouted after him. “Have a good day, sweetheart!”

He raised his hand but didn’t make the effort to wave.

Rolling along the sidewalk, wind blowing through his dyed black hair, he trick-flipped his board a few times. Once he had to stomp on the back end to grab it and carry it over a broken stretch of sidewalk.

Ricky hadn't intended to actually find the school building, but he did. Students were pouring in from the sidewalks and parking lot as he stood before the large, brick building. FM Prep, commonly known to its students as FML prep, was a fancy private school. Ricky was basically the one and only fashionably rebellious student, but he'd known those kids all his life. Here he had no idea what to expect. At least he had taken the precaution of wearing street clothes.

"Hi, you're new here, aren't you?" A voice said from right beside him.

His eyes grew wide when he turned. Beside him stood an attractive, edgily-dressed human girl, who looked to be about his age. She was wearing a short skirt, which Ricky quite admired, and a black, faux leather jacket. The only shred of real color she wore was coming from the rainbow of colors in her hair.

Ricky nodded, a little stunned. There were no girls like this at his old school.

"I'm Tasha," she said, offering her black, nail polished, fingers toward him.

"Ricky."

"Come on. I'll walk you to the office."

Ricky wasn't sure why, but he followed Tasha up the stone steps and into the school building. "I saw you boarding earlier," she continued.

Ricky sort of smiled by didn't say anything.

"Here." Tasha motioned to an office on their right. "Oh, and I don't know if you're interested but a bunch of

us are working the carnival after school if you want to join.”

“Thanks, I’ll think about it.”

“Okay, I’ll hold you to that then,” she responded as a smile spread across her face. Then she turned and almost trotted down the hall, leaving him to walk into the office alone.

Girls! Ricky thought as he shook his head a little and smiled to himself.

He then contemplated running back out of the school, but where would he go if he did. He’d just have to make it through the school day like he had at FML Prep; by making sarcastic comments to his teachers and thinking about how ridiculous the whole school thing really was for a werewolf.

He squared his shoulders and walked through the open door. Stopping in front of a cluttered desk, he cleared his throat and waited.

“Oh hello,” a large, dark-skinned woman in glasses greeted.

“I’m Ricky Harrison. I think you are expecting me.”

“Right,” she said and then looked at all the sticky notes attached to her workspace. “I did hear something about that.”

Ricky waited.

“Tell you what. We aren’t actually ready for you at this moment. Why don’t I walk you down to the library? I’m sure Miss Bristow could put you to work for a few hours.”

“Whatever,” Ricky replied.

JULIANA

At the start of another workday, Jules crouched at the back of the library shelving a pile of books some juniors had left in a stack on the floor.

"Jules?" Belinda, the office assistant, called.

"Back here!" Jules peaked her head around the shelf. "Be there in a second!" Jules shoved the last book into its place on the shelf, stood, and walked toward the front of the library.

"There's a vampire in your library," said the boy standing next to Belinda.

"You have quite an imagination young man. But in this school, our students treat our staff with respect," Belinda scolded.

"But..."

"Sit." She pointed to one of the tables nearby.

The boy scowled but walked over to the area she was pointing at and sat with a thud.

Jules walked behind her desk, eternally grateful that Belinda had reacted as she had. "I'm sorry about this, Jules," Belinda began, walking behind Jules's desk as well. "The superintendent called this morning, demanding that we find a place for this kid. We don't have things worked out yet. Can you keep him here for a while? Get his books together maybe. I'll email you his class list once I get him enrolled."

"Bee, breathe." She patted the woman on the shoulder. "Yes. We'll be fine."

“You’re sure?” The middle-aged woman looked skeptical. Jules looked over at the werewolf boy. He looked more annoyed and prickly than scared.

“Positive.”

“Then, I should really get back.” Belinda pointed over her shoulder.

“Go. I’ve got this,” Jules assured her, yet again.

“You’re a miracle worker,” she called back as she left in a rush.

Jules gave her a few minutes to disappear back down the hall before approaching the teenager.

“Are you going to kill me?” he asked without looking at her, his hands clamped over the edge of the table.

“I wasn’t planning to. Nor would I,” Jules said honestly. She continued to stand several feet back from the seemingly skittish youth.

“How about we don’t do anything this morning Jules,” Ethan blathered as he came through the door. “Did you replace me?” he asked, noticing the other person his age sitting where he usually plopped down in the mornings.

“For today,” she said, her concerned expression softened as she looked at Monica’s little brother.

“Works for me. See ya J!” He waved once as he walked back through the door.

“Go to study hall!” she shouted after Ethan.

He turned and shrugged, smiling mischievously at her through the glass.

“So, you just... work here.” Ricky spoke again. “At a school. Like a human?”

Jules glanced out the glass door before responding. The students were already tucked into their homerooms, leaving the halls pretty much vacant. "I do. I've been here for three years now." Jules tentatively sat across from the boy.

"And the students don't die off mysteriously or anything?" He sounded skeptical.

"I don't feed off humans. Or werewolves for that matter."

He looked up at her for the first time since he'd sat down. He searched her eyes. Looking for what? She wasn't sure.

"Juliana Bristow. Or Jules, as it were." She smiled as unthreateningly as possible.

"I'm Ricky Harrison," he said but didn't offer his hand.

"What brings you here, Ricky?"

Ricky just looked at her, baffled.

"You're obviously new here for some reason."

"My father was murdered. Yesterday. By a vampire."

Empathetically, Jules wanted to comfort the boy. And yet, if his story was true, he was probably feeling very scared, insecure, and sad right now. "You have nothing to fear from me."

"Awesome," he said sarcastically.

She searched for something else to say and then remembered that she was playing the part of a school librarian. "How about you help me out. You can shelve some books for me?"

Ricky yawned involuntarily, pulled his phone out of his bag, put his earbuds in his ears, and music started to blare.

“Or we can do that later,” Jules said to no one, since Ricky was obviously no longer listening. Just then, Jules’s in-house messenger dinged from her computer. She took the excuse to leave the boy alone and walked back to her desk to pull up her staff messenger. She had a message from Belinda waiting for her. “So, this kid’s transcripts just came in from his last school. He was at the top of his class. Go figure. I’ve attached his class schedule and book list. He can start tomorrow. Hope you’re doing okay with him.”

Jules looked over at Ricky, who was typing out a message of his own. This was going to be a long day.

LUCA

Luca was sleeping late due to the previous night’s celebration. If dreams were a choice, he would have chosen to dream of Jules. But instead, his subconscious haunted him with his greatest shame. Forcing him to relive his greatest pain, over and over again. Luca dreamt of a picturesque little cabin, secluded from prying eyes. It lay in the Canadian forest of Ontario. A loving family lived there; it was his family, this had been his home.

A woman stood in the cabin doorway waving at him. Jenna Cain, Luca’s mother, looked as radiant as she had on that day. His father, Bill, a strong and wise leader, clapped him on the shoulder. In the dream, Luca jumped at the unexpected contact. He looked over and saw blood

pooling on his father's forehead. Bill seemed unconcerned. Luca looked again, the blood was gone.

The dream shifted, and Luca saw a face, one he'd never been able to forget. The face of the human girl Luca had fallen in love with. Luca and Rosemary fell in love young, and they loved each other recklessly. He lived for the look she got in her eyes when they were together. That look he saw now in his sleep. For the briefest of moments her face became another's, her hair wasn't blonde but red, her eyes lightened, her features softened.

Jules.

"Rosemary, I have to tell you something," the teenage version of him said. The face turned back into the tall blonde. He didn't want to have secrets from Rosemary, not even this one. "There is something about me you don't know."

"Really?" she asked coyly.

In his dream, adult Luca was screaming at his younger self to stay quiet. The course of events that followed this act of trust would destroy everything Luca loved.

"You're a liar, Luca Cain," Rosemary screamed. "Never speak to me again!"

"Wait, Rosie, I can prove it to you!" he called after her.

"How?"

Then he did the one thing he'd promised his father he never would. He showed Rosemary the truth. He turned into a wolf before her eyes.

Rosemary screamed and fell into hysterics. “You’re a monster! I’ll destroy you if you ever come near me again!” And then she ran.

Luca had ignored her threats but had tried to keep his distance. He had wanted to believe that once the shock wore off, she would come around.

He had been very wrong.

Rosemary had told her father Luca’s secret. He, in turn, had rallied the townsmen to hunt the wolves down. In a bold attempt to destroy what they didn’t understand; the unruly mob had armed themselves and had stormed Luca’s family’s home.

Luca and his father had been out in the forest. “It’ll be your responsibility someday,” Bill had said. Luca’s father liked to be out running in the forest. He had always been the freest in those moments.

The angry mob had broken into Luca’s home that night. They’d murdered everyone he loved. Not only did they shoot his mother, ten-year-old brother, older sister and her husband, but they also murdered Luca’s two young nieces.

Luca and his father had rushed toward the house, but Bill never made it inside. An athlete Luca went to school with had shot Bill between the eyes before he could save his dying family.

Luca woke when the gunshots rang in his mind. He was drenched in sweat, tangled in his sheets, and trembling from the dream. Shaking himself from the nightmare, he tried not to relive what had happened next.

Enraged, Luca had lunged at his father's killer. In one swift movement, he killed the boy. *His first murder.*

As Luca had run into the cottage, he'd heard terrified screams coming from his nieces' room. He'd made it just in time to see five-year-old Elena transform into a wolf for the first time. Rosemary's older brother had shot little Elena out of mid-air. She'd died instantly, her sister already gone. Luca's rage had consumed him. He'd torn the boy apart. *His last murder.*

When the mob found the dead boy outside, they'd taken the body and fled. In a daze, he'd tried to wake his sister and then his mother, but nothing could be done. His entire family was gone in those few terrible moments.

Luca had dragged his father's body inside the house to lay with the rest of his family. With a mighty howl, he'd lit his family home on fire. Guilt-ridden, heartbroken, and afraid he wouldn't be able to stop himself from exacting his revenge on all the humans involved, including Rosemary, he'd fled Canada immediately following the start of the blaze. He lived inside the wolf for many months following these horrific events.

Luca shook the memories from his mind. He didn't know why this dream had chosen to haunt him once again. He suspected it had something to do with telling Ricky that he understood his pain.

Luca stretched noisily and dropped one hand over the side of the bed. He shifted things around the floor until he found his phone lying under the shirt he'd worn the

day before. The screen blinked to life. He'd missed one message from his Juliet. "Hope I don't wake you, but I have a very angry werewolf boy here today. Any ideas on convincing him not to out me?"

The message was only a few minutes old. Luca held his phone above him as he typed. "Is his name Ricky Harrison?" He dropped the phone on his bed and started detangling himself from his sheets.

Jules's response came back almost immediately. "That's the one."

Jules had told him that she worked at the local high school. He thought it odd that Carson seemed not to know this. Especially since werewolf kids did regularly attend Aboit High. But they were also kept out of most pack drama. The majority of them probably didn't even realize that their school librarian was a four-hundred-year-old vampire.

"I'm on my way," he sent back and then got up to shower and dress.

Chapter Ten

BETA AT ABOUT HIGH

Jules responded with, “that’s probably a bad idea,” and then set her phone down on the desk. It’d been half of an hour and Ricky still hadn’t moved. His head stayed bent over his phone while he did whatever he was doing to pass the time. Jules had tried to start a conversation once, but his hearing was either obscured by his music or he was just very selective with what he chose to hear.

A group of students came into the library on assignment. Jules kept one eye on Ricky as she helped them. She saw one older werewolf boy named Landon Reynolds approach Ricky. She eavesdropped on their conversation, it remained fairly neutral.

Jules’s attention was pulled away momentarily by her vibrating phone. “Probably so, but I’m outside.”

“Wait there,” she sent back.

Jules typed out a quick message to Belinda.

After the next bell rang, pulling the current group of students into their next class, she told Luca to go to the office. A few minutes later, Belinda returned with Luca

two steps behind her. "This is very odd Jules," she commented as she showed him into the library.

"Is it?" Luca asked.

"We don't usually allow attractive uncles such as yourself into our school, but Jules has vouched for you," Belinda told him.

"Did she?" Luca chuckled.

Jules tried to suppress the utter joy she felt upon seeing him, but one smile slipped through the façade. "Thank you, Bee," she said while pointing Luca in the direction of Ricky's turned back.

As Belinda left, Luca raised his eyebrows and pressed his lips together. Jules assumed this was his own version of being discrete. Ricky didn't look up from his phone until Luca sat down across from him and tapped his hand on the table to get his attention. Ricky slowly pulled his headphones out of his ears. "What are you doing here?"

"A friend called," Luca replied.

Jules's phone vibrated again but she ignored it. Whatever it was it could wait.

Ricky looked from Luca to Jules and then back again. "This vampire is your friend," Ricky asked skeptically.

Luca nodded. "She is."

Jules wasn't sure she would have gone with that approach, but Ricky was Luca's pack member. How he handled this was his call.

"Okay, but what are you really doing here?" Ricky asked, clearly not buying the 'you can trust her because she's my friend' angle.

Luca sighed. "I need to know if you are going to tell Carson or anyone else that she works here. Doing that would put her in danger, and I don't want that."

"So, order me not to," suggested Ricky sarcastically. "Only Carson could demand the information from me then."

Luca leaned forward across the table. "I don't want to do that. Forced control is not my style. I would rather just decide that I can trust you." Jules watched him closer. She'd never heard a man that she loved utter such a thing in her life. Yes, it was not directed at her but... Jules realized in that moment that it was true. *I do love him. I love Luca Cain.*

"Jules?"

Luca's voice pulled her back to the present. She'd been, not so discreetly, staring at him.

"I'm fine," she said and then looked anywhere but at the werewolves.

LUCA

"She's Juliet." Ricky's comment took Luca by surprise.

"No, she isn't," Luca said, but doubted that he'd recovered enough to sound convincing.

"My name is Juliana," Jules said.

"I know," Luca replied, continuing to look at Ricky.

"Yes, she is." Ricky stood, knocking into the table as he did. "You've been making goo-goo eyes at each other since you walked in here. You have this crazy forbidden

love thing going on and you don't want me to tell the pack your secret."

"I don't make goo-goo eyes," Luca said, trying to remain calm and stretching his feet out in front of him.

"Have you seen your face?" Ricky asked rhetorically.

"Not recently," Luca admitted a bit sarcastically. "Sit." Luca used a little more of his Beta power than he would have liked to get Ricky to do so. However, he couldn't take the chance that Ricky would run.

"Well it's not hiding what you want it to," Ricky said while he slumped back in his chair.

"I'm going to go talk to my..." Luca pointed toward Jules, "friend. Stay," he ordered.

"Woof Woof," Ricky snapped back angrily.

Luca walked over to Jules's desk and leaned across it. With his elbows resting in the middle of the desk his shoulders were of equal height to Jules's.

"What do we do now?" Jules asked, her voice below a whisper.

Luca shrugged a little. He didn't have an answer. Not a good one anyway. "He is right. I could order him to keep quiet, but I don't want to do it. I really hate taking away someone's free will. It's not right."

A look that Luca hadn't seen before crept across Jules's face. She lifted her hand like she might brush some hair out of his face but pulled her hand back quickly instead. But then she smiled, picked up a pen, and scribbled something. Pulling the, now written on, sticky note off of the top of the large stack, she stuck in on the

desk between his arms. It read, "I really like that about you."

Luca chuckled.

"You two really think you can fool people?" Ricky asked. Luca had honestly momentarily forgotten he was there.

"I told you coming here was a bad idea," she whispered.

If Luca was being honest with himself, he'd known that she was right even before he had left the Den. But he had wanted to see her, and this was as good of an excuse as any. So, as a response, he simply shrugged minutely and offered her a playfully-guilty looking expression.

She made a face that he took to mean that he was silly and maybe a bit sweet. This was, of course, true.

But what to do about Ricky? It hurt Luca to even consider ordering Ricky not to speak of Jules. However, if he couldn't get through to the boy, it was very likely the only way to protect Jules and keep their secret safe.

Luca let out a long breath, his head hanging low for a moment. "Okay," he finally said.

"Luca." Jules's hand clasped down on his arm.

"What?" He looked back up at her. He saw worry in her eyes.

"Hide."

Luca looked over his shoulder. Through the glass, he saw Gabriel heading in the direction of the library. Luca ran back into the stacks, crouching by one of the book-filled shelves that would obscure him from the view of the front door.

“Gabriel, hi.” Jules’s cheerfulness sounded forced. “Don’t you have class right now?” This was said a little more naturally.

A class? He works here too! Luca thought.

“You haven’t been answering my messages,” the male vampire’s angry voice said a few seconds later. Luca thought that perhaps he could’ve asked her if everything was okay, rather than coming at her so accusatorily.

“I’ve been a little busy today.” Luca could hear some annoyance in Jules’s response.

“Too busy to respond to a text message?”

Jules didn’t speak.

Luca was distracted from the conversation by the sound of tentative footsteps walking across the library. He waited for Jules to call out to warn him. The sound grew closer. What was he supposed to do if Gabriel discovered him?

Luca’s gaze shot sideways when Ricky appeared. He’d backed across the library, evidently less comfortable in Gabriel’s presence than in Jules’s.

Gabriel’s voice raised.

“There is a werewolf in here, Jules. One I don’t recognize.” He spoke low enough that a human would have been unable to hear him.

“Yes, Gabriel, there is,” Luca heard Jules say, and wondered for a moment if she was going to tell Gabriel about him. But then she continued, “he’s a new student. And if I had to guess, you are scaring him. You do know you teach quite a few of them.”

Luca thought that this would shut the male vampire up. But instead, he said, "and the one sitting outside in his car. What about that one? Is he just a new student too?"

Luca and Ricky exchanged confused looks.

"What are you talking about? Who's outside?" Jules asked, voicing Luca's confusion.

"I don't know. Some beast. Scrawny, glasses, overactive camera."

"Jed," Luca said under his breath.

"Why is he here if not for us?" Gabriel continued.

Luca was horror-stricken. Jed must have tracked one of them here. *How long has he been out there?* Had he seen Luca enter the school building? Had he spotted the Jeep in the parking lot? Luca's mind was spinning as he caught sight of Ricky watching him. The kid was looking at him kind of strangely like he was trying to decide something. Then, suddenly, Ricky cleared his throat, drawing all attention in his direction, stepped away from Luca's hiding spot and said, "he's here for me."

Luca's astonishment made him sway in his crouched position.

"My mom's dating the Alpha now. I don't think he trusts me," Ricky added.

Luca didn't know how or why he was coming up with this lie but he was eternally grateful that he was.

"See, Gabriel," said Jules. "You may, in fact, be overreacting."

“Don’t start with me, Jules,” Gabriel spat back. Tension filled the seconds that passed. Luca held his breath. All at once, he heard footsteps recede.

“He’s pleasant,” Ricky said flatly.

Luca looked up when Jules rounded the corner, looking down at him.

“That was close,” she said.

“Too close.” Luca took the hand that she offered to help him stand. He should let go of her hand, but he didn’t.

“Why did you do that?” Luca asked the boy who was now standing a few feet away.

Ricky contemplated his answer before speaking. “I’ve decided that you can trust me.”

Luca glanced at Jules.

“Both of you,” Ricky added. “I don’t really know why, but I think I’m like on your side or whatever.”

At this, Luca smiled mischievously and tugged on the hand of Jules’s that he was still grasping. She fell into him gracefully, one hand coming to rest on his abdomen as he simply gazed down at her.

“I guess we’ve got a friend,” Jules said, looking up at him and then over at Ricky.

Ricky shrugged and blushed all at the same time.

CARSON

Carson had taken Demetria back to bed once the house had emptied out for the day. She lay snuggled against him. She felt familiar next to him. Thirty years was no time at all to a werewolf. It was true, those thirty

years she had lived with the man she'd chosen over him, but he was dead now. And Carson had become the Alpha of this pack, despite her and Micha's betrayal.

Carson saw silent tears escape from her eyes as he stroked her hair. However, he chose not to speak to her about the reason she was crying. His mind was on other things.

Jed had text to say that he'd discovered where the vampires worked. Carson couldn't believe that the pack's children had been in danger for years and he had not known. This oversight was a mistake that he'd carry with him. Every day they went to school, they were at risk of not returning home to their parents.

Of course, he had no intention of telling the parents this. *Why worry them?*

However, this vampire problem would need to be dealt with as soon as possible. Another thing that troubled him greatly was that his Beta had been seen entering that same school and had not yet reported the vampire's location. He would have to do whatever needed to be done to find out where his Beta's loyalties truly stood.

Carson picked the knife he always carried up off his bedside table. He caressed the silver blade, making sure not to slice himself with it.

Demetria sniffled beside him. "Why do you keep that?"

"This?" he asked holding up the knife.

She nodded.

“To hold something so deadly in my hand, to control if it kills, is the essence of power.” Like the gift granted to him over his subjects, the weapon could only do what it was meant to do with strength behind it.

“Oh,” Demetria said quietly. He patted her arm. She didn’t have the temperament to understand such things. She did, however, understand how to kiss. He leaned over, pressing his lips to hers.

GABRIEL

Gabriel passed back his student’s essays and returned to sit behind his desk. “Girls, you are not whispering as quietly as you think you are,” he said while peering over his book. “This is a literature class, which means you are to be reading, not talking.” Two giggling girls in the back of his class exchanged a few more hushed words but then quieted. Silence again overtook the room.

Gabriel looked back at his own book again but couldn’t seem to concentrate on the words he was supposedly reading. *What is going on with Jules*, he wondered silently to himself. The werewolf presence was far too prevalent in this town and Jules was continually ignoring the problem.

Gabriel was not blind, he knew not all werewolves were mindless beasts. In fact, he had three werewolf students in his class at this precise moment. One of them, Amy Reynolds, was one of the best students. Gabriel simply could not trust werewolves. But he was also not a monster. He’d never dream of harming an

innocent: human or werewolf. And Gabriel truly believed that Amy and the others he taught day to day were still to be considered innocent, and thus were to be protected.

However, there was a reason for Gabriel's mistrust. Years ago, Gabriel had sought solace in teaching children on a reservation out west, Eileen's people. He lived near the reservation. Some disliked him, they called him an outsider. The elders even rejected the suggestion that he should live on the reservation as well as teach at the school. But Eileen was always kind and welcoming. It hadn't taken much for him to fall in love with her.

Back then, he had only Jules in his life. As much as he cared for his mentor and friend, it was not enough. Finally, he saw that he needed more. He needed Eileen. However, he knew he couldn't have her. She was human. He was never going to take that away from her. And he hadn't.

A couple of years after he had come to the reservation, he'd gotten too close to Eileen. He decided that he would have to move on and put her from his mind. He remembered every detail of that night perfectly. He asked her to meet him in the woods nearby. He intended to tell her he was leaving, that it was better this way. When he arrived, she was nowhere to be seen. But in the distance, he heard her screams.

He'd known there were werewolves in a nearby town. Not as many as there were in Aboit, just a few families. Jules had said to leave them be, that they weren't hurting anyone, and he had accepted this instruction wholeheartedly. The war that had raged between the species

was not his war. Until that night. The night the beasts had attacked Eileen.

He'd overlooked the fact that it was the night of a full moon and she'd died because of it. He told himself that he'd done what had to be done to rescue the woman he'd fallen in love with. When he reached Eileen, Gabriel had become enraged. The wolves who cost Eileen her life had not made it out of the forest alive. Regardless of if the true cause was the power of the full moon or their choice to hunt, their werewolf natures caused them to commit this atrocity. And Gabriel had taken their lives for it.

Once Gabriel had returned to his senses, he saw that Eileen was too close to death. If he hadn't bitten her and encouraged her to drink from his wrist, her existence would have ended that night. Her life was saved but she still carried the scars of that attack.

He regretted forcing this life on the woman he loved but she didn't. For all of her frustration over learning to control her impulses and desires, he liked to think that she was happy in their life. She missed her aging parents, her siblings, and her tribe. He knew this, and he'd assured her that they would return one day. As soon as she could control the bloodlust, she could be with them again.

A reverberating ringing came over the loudspeaker, pulling Gabriel from his contemplations. "Alright class, please get to the end of chapter four by tomorrow and I expect to see all of you and your families at the Carnival tonight." Then his students left in a surge of stomping feet and he smiled.

LUCA

Once Ricky had made his declaration that he could be trusted, the kid had relaxed and retreated into the confines of his cell phone screen. Luca again leaned across Jules's desk while he and Jules whispered in low tones.

"You should go," she said for the third time.

Their fingers had somehow become entwined as they spoke. It was becoming instinctual to need to be closer to her, to touch her. He gazed at her a moment longer before he replied. He wanted to take every inch of her in. She was so little and cute, but sexy and strong as well. He loved the light in her eyes when she looked at him. She was so much more than he had ever known before. "I know," Luca replied yet again.

"It's nearly lunch hour, and I have another class coming in just after."

"Alright," Luca conceded.

He rolled his eyes playfully and bit his lower lip. He glanced out into the empty hallway and then over his shoulder at Ricky. Facing her again, without warning, he closed the distance between them and kissed her. A giggle escaped her lips, through the kiss, and her hands rose to his neck. This perfect kiss lasted for only one fleeting moment.

"I'll see you tonight," he said, backing away slowly. It almost hurt to pull back from her; everything in him was screaming for more.

“Go straight to the end of the hall and then turn left,” Jules instructed. “It’s the long way back to the front door but you’ll avoid Gabriel’s room.”

“I can do that.” He looked at her a moment longer and then turned away.

Luca tapped Ricky on the shoulder. The boy jumped, obviously not expecting the physical contact. “I’m leaving,” Luca told him. “Will you be okay?”

Ricky looked over at Jules and then back at Luca. “I’m good.”

“Thanks, Ricky,” Luca said again. They both owed him, and they both knew it.

“Whatever,” Ricky said, but there was no venom behind it.

“I thought you were leaving,” Jules said with a small laugh.

Luca looked over at her again. “I am.” With that, he left the library.

The long way back wasn’t that long. It was strange being inside a high school again. Things had been slightly different in the nineteen-fifties.

Once he was on the outside of the school building, Luca scanned the lot until he saw Jed. He was sitting in his beater car, looking down, taking a bite of a sandwich. Jed looked up between bites. When he saw Luca, his food slipped through his fingers making a mess of the driver’s seat. Luca headed toward the Jeep, chuckling.

Luca weaved through the lines of cars until he reached his Jeep on the far end of the lot. Once inside, he pulled out his phone. He had no new messages, which

was a good sign. He hesitated only a fraction of second before he found the contact name and hit send.

The call was answered after just one ring. "Carson," Luca began, "I've found her."

Chapter Eleven

HALL OF MIRRORS

After work, Jules went straight to the local fairgrounds to help set up for Aboit High's biggest fundraiser of the year. She'd volunteered to oversee the carnival games with Gabriel.

She stood and held the end of the banner off the ground as he stood on a tall ladder, tacking it high above their heads.

"Give me a little more slack," Gabriel said, tugging on his end.

Jules let a few more inches of banner slip through her fingers.

"Where has your mind wandered off to this time?" Gabriel teased as he tugged on the banner again and smiled down at her.

"It's gone on vacation apparently," Jules replied with a wide smile of her own.

It was nice to feel less tension between them. She and Gabriel had talked things through a bit when she'd seen him at lunch. Since then, he seemed to be much more

relaxed. Apparently, Ricky's lie had done the trick. He'd told her that he wasn't comfortable with Ricky knowing what he and Jules were, but since there hadn't been any more altercations with the Alpha, he would try to put the whole werewolf thing to rest. Jules appreciated the effort this must take on his part. She knew Gabriel had just reason to lack trust in werewolves. But she simply couldn't judge the whole species for an act that only a few had committed.

Once, a few decades ago, she'd said this to Gabriel. However, he was convinced that it was werewolves' very nature that made them dangerous. Jules had tried to argue that all vampire must then be judged by their species' nature, and Gabriel hadn't spoken to her for a week. He was wrong on this, and she believed they both knew it. But Eileen had lost her human life and Gabriel simply hadn't been able to find forgiveness inside himself yet. He did say this afternoon that he would try to let it go. This gave Jules hope that Gabriel would, one day, find peace.

Just then, Gabriel finished that side of the banner, jumped down, and moved the ladder to the other end. Jules regained her focus and followed suit, keeping the banner out of the dirt below.

The pre-carnival atmosphere made Jules's senses throb. The music had begun to emanate from the rides on the midway, which were set up starting one street over. The rising smells of the food vendors were wafting from near the entrance to the grounds. Excited teenagers were chattering and horsing around while they waited for their

families and townspeople to arrive. All these things reminded Jules of a day long gone, when she and Gabriel had visited the first circus together.

“Alright, gather around,” Gabriel shouted as he jumped off the ladder again. Jules watched as several girls swooned. Slowly, all the students assigned to the carnival games meandered over.

Jules picked a clipboard up off the nearest table and handed it to Gabriel. Gabriel began taking a shrewd form of attendance and giving each student their individual assignment.

“Missy Thomas, Asher Danforth, Terry Pope, with me at the ring toss.” Several students’ faces dropped at not being able to work with their favorite teacher.

“Tasha Anderson and Ethan Martin with Ms. Bristow at the balloon pop.” Both students nodded. Ethan and Tasha glanced a little awkwardly at one another. Their families lived next to each other, but they didn’t have much in common. Normally, Ethan would have made some crack about not working at all, but Gabriel moved quickly down the list.

“Kara Willis and Amy Reynolds with Landon Reynolds and Seth Yang at the water shooter.”

“All of you freshmen and sophomores will listen to your upperclassman. Seniors, any questions see Ms. Bristow or myself.”

Amy scowled, possibly at having to work under her older brother. Seth and Landon high-fived, enjoying being in charge for once. Amy smiled at the girl, one year

younger than herself. Landon winked at Kara, who giggled.

Nodding and muttering erupted all around, some students happy with their assigned group and some disappointed.

"I don't have an assignment?" Ricky said quietly. He was standing a few feet behind Jules. Apparently, he was more comfortable with a vampire he barely knew than a whole bunch of peers he didn't know at all.

"That's okay. You can work with me." She smiled softly at him.

He looked grateful at not being left out completely, not that he was the type to admit such things.

"Alright gang, the carnival opens in twenty minutes. Go prepare your booths." With this, the groupings went their separate ways. Jules and her unlikely trio took up position between Gabriel's booth and the one being run by Seth and Landon.

When Jules entered her booth, Tasha was sitting on the front table and swinging her legs while Ethan lounged against a stack of heavy crates.

"Okay," Jules began. But she changed directions when she saw that Ricky continued to stand awkwardly at her side. *First things first.* "Have either of you met Ricky?" Jules asked them.

"Nope," Ethan said, "other than the fact that he gave me an extra hour to hide under the bleachers and make out with Kara Willis this morning, that is."

"Ethan!" Jules said, aghast. "I told you to go to study hall."

“Yeah. I didn’t do that.”

Ricky raised his eyebrows while watching the exchange between Ethan and Jules.

“Thanks, dude.” Ethan gave Ricky a wide smile.

Jules made an exasperated, older sister sound.

“I thought we respected teachers in this school?”

Ricky commented to Jules, doing a nasally impression of Belinda.

Jules was about to respond when Ethan spoke again.

“For the most part I do, but you see, Jules practically lives at my house.”

This time Tasha joined Ricky in the eyebrow raise.

“She’s is my sister’s best friend. So basically, she’s like another bossy big sister I don’t have to listen too,” he clarified.

“Oh,” Tasha added as she a Ricky nodded.

“Does he...?” Ricky began to ask.

“No, he doesn’t.” Jules cut him off before he could say anything that Ethan didn’t need to know. “Tasha, have you...” Jules began.

“What don’t I?” Ethan asked at the same moment Tasha responded to Jules’s first question.

“Ricky and I met this morning,” she said, looking over at Jules and then turned, smiling at Ricky.

“Good,” Jules said, ignoring Ethan completely. “Ricky and Tasha, why don’t you two work with the darts and re-tacking balloons, and Ethan you can fill more balloons.”

“Why do I get the sucky job?” Ethan asked.

“Trust me, you don’t,” Ricky said.

“What will you be doing then?” Ethan asked.

“Helping.” Jules crossed her arms and looked down at Ethan, who had dropped onto the dirt and gathered up the air hose to start filling more balloons. The first balloon Ethan filled, burst with a bang.

RICKY

The carnival opened and people began to team in through the front gate. Many went straight to the food or the midway, others meander toward the games. “You don’t strike me as a particularly social person,” Tasha said observantly. In fact, Ricky hated massive amounts of social interaction. When there were too many people around, he generally started to feel overwhelmed. “So why don’t I take the front office?” She motioned toward the front of the booth.

Ricky shrugged. But, in reality, he was relieved by the thought of not having to converse with hundreds of strangers throughout the evening.

In the first couple of minutes, Ricky could see why Tasha had offered to be the one who talked to the carnival goers. She thrived amidst the chaos. Talking to anyone and everyone seemed like a completely natural occurrence. Ricky was genuinely surprised that her personality was as openly vibrant as her hair colors. At first sight, he’d thought she was introverted like him, but now he could see that they were actually opposites. This intrigued him all the more.

He pulled the darts that had just been thrown from the board and handed them back to Tasha. “Better luck

next time Mike,” Tasha said, waving off the customer who failed to hit his mark.

“Ethan behave,” Ricky heard Jules say.

Ricky rolled his eyes, he had tuned out Ethan Martin’s banter with the vampire long ago. He was amazed that the teenager seemed so comfortable around Jules. Still, he didn’t think Ethan knew what she was. So, he didn’t know that he should fear her.

The next person missed the board completely and Ricky picked the darts up off the ground, brushed them off on his shirt, and handed them back to Tasha for the next person to use. “Cheer up, Ricky Harrison,” Tasha said, taking the darts from him. “It’s for charity.”

“Charity?” Ricky repeated skeptically.

“Well not technically, it’s for the school. But it feels like charity on my part,” Tasha joked. *It feels like slow, arduous torture to me*, Ricky thought but didn’t say aloud. This was going to be a long night.

A little under an hour after the gates opened, a bi-racial couple arrived at their booth. Their gorgeous daughter stopped at the next booth over and kissed the senior named Seth on the lips. “So, do you get a break later?” she asked him.

“Probably not,” Seth replied.

Ricky heard a balloon actually pop. He walked over to pull the darts free and stapled another balloon in the empty space.

“Hey bud,” the man addressed Ethan, who was sitting on the ground filling balloon after balloon.

Ethan didn’t respond.

Jules tapped his leg with the toe of her shoe.

"Huh!" Ethan shouted, looking over at Jules, who pointed. "Oh, hi dad." Ethan turned off the air compressor.

"Jules has got you doing the hard work I see." Mr. Martin winked at Jules.

Jules left her spot near the front of the booth and walked to the corner closest to the middle-aged couple. "Oh yes." Jules smiled. "He's my least favorite student, you see."

"I am not!" Ethan said, most likely not as offended as he sounded.

"How's is it going sweetie?" the woman asked, but she wasn't talking to her son. She was addressing Jules. This had to be Ethan's, clearly human, family that Jules, the vampire, practically lived with.

"Pretty good," Jules replied.

"Are you behaving?" Ethan's mother asked her son, who had walked up next Jules's shoulder.

"Yes," he said.

His mother looked at him skeptically.

"That's half true," Jules told her.

"Traitor," Ethan grumbled.

Ricky heard a pop which indicated that someone had hit their intended target. He turned and watched a girl hit two more in a row.

"Great job!" Tasha praised.

Without comment, Ricky walked over, returned the darts, and stapled three more balloons over the empty

rubber carcasses of the last. As he did so, he continued to watch Jules and the humans from the corner of his eye.

“Jules.” Ethan’s sister finally left Seth’s booth, joining her family at theirs. “You should probably know that I’m coming over tonight. I feel like I haven’t seen you in forever. I mean, I see you in the mornings but I haven’t actually spent time with you since...”

“Monica, really,” her father chided.

“What?” Monica shrugged.

“Inviting yourself over to other people’s homes whenever you want. Where did we go wrong?” The man asked his wife, but it sounded like a joke.

“It’s Jules,” Monica said as if this was an obvious exception to propriety.

Ricky was watching this family’s interaction sadly. Three days ago, that was him. Happy family, loving parents, snarky teenager who they loved and adored. It was very different now. His mother wasn’t the same person she’d been last week. He assumed she was upset about his father’s murder somewhere deep inside, not that she had shown that to him. But it was his dad, not his mom, who had always been the one to let Ricky in on the inner workings of his mind and emotions.

“You okay, Ricky?”

Ricky turned, expecting it to be Tasha who’d inquired, but she was making some grand gesture, calling people over to the booth to take their chances. It was Jules who had momentarily turned away from the human family and spoken to him.

Ricky scrubbed a tear from his cheek that he hadn't realized he had shed. Instead of answering her question directly, he said, "so, does she know what you are?"

"Who? Monica?"

Ricky nodded.

Jules hesitated for a moment as if deciding how much to say. "She does."

"And she's okay with it?" he asked, astonished.

Jules looked him dead in the eyes as she spoke. "I don't hurt people."

"I believe you." Ricky turned at another set of multiple popping sounds.

"That's the best round so far!" Tasha said, congratulating the man standing in front of her. "For that, you get a bunny." Ricky handed Tasha a blue, stuffed rabbit, who passed it to the victorious customer.

"Luca!"

Ricky's attention was jerked to the next booth over. Luca, along with the couple whose wedding reception he'd skipped out on last night, approached the booth next to theirs. Between the hunt and the reception, Ricky had put together that Amy, Landon, and the newly-wed wife were siblings.

"Kyle, I didn't know you knew Hayley Reynolds," Seth said, looking from one werewolf to the other.

"That's Hayley Reynolds-Cooper to you," Kyle said, putting an arm over Hayley's shoulders.

"You're married?" Seth asked astonished.

Ricky saw a scowled cross Landon's face, but Landon remained silent.

“Look who it is,” Monica whispered to Jules. “I know you like him.”

“Don’t,” Jules said.

“Luc...” Monica began to shout in his direction.

Jules grabbed her waving arm. They exchanged a weird glance and then Jules shook her head minutely. But it was too late, Luca had already turned in their direction. His eyes met Jules’s for the briefest of moments and then he turned his back, stepping between Jules and the other werewolves.

“I’ll explain later,” Jules whispered so lowly to Monica that Ricky almost missed it, even with wolf hearing.

Monica nodded and stepped away from the balloon pop booth. “Mom, Dad. This is Seth’s friend Luca Cain,” Monica introduced, drawing all nearby attention. “And Hayley Reynolds, she was on cheer squad with me and I’m sorry. I don’t know your name?” she said to Kyle.

While the newly-arrived werewolves were distracted, Ricky saw Jules discreetly take a few steps farther into the booth.

Ricky decided belatedly to be helpful and stepped in front of Jules, obscuring her from the view of the others.

There was another pop.

“That’s a turtle,” Tasha said. Ricky didn’t move to hand her the prize. Tasha looked around confused, but Ricky pretended not to notice. Tasha rolled her eyes and walked over to retrieve the small turtle shaped bag of beans herself.

Ricky looked behind him. To his surprise, Jules was gone.

GABRIEL

Gabriel's ship was running quite smoothly, so to speak. He had picked three kids to work with that were likely not to work well under lesser authorities. One was a detention-prone sophomore, one was a social outcast, and one had the richest family in school, along with a severe authority figure problem. These three students were part of opposite sides of the school hierarchy, and yet, they were some of his favorites this year. He enjoyed teaching the smart, well-behaved students of course. But the challenging ones always seemed to tug on his heart-strings. Every student had a story, Gabriel had learned not to ignore the ones with darkness in theirs.

"Gabriel," Jules called from just outside the back of his booth.

"Missy, you're in charge until I get back," he said to the social outcast. The boys groaned. He ignored them and joined Jules on the other side of the tent flap. "What is it?" he asked her.

"Werewolves," Jules whispered, peaking around the edge of the tent. "You'll leave them alone, right?"

"You think I'm going to make a scene in front of my students?" He was a little offended, to be honest. He may have overreacted at the Promenade that night, but he definitely knew where to draw the line.

"No, of course not. But..." She back peddled.

"I'll be sure to avoid them and, yes, I promise I won't make a scene," Gabriel interrupted. He would never risk the safety of his students that way.

"Okay," Jules said, looking like she felt a little awkward about pulling him away from his booth.

"Thank you for warning me, Jules." Gabriel squeezed her arm, hoping to make her feel a little more at ease. They exchanged a smile and he left her, returning to the inside of his booth. "Terry give that back right now!" he ordered sternly as the detention prone boy held Missy's cell phone above her head. The rich kid wasn't laughing but he wasn't helping restore order either. "You have customers." Gabriel pointed to the front of the booth. He turned and stuck his head back through the tent flaps. Jules was just about to step back into her own booth. "Jules!"

She turned toward him.

He walked back out and met her halfway. "Can you check in with the other booths? My leaving these three doesn't appear to be possible." Gabriel looked over in the direction of the front of Jules's booth. He could just see the Beta werewolf conversing with one of Jules's students.

"Sure," Jules replied. "My kids will be fine for a little while."

"Yeah, you got some easy ones."

"You totally did that," Jules pointed toward his booth, "to yourself."

"What can I say? These are the ones who need me," he said with a shrug and a smile.

Just then, Gabriel heard shouting from his booth. "What now?" he muttered and then went back to work.

JULIANA

Jules was moving to step back through the flap in the back of her booth when she discovered that the entrance was being blocked. *What on earth?* But as she peered in the small opening she could see Ricky standing in the entrance, holding the flaps of heavy plastic together discreetly. "Bye Mom, bye Carson!" he shouted a little louder than was necessary and stuck his hand through the flap, palm out. Probably signaling that she should wait there. Jules waited. After a few more moments, Ricky stepped aside.

"Sorry about that," Ricky said quietly.

"Thanks, you didn't have to do that," she said. Understanding that he'd just put himself between her and the Alpha.

Ricky shrugged.

"Dude your stepfather is a beast," Tasha said once both Jules and Ricky had joined her closer to the front of the booth. "He popped like eight balloons in a row."

"He's not my stepfather," Ricky said flatly.

"But he is a beast."

"You have no idea." Ricky said this under his breath, but Jules heard it clearly.

"Was that really your mom?" Ethan asked.

Jules cut him off, "listen up guys..."

Tasha rolled her eyes and groaned.

“And girl,” Jules added. “I need to make a run to the other booths. Tasha’s in charge until I get back.”

Tasha smiled widely at this.

“Why is she in charge?” Ethan asked incredulously.

“Because she’s the girl,” Jules teased, raising her eyebrows at Ethan. “If you need anything, Mr. Prentiss is right over there,” she told Tasha.

Tasha nodded.

Jules left them to their own devices and walked by Seth’s booth. Silently, she asked the question of ‘how’s it going’ by moving her thumb sideways and up.

Seth gave her a thumbs-up and she moved on down the long row of booths. She was just about to check in with the forth booth when her phone beeped in her pocket. She stopped in the middle of the humans meandering the strip and retrieved it. The message was from Luca. It read, “meet me at the funhouse.”

She knew that she shouldn’t go but hesitated only a moment before replying and changing directions, heading toward the midway.

This section of the carnival was far busier than her own. The humans were more crammed together and much louder. She passed the ticket booth, which was being overseen by the administration staff. Then dodged around the Ferris Wheel, and approached a small, colorful building that was adorned with a creepy-looking clown.

She looked around for Luca but didn’t see him standing outside or anywhere near the funhouse.

Shrugging, Jules entered through the clown's open mouth to see if he was somewhere inside.

She walked up a moving staircase, across a bridge jerking this way and that, slid down a twisting slide, and walked into yet another room. This one contained a springy rope obstacle course. The family in front of Jules was giggling wildly. Jules supposed something like this would be fun with loved ones to share it with. For her, it was frustrating and unamusing. The family ahead of her skipped into the next room gleefully. Jules stopped short. She couldn't enter. The room in front of her was a maze of mirrors. She couldn't see the expression on her face, she never again would. As they bounded away, the family's reflections were warping into many different shapes, sizes, and contortions.

Jules looked behind her, she couldn't go back but she couldn't go forward. The family successfully made it to the other side just as another group entered the rope room. It was now or not at all. Jules sped through the maze, her lack of reflection accosting her from every side. She hit a dead end, spun, and tried another angle. The next group was catching up to her. She heard them enter the mirror maze just as she ran into the next room.

The world around her went dark. The music was wild. Lights were flashing; obscuring her sight. It was enough to make you dizzy and disoriented, which Jules guessed was the point. She was just about to rush from this room as well when she felt herself being pulled across it. For a moment, she thought it was part of the funhouse until

she realized it was strong arms moving her into position against the wall. A tall body pressed against hers.

The whites of his eyes were glowing down at her. “Hi,” Jules said, looking up at Luca.

“Hi.” Luca put one hand on her back and one behind her head. She stood on her toes and he bent to kiss her. She gave into the moment, her body desiring more and more of him. Their kiss intensified and then it stopped as Luca pulled back just a little. “Thanks for meeting me.”

“I wanted to see you,” she said, her hands coming to rest over his white tee-shirt.

“I’m sorry.” He looked at the wall over her head for a moment.

“Why?” she gazed questioningly up at him.

He dropped his gaze back to her. “Because I forgot to tell you something earlier.”

“Is that so?” she asked. “Let’s hear it then.”

“I don’t know if you’re ready to hear it,” he said, his hands coming to rest on the sides of her neck. He bit his lip as he stared down at her.

“I’m in love with you,” Jules said in a rush. She wasn’t sure what possessed her to say such a thing in this moment. Why was now, in this dark, dizzying room, the right time to inform him that she’d fallen completely in love with him?

Luca’s eyes grew wide. He seemed taken aback until an intoxicating smile spread across his lips. He laughed.

“Why is that funny?” Jules asked, trying not to be stung by his reaction.

"It's funny because that is precisely what I was going to tell you."

"There is still time," she commented, stretching up on her tiptoes again.

"Nope, you've ruined it," Luca said. "You..."

"Luca." She said his name softly. "I love you," she said again, looking up into his eyes.

"I love you too." With this, he pulled her even closer and kissed her again.

CARSON

As the carnival began to die down, Carson meandered back through the games. The music from the midway started to fade into the background and the smells of the food vendors grew closer. Carson had come to this event to support his town and the local high school. He had encouraged his entire pack to do the same. As the leader of so many, it was Carson's duty to enrich the community in which the majority of his wolves lived.

He had elected to come without the Den members. There was a lot of tension in the Den at the moment, between Kyle's betrayal and Luca's rebellious words. Luca, at least, seemed to be coming around. He had told him that the red-haired vampire was the school's librarian.

Carson's arm was draped lazily around Demetria's shoulders. She was tall, shapely, and strong. He'd originally wanted someone younger to be his mate. However, his first love, the one that should have been his years ago, seemed like a deal he couldn't easily pass up.

Especially now that his first choice had been stolen from him.

Demetria squeezed his hand. "Let me go see if Ricky is ready to leave," she said, sliding out from under the weight of his arm.

"Do you have to?" Carson asked with a playful whine. He grabbed the back of her dress and held on for a moment.

She turned back toward him. "He's my son." She walked over and kissed his lips quickly. "So yes, I have to."

He took her face between his hands. "Alright." He kissed her again and then released her.

She walked across the dirt while he watched her go. That's when he saw what, if he was being honest, he'd really come for. Proof of Luca's intel. The ancient red-headed vampire was inside the booth with Demetria's son. It chatted lightly with Demetria for a few moments while Carson watched.

It was smaller than he remembered and young looking, despite the fact that it was supposedly on staff at the high-school. At first glance, the little vampire looked harmless, and yet, he knew it was a monster, more deadly and grotesque than all others.

Carson desperately wanted to run across the way and rip its head off where it stood. The world would be better off if he did but he resisted. There was a time and a place for such executions. He had tasked Jed with tracking its movements. The time would come. There was already a plan in motion that would ensure the vampire's demise.

Silver's Bane

Soon enough, Aboit and the wolves under his care would be rid of this threat forever.

Chapter Twelve

BURNT PAGES

When Jules arrived home late that night, Monica was already there waiting on her. “I know, I’m sorry. Work ran late,” Jules said as she entered the lighted house.

“It’s fine.” Monica was stretched out across the couch, an empty pizza box, dirty napkins, and two glasses littered the coffee table. “Seth just left. So, it’s seriously fine.” Monica winked.

Jules made an exasperated-sounding sigh as she passed through the living room on her way to her bedroom. She wanted to change out of her work clothes. Monica bounced off the couch and followed her. Jules slipped off the slacks and cardigan and into a pair of shorts and a tank top as Monica plopped down on her bed. “So, spill,” Monica demanded.

“Spill what?” Jules asked, feigning innocence. Secretly, Jules had been hoping that Monica would forget about the odd moment earlier concerning Luca.

“Don’t play dumb. It won’t work.”

“Monica,” Jules began.

“Don’t Monica me!” she nearly shouted as she sat up into a cross-legged position. “Why won’t you just tell me what you’re hiding?”

“It’s not my secret to tell,” Jules told her. “Not all of it anyway,” she added, sprawling across her bed beside Monica.

“Then tell me the part that is yours.”

Jules threw her hands over her face and groaned. She could do it. She knew that she could trust Monica; there was no doubt about that. Still, she hesitated because telling Monica meant that it was no longer just a secret she and Luca alone shared.

“Juliana Bristow,” Monica said sternly, “am I your best friend or not?”

“Fine.” Jules dropped her hands back onto the bed and rolled over on her elbow, facing Monica. “I’ve been seeing Luca.”

Monica shrieked. “I knew it. You had so much chemistry that night. I can’t wait to tell Seth.”

“No.” Jules sat up, a little startled. “Monica, you can’t tell anyone. Not your parents, not Seth... especially not Seth. It has to be our secret.”

“But why?” Monica almost whined. “It’s just Seth.”

Jules slid into a sitting position. “That’s the part that I can’t tell you,” Jules admitted. “I’m sorry Monica. But please, no one can know.”

Monica pressed her lips together, considering for a moment. “Alright,” she said finally. “The best friend over boyfriend code will be honored,” Monica said with a teasing tone. “But you have to at least tell me one thing.”

The look on Monica's face was mischievous at first but then turned genuine. "Are you happy?"

Jules sighed, but then a ridiculously wide smile spread across her face. "So very happy," Jules almost gushed. "I told him I loved him. I can't believe I said that. That's the first time I've said it romantically in..."

"About three-hundred years." Monica finished her statement for her. "You do know that you've known him for less than a week?"

"That's crazy right?" Jules asked. "I think I'm going completely insane."

"You could do with a little crazy now and then."

Jules covered her face again. She knew she must sound like a love-sick fool, but she didn't care. Loving Luca was worth it.

Monica laughed and crawled closer. She put her arms around Jules in a hug. Jules accepted for a moment until her mouth got too close to Monica's neck. She could see the vein pulse under the skin. *Warm, flowing...* Jules wrenched herself free of Monica and was on the far side of the room in an instant. She pressed her palms against the wall to keep her there and then slid down it. "I'm so sorry." She whimpered.

"How long has it been?" Monica asked, sounding a little shaken, but not nearly as shaken as she should.

"Too long." Jules's head dropped between her knees. She held the breaths that she didn't really need anyway. "Gabriel and I worked on carnival prep through lunch."

"Hang on," Monica got off the bed and left the room. Jules knew where she was going. She hated that Monica

knew what to do in these situations, but she was grateful for it.

Jules's head shot up when Monica reappeared.

"You're out of blood." Monica stopped in the doorway.

Jules stared, wide-eyed at Monica. And then she remembered it was true. She'd drunk her entire home supply after her unplanned beach day with Luca. The blood she'd consumed that night should have lasted her another three weeks.

She knew that Gabriel had some at home and she still had some at the school, but why hadn't she brought some home with her?

She couldn't wait until morning, and she couldn't stay here. If she stayed, Monica could end up dead. Even if she would drink from Monica, which she would not, she didn't trust herself to stop feeding once she started. She didn't explain or even speak before she bolting passed Monica and out her front door. She left her car in the driveway and ran.

LUCA

Luca woke abruptly to the sounds of shouts and slamming doors. *I need a new place to live*, he thought to himself. He then pulled himself into a sitting position and shook his head just as his bedroom door burst opened, slamming against the wall behind it.

"Luca, let's go!" Ben instructed from the doorway. "Now!" he added when Luca didn't immediately hop out of bed.

“Okay,” Luca griped but began to do as instructed. “Couldn’t whatever this is have waited until morning?” Luca muttered to himself grumpily as he stood. He stretched noisily and headed toward the commotion.

“What’s all this about?” he asked Kip, whom he met at the top of the stairway.

“Something big, I gather,” he said, springing down the stairs ahead of Luca.

Luca yawned, following at his own drowsy pace. The pack had gathered on the back porch. This was unusual, but Luca figured it was due to the houseguests, now unavoidably awake in the living room.

Swinging the screen door open, he joined the others. To his surprise, Kyle was among them. “What are you doing here?” he whispered to his friend.

“I was once again summoned, so here I am?” Kyle said quietly, but with a subtle amount of annoyance in his voice.

Luca yawned.

Neither of them were concentrating on Carson’s intense, hushed tones until Luca heard something that yanked his focus to his Alpha’s overly excited speech.

“What did he just say?” Luca asked Kyle, who shrugged.

“This means that thanks to Jed’s stake-out, we know where the vampire is at this exact moment. So now, the time has come,” Carson said, balling his hands into fists. “Tonight, we end the demon for good!”

Jules hadn't slowed her pace until she'd gotten far enough away from Monica, and all other human life, to be safe. When she'd walked across the school's parking lot, she had noted a few abandoned cars but had given them little attention. She assumed tired or drunk students would retrieve them in the morning. She didn't have her keys, in fact, she'd left everything at home. She knew she should change her mind and go to Gabriel's to get some blood, but she didn't want to have to explain to him why she'd run out in the first place.

She decided that she was too close to the stock she kept at work to go back. If she changed course now, she'd have to go back through town. It's was too much of a risk. Breaking and entering was the lesser evil than accidentally murdering a townspeople. So, Jules ran at full speed toward her place of work. She jumped up the side of the building, grabbed onto the ledge, and pulled herself over.

The roof was littered with years of old beer bottles and half-smoked cigarettes. She walked to the small skylight over the cafeteria and loosened its bolts. "Ouch," she cried aloud when she cut her finger on the last bolt. She sucked on the cut momentarily and then lifted the window off. Slowly, she lowered herself over the edge feet first and dropped soundlessly onto one of the long tables below.

She knew which passages she could use and still avoid the security cameras and she did so with as much haste as she could without being recorded. After a few long minutes, she'd reached the far side of the school,

and the library. Once inside, she rushed through the stacks to her office. Her hand went to her neck to retrieve the key to her refrigerator. "Seriously." It wasn't there. In desperation, Jules yanked the padlock off the small, white door and opened it. She bypassed the glass and ripped the bag open with her teeth. With every gulp, she felt her desire to kill her best human friend dissipate. She had control again. Only after she'd drank the entire bag did she realize that she was being watched.

A pair of dark eyes stared at her through the outside window, and he was snarling. Jules recognized the Alpha of Luca's pack instantly. Unsure of what his next move would be, she waited.

He raised his face to the sky and let out a long, deafening howl. She recognized this call, it was a call to battle.

Jules spun, preparing to run, but found the door to her office blocked by two other members of Luca's pack. They stood panting and snarling at her. "Your time is over, Demon," the shorter of the two said. He twitched, betraying his nerves.

A threatening hiss pulsed through her throat and the twitching wolf ran at her, bouncing wildly as he did so. Jules evaded his attack easily. She spun, grabbed him, and threw him as hard as she could. With a loud crash, her desk broke under his weight. He lay, unmoving, on the office floor. She turned on the taller wolf, who had been lounging against the doorframe looking more at ease than his companion. He was the largest wolf she'd ever seen. Near Luca's height, but much bulkier.

Jules's confidence waned, defeating him would not be as easy. She went for a round kick, but he was surprisingly fast and even stronger than Jules had anticipated. He took her kick square in the stomach, grabbed hold of her foot, and swung her hard against the wall. It cracked under her impact. She dropped to the ground but rolled to standing, barely feeling the impact's effects.

Just as she got to her feet, however, he came at her again. This time, she was able to bolt a few feet out of his path. She was hoping that his speed would cause him to hit the wall hard, but for a man of his size, he was quite graceful in his movements. Not lumbering as Jules had expected. *Which is unfortunate*, she thought to herself. He navigated a turn easily and they were now facing off once again.

Just then, a groan sounded from the wolf still on the floor. Instinctively, Jules glanced sideways at him but only for a fraction of a second. It was long enough. She was convinced that the wolf was still satisfactorily incapacitated.

"Sorry about your friend," Jules commented, trying to buy herself time to come up with a plan.

"Not really a friend," the big wolf said with a shrug.

Jules took the moment his response time allowed and picked up one of her file cabinets. Launching it across the office, she hit the wolf in the face, knocking him backward. Both the cabinet and the wolf landed hard against the wall and she bolted toward the office door. But the wolf recovered too quickly. He stood and caught

her arm as she passed him. Their eyes met for a fraction of a second. His eyes began to glow wolf yellow and his huge hand clamped down hard on her neck. He sneered at her and lifted her off her feet by the throat. After a few long seconds, her body went flying backward.

Jules felt this impact. The glass of her large internal office window shattered as she flew through it and hit the bookshelf just outside the office hard. She landed on the floor with a thud, glass shards digging into her back and books raining down on her head.

She laid there, stunned, for a fraction of a second. She knew she had to get moving or she might end up dead. She tried to stand but cried out when the glass embedded itself deeper into her back as she shifted. Involuntarily, she dropped back to her knees.

Just then, Jules smelled gasoline. The friend that Luca had been with at the carnival was dumping it around the perimeter of the room and on all of the books. *Why didn't Luca warn me?* She knew this was a completely irrational time to be thinking about him, but still, the question grabbed hold of her mind as she again tried to stand. She failed, collapsing to the glass ridden floor again.

A pair of large boots stopped in front of her and the Alpha crouched next to her, his face coming into focus. "You're going to die tonight." It didn't sound like a threat, but a promise. Then one of his large hands came to rest on the back of her head. He caressed it for a moment. Instead of delivering a fatal blow, however, Carson grabbed Jules harshly. The glass in her back

twisted inside her skin as he and the big wolf, who had apparently just joined them, made her stand. "Nice job Kip," the Alpha congratulated the big wolf who had defeated her.

"The job's not done yet," Jules spat. The Alpha had made his first mistake. If he wanted her dead, he should have killed her while she was still on the floor. Jules lashed out, her nails creating long scratches across the Alpha's snarl. She could have gotten away in the fleeting moments he was distracted but Kip grabbed her and held her against him, his beefy arms clamping tightly around her. Jules got a small amount of satisfaction when the wolf groaned as the glass still embedded in her back cut into the flesh of his abdomen.

As she struggled against the tight hold, the Alpha's hand connected with her jaw. She would have fallen if she hadn't been trapped between Kip's arms. Jules turned back toward him and spat blood in Carson's face. The Alpha's fist connected with her ribcage. She felt a few ribs crack under the impact.

"Carson," a wolf called, and Carson walked a few paces away to meet the newcomer.

Jules struggled to free herself. If she didn't get away now, this might actually be how her long existence would end. Before she could manage to wriggle free, the newly arrived wolf joined Kip in restraining her.

"Were you able to erase the security footage?" Carson asked the new wolf as he plugged something into the wall and approached them.

“Just like the alarms, it wasn’t a problem,” he responded calmly.

“Excellent,” Carson said as he lifted the object in his hands and turned the switch. The UVB light flicked on and the scalding rays stung her eyes.

So that was his plan. He was going to burn her alive. Without whimpering, Jules struggled against the two men who were holding her in place. She knew what came next. Jules wanted to beg for her life, but she never would. She’d live, or she would not. But she knew her immortal life would not be spared by begging for it.

“You should have left town when I told you too,” Carson growled, waving the light back and forth in front of her face.

“Do it!” Jules shouted. The taunting had gone on long enough.

With that, Carson placed the bulb on Jules’s chest and pressed down slightly. She cried out involuntarily as her flesh started to burn. The pain was like nothing Jules had experienced before. No physical pain she knew of was its equal. Just as she felt the skin directly under the light begin to melt away, Carson pulled the light back. Jules trembled. Carson looked down at the angry red burn, undoubtedly an open wound now.

“That’s disgusting,” Kip said from behind her.

“Why torture her?” Luca’s friend said as he approached. Apparently pouring gasoline on every inch of the library was sufficient. “Why not just kill her?” This wolf sounded different from the others, less jovial.

"Where is the fun in that?" Carson said, a dark desire in his yellowed eyes.

"Kyle's right Carson, protecting Aboit doesn't mean we have to torture people, even if they are already dead," Kip said from behind Jules, still restraining her. "And the whole, melting her skin off thing is just gross," he added, sounding a little like he might be trying to lighten the mood.

How absurd, Jules thought but said, "I agree with the big one." Jules found that with this short reprieve she was regaining some of her determination, despite the pain.

"Kyle, where is Luca?" The other wolf that was holding her in place inquired.

Jules didn't catch his reply, for Carson had touched the bulb to her skin again, in the middle of her forehead this time. She screamed as he began to drag it slowly down one side of her face. The searing pain made Jules weak on her feet. The large wolf took her weight. The smell of burnt flesh made Carson wrinkle his nose as he laughed maniacally. Jules knew that he was enjoying watching her suffer. The question was, why?

"Seriously Carson, you don't have to do this," Kyle said, standing tall.

Carson growled. "Kyle, that will be quite enough, get back to your post," he ordered.

The wolf strained under the order in defiance, but after all to brief a moment, did as he was told.

Weak, but not weak enough to give up the fight, Jules used this distraction to elbow the big wolf in the ribcage.

She kicked the other in the back of the knee and he went down hard. This would have been her best chance to escape if the first wolf she'd knocked out hadn't regained consciousness. As the others' hold faltered, he grabbed her around the neck and slammed her into the wall. The glass in her back penetrated farther. The pressure on her neck was harsh, but he couldn't exactly choke her, she didn't have to breathe. Her hands came to his wrists. She squeezed hard, probably breaking at least one of them.

"You idiot," Carson shouted. He shoved the energetic wolf out of the way and kicked Jules hard in the leg. She dropped to both knees, pain shooting up and down the left side of her body. He was about to kick her again when someone shouted.

"Everybody get out!"

The shout made Jules look toward the door of the library. A wolf stood in the entrance holding up a lighter, flame blazing.

"Luca," Jules said, astonished.

He didn't meet her gaze. He refused to look at her at all. *He did know about this.* He was a part of this pack and this attack. Her heart broke. Even if he had been using her, she loved him. She'd opened her heart again, that was her choice, this pain was on her.

"Luca don't..." Carson began to shout but it was too late. Luca tossed the lighter down onto the gasoline-soaked floor. The room around them erupted into flames. The pages of the books blackened and curled, feeding the fire. As the smoke built, the wolves released her and

rushed from the library. Luca slammed the door behind them, locking her inside the inferno.

When the wolves had let her go and ran for safety, Jules was left kneeling on the floor. The pain of Luca's betrayal felt equal to the cuts and burnt flesh.

Sitting there, next to her office, Jules could hear the Alpha snicker as he watched the blaze close in on her. Everything was burning. The flames were rising higher by the second. If she stayed much longer, she would most certainly die. All at once, the snickering stopped and a great howl ripped through the air. More howls followed.

She wouldn't let this be her end. Not while she still had a minute chance. With every last ounce of strength she could muster, she pulled herself to her feet. Her hand gripped the broken window frame, glass cutting into it as she stood. She glanced back toward the werewolves, all still congregated around the doorway. She took one step toward the far wall and then another. She stood a moment, calculating the distance.

"Wait!" Carson shouted. "This can't happen!" Luca and Kyle grabbed onto Carson, keeping him from entering the fire-filled room.

Jules didn't wait for the Alpha to over-rule them. This was her only chance. Jules ran through the fire and launched herself through the wall of glass opposite them. Cuts from this glass were added to her chest and face. Oxygen wafting into the burning room caused an explosion. Jules escaped in the chaos. Smoke from the library followed her path.

She was completely exposed as she ran down the hall, but she had to try. She knew they'd follow her. She knew she had little hope of escaping them, but she wasn't ready to give up.

Jules could hear several four-legged beings pursuing her now. They were much faster in this form and she was running much slower than she normally could. Jules pulled one of the trophy cases away from the wall. It shattered, obscuring their path. A wolf yelped.

Jules didn't slow her pace. She ran down two more hallways and burst through the doors at the top of the auditorium. She hit the lights, blackening the room, and slid the lock in place on the door. She skipped several of the steps as she ran down toward the stage but froze halfway down. A set of yellow, wolf eyes glowed from the right side of the stage. She took one step backward, intent on leaving the auditorium until she heard several sets of pattering paws on the other side of the double doors.

She turned back to the stage but the wolf that had been there was gone. Facing one was better than facing them all together. Jules sprinted the rest of the way to the stage and jumped up onto it with a grunt. She fumbled on her most injured leg but, kept the cry of pain silent. With more effort than she truly had the strength for, she ran for the left of the stage where there was a back door to the school.

Before she could reach it, large hands grabbed her. A muscled arm wrapped around her waist pulling her off her feet, while his other hand clamped over her mouth.

She fought against his hold on her. She didn't want it to end like this.

"Jules stop," Luca whispered in her ear. "It's me."

She considered biting the hand clamped over her mouth, but it didn't matter how betrayed and used she felt. It didn't matter if he handed her over to his Alpha now. She didn't want to kill him. She did, however, kick him in the shin. Forcing him to release her. She spun and shoved him hard in the stomach, making him stumble backward. She needed to run, she needed to keep running, and yet, she had so little strength left.

Jules stumbled backward. Luca reached out as if to steady her. "Don't touch me." She spat the words. She'd had enough of werewolves tonight.

"Jules?" Luca looked down at her questioningly.

"You tried to burn me alive." Her tone was harsh but not loud. There was no sense in helping the rest of the wolves find them sooner.

"I had to..." Luca's explanation was cut short at the sound of the doors to the auditorium being broken open. Luca's eyes began to glow the soft yellow of a werewolf about to transform.

Before she could protest, Luca had grabbed her again and pulled both of them behind a long curtain. His grip was looser this time. It was gentle. He didn't release her. His arm came to rest around the front of her neck, on top of her shoulders. Footsteps and sniffing confirmed that at least three wolves had entered the auditorium.

Jules leaned forward, peaking around their velvet hiding place. One wolf had stopped as he reached the

stage. Nose in the air, he was sniffing around him. Luca pulled her back and his grip tightened a little. If they ran, they'd be heard. If they stayed, they'd be found.

A wolf on four paws stepped around the curtain. He zeroed in on Jules, lowered his head, and growled quietly.

"Kyle!" Luca's whisper was nearly silent, pleading.

The wolf's gaze shifted from Jules to his Beta. In one swift movement, Luca swung Jules behind him, putting himself between her and his friend. Jules grabbed his waist to steady herself and keep from hitting the wall next to them. "Please, don't."

Kyle looked at them a moment longer and then lifted his snout and howled. Another howl answered it and Kyle bolted away.

For the next several moments, neither of them moved. Then, before she knew what was happening Jules was enveloped in Luca's arms, shoulders, and chest. She hurt everywhere but didn't resist the affection. Jules felt her consciousness slipping. She could still die from her injuries. She clung to Luca, trying to anchor herself to the living. She focused on the sound of his pounding heartbeat, the tickle of his hot breath in her ear, the feel of his body covering hers. "They'll stop looking," he whispered. "Give them a minute."

After several more long moments, Luca moved first, looking over his shoulder as the sounds of the aggravated wolf pack began to be more distant. Luca let out a quiet sigh. Releasing her, he walked to the edge of their hiding place. "They're gone," he said in a hushed tone.

Jules let out a breath and began panting quietly. She was out of breath, she hadn't been out of breath in four hundred years. Jules knew it was her mind playing tricks on her; telling her that her adrenaline was dropping. She tried to speak but she couldn't make her voice audible.

Luca walked back over to her and placed one finger under her chin. Jules lifted her head, her hair dropping away from her face. She heard him suck air in through his teeth, cringing. "I'm sorry," he said.

His pack had done this to her. As their eyes met, she saw guilt in his. Jules did not respond verbally but pulled closer to him, hugging him around the waist. His hand rested on her hair softly, the other touched her back and she cried out accidentally.

"I'm so sorry," he said again. "Can you walk?" Luca asked. "We should get you out of here." Luca stepped back, offering her his hand. She took it and attempted to take a few steps forward. Pain ripped through every part of her. What little awareness she had left in her fled and she fell. Luca's strong arms caught her, lifting her back off her feet. Glass dug into her back and his arm where he held her, but she couldn't cry out and he didn't. Her consciousness waned.

"Jules!" Luca said quietly, shaking her a little.

"Luc..." she mumbled and then her head fell against him.

Chapter Thirteen

BLOOD HEALS ALL WOUNDS

Luca shook her gently. “Jules, wake up,” he pleaded. She stirred, but barely. Luca’s mind searched frantically for what to do. He didn’t know much about saving a vampire’s life. He didn’t know where the rest of her coven lived. There was only one thing he did know; she needed human blood. And there was only one place that might have some readily available. “Hold on Jules. Please. Just hold on. I’m taking you home.”

Luca shifted her weight, cradling her more tightly against him. He took a back door out of the school. Which should have set off an alarm, but he knew Ben had disabled the system before this whole, abhorrent thing had started.

Luca avoided the street where the pack had left their vehicles. He took the darkest allies he could find, cut through as few yards as possible, and worked his way across the sleeping streets as silently as his running footsteps would allow.

Luca moved to open Jules's front door. Luckily, it wasn't locked. *That's strange.*

Luca maneuvered through the doorway, still holding the barely conscious vampire in his arms.

"What happened!" he heard someone cry from the living room as he passed through it.

Jules stirred again, mumbling something incoherent.

"She was attacked," Luca explained to Seth's girlfriend as she followed them into to bedroom and he set Jules carefully on the bed.

"You probably shouldn't be here right now Monica," he said. "It's not safe."

"I'm going to pretend you did not just say that," Monica said, sounding almost offended. "I'm only going to ask once more, Luca. What the hell happened!"

"Werewolves. They attacked her at the school. I tried to warn her, but she didn't answer the phone. I tried to...,"

"Luca, you did what you could. You got her home," Monica replied, walking to Jules's other side and sucking in a breath. "Now we need to figure out what to do with her. She has cuts and burns all over her," she said more quietly. "Why aren't they healing?"

"I think she needs blood." Luca sat gently on the bed next to Jules. Her eyelids fluttered but didn't open.

"She doesn't have any here, but..." To Luca's amazement, Monica bent over the vampire and started feeling around on the bed for something. Monica knew what Jules was, how dangerous she could be, and yet, she trusted her completely. "Found it." Monica pulled a

phone out from under Jules's shoulder. Her hand came away bloody. Apparently ignoring this, Monica stood and scrolled through the phone for a moment and then pressed it against her ear.

"Mr. Prentiss, it's Monica. Jules needs help. She's been attacked. We're at her house. No, a friend brought her here." Monica sounded impressively strong, but her voice was shaking a little.

Jules's eyelids fluttered again. This time they opened. "Jules." Luca leaned over her. Her eyes focused on him.

"Don't let me hurt Monica," Jules managed to mumble.

Luca looked between Jules and the pacing young adult.

"I won't," he said. That was the least he could do. Since he'd obviously failed to protect her.

Monica ended the call. "You're not going to hurt me," she told Jules. "Gabriel's on his way."

Jules offered him what he thought was supposed to be a smile. Then he watched as she turned over slowly, obscuring the cuts and burns on her face, but exposing her shredded back.

"Gabriel. Jules's coven?" Luca asked, tentatively.

Monica looked at him wide-eyed and then looked back at Jules, who nodded at Monica.

"I'm going to pretend that I haven't guessed the rest of this massive secret you two have, but assuming I am right, you'd better leave," Monica said in a rush.

Luca did not confirm or deny Monica's assumption. "How long will Gabriel take to get here?" Luca asked

instead, looking down at Jules again. He was reluctant to let her out of his sight.

“He’ll be here any second,” Monica assured.

“I’ll have to be gone.”

“You’re a werewolf.”

Luca said nothing. He didn’t want to leave Jules’s side, but he doubted that the angry, blond-haired, male would ask questions before killing him. “We both need to go.” He looked up at Monica.

Monica fumbled over this new information but said, “I am not leaving her.”

“I made a promise to Jules. If you won’t come with me, you at least have to wait outside. I can’t leave you here, it’s too dangerous.”

Monica said nothing but nodded.

Luca began to stand.

“Luca...” Jules’s soft voice was barely audible.

“Jules?” Luca paused, leaning over her.

She turned to face him. “I love you.” She mouthed the words, but no sound came out.

Instead of responding verbally, he bent down and brushed his lips lightly against her shoulder. She smiled a small and broken smile. “I love you too.” He squeezed her hand once before ushering Monica out the front door.

He knew he didn’t have much time. So, he sprinted a few blocks and then slowed his pace. He wasn’t going anywhere in particular, just away. He certainly wasn’t in a hurry to face whatever would be waiting for him back at the Den.

As he looked down and notice that his tee-shirt was covered in Jules's blood, he was hit hard from the side. He rolled to a stop. His eyes glowed yellow and his nails became lethal claws. Standing only feet away was the vampire who was supposedly on his way to help Jules. Luca glanced in the direction of Jules's house, which he could no longer see.

"Get up and fight beast!" Gabriel shouted.

Luca looked around them. All was quiet. This vampire was important to Jules. If they fought, one of them was very likely going to die. Luca didn't want to fight him. But would Gabriel stop before Luca's blood was flowing?

With a speed hard to comprehend, Gabriel came at him. Luca dodged the attack, sending his assailant into a barrel roll. The vampire hissed, extending his fangs but Luca resisted the urge to embrace his animal side. If he lost control of the, situation they would likely fight to the death.

GABRIEL

Gabriel hissed again. This werewolf was covered in blood. He leaped at the creature again. This time, slamming his fist into the wolf's stomach. "Fight back!" Gabriel shouted as the large wolf hit the sidewalk beneath them.

"No!" the wolf growled.

Gabriel hated werewolves. These beasts with so little control over their rage. It was out of character for animals such as these not to attack. It was in their nature to be ruthless. So why wasn't this one doing what was

expected of him? Gabriel wanted to kill him. He needed to. But like any decent being, he preferred to fight fair.

In a flash of light, the man was gone, and the wolf remained, but he didn't charge. Instead, it turned tail and ran away. Gabriel stared after him in disbelief as he disappeared into the heart of town. Gabriel wanted to follow but knew he needed to let the cowardly beast go. Jules needed him more. Something in Gabriel knew he would have another chance to fight this werewolf. "Next time, I will kill him," Gabriel said to no one and then turned and ran towards the quaint, coastal street.

When he reached Jules's darkened house Monica was waiting on the stoop.

"She's over here!" Monica said as she led him inside and to the bedroom. She left a bloody handprint on the wall next to the doorframe.

"Jules!" Gabriel closed the distance between himself and the bed where Jules was curled in on herself, lying limply on her side. "It's alright Jules. I'm here now. It's all going to be okay." Gabriel pulled the cooler bag off his shoulder and turned toward Monica. "Can you give us a moment?"

Monica nodded, exited the room, and pulled the door shut behind her.

"Come here, Jules." He put one hand under her neck and propped her shoulders against his leg. He unzipped the cooler he'd set down beside him and pulled a bag of blood from it. Jules drained it in seconds. And then another. And then another. She drank everything he'd brought with him and still looked injured and weak.

“I’m going to talk to Monica for a moment,” Gabriel told Jules, lying her gently back on the bed. He walked across the room and opened the door.

“What happen?” Gabriel asked, stepping out of the room, closing the door behind him.

“I don’t know. She was attacked I guess,” Monica replied.

He studied her for a moment. He didn’t entirely believe that was the whole story.

“I’m getting her out of here.” Gabriel couldn’t worry about why the human was lying to him. He pulled out his phone and sent a text to Eileen, asking her to bring the car and pick them up.

“Where are you going?” Monica asked.

“My house, for now,” Gabriel replied. “You should leave too. It’s not safe for you here.”

Monica nodded. He watched as Monica walked around him and back into the bedroom. She hovered over Jules a moment and spoke. Jules shifted and whispered something in Monica’s ear that even Gabriel couldn’t hear. Monica nodded.

Gabriel waited impatiently for the sound of Eileen pulling into Jules’s driveway. Once he did hear it, he walked back into the bedroom and picked Jules up carefully off the bed. She whimpered. He would have to start pulling glass shards from her flesh as soon as they were in a safer place and free from human presence. It would take time and blood for all of this to heal. Both, he could give her.

RICKY

Ricky had been so tired from being on his feet all evening that he'd collapsed onto the couch after the carnival, not even caring when his mother went upstairs to sleep in Carson's bed. At least working the carnival had paid off. He'd gotten Tasha's phone number. That's why he'd even agreed to go of course. But regardless, he'd spent the night sleeping not-so-peacefully until the moment he was no longer sleeping at all.

Ricky sat up groggily after the front door slammed against the wall. In Carson's rage, Ricky heard the wall crack. *Nice guy my mom's screwing. Really stable.* Ricky pulled his headphones out of his bag and plugged them in.

"How the hell did she get away!" Carson yelled at a few of the other wolves who had trailed in behind him. Kip's shirt was covered in blood, Max was nursing a bloody scalp, and Ben was limping.

"I don't know," Max said. "We just lost her."

"How do you lose a five-foot-something, blood-sucking demon exactly?" Carson shouted.

The younger wolf whimpered, cowering.

Well, you were there, weren't you? Ricky thought to himself. *How did you lose one then?* Ricky stuck the headphones in his ears and laid down, closing his eyes. However, he did not turn on any music. He was awake, listening intently, for he assumed they were talking about Jules.

"Can she even survive all those injuries?" Kip asked.

"Unfortunately, she can," Ben replied.

“How?” Kip asked.

“Blood, you idiot,” Carson growled. “She’ll only have to kill a human or two to heal herself right up.”

But she won’t do that, Ricky thought, laying too still. What had they done? Was Jules going to die? Where was Luca? Ricky wasn’t sure why he’d decided to get mixed up in the Beta’s relationship drama. Maybe because Luca was the only person who’d asked him if he was okay after he watched his own father get murdered. Also, vampire or not, Jules seemed cool. Yes, a vampire killed his father. But after meeting Jules, he’d decided that vampires, like werewolves and humans, weren’t as cut and dry evil as he’d always been told. Carson, on the other hand, was pretty much a beast, not the *Beauty and the kind* either.

Someone’s phone beeped. Ricky had the auto response to check his own phone, even though his alerts didn’t sound like that.

“Kyle found Luca,” Ben said, most likely reading a text. “The vampire is gone, but Luca is hurt. Kyle’s taking him home so...” Ben voice trailed off for just a moment and then he continued, “so, Hayley can help babysit his recovery.”

“Fine,” Carson said, his voice cold. “I’m over that Beta right now. He started that fire too early. He’s the reason she escaped. Let him stay where he’s out of the way.”

“At least he’s alright,” Ben said, sounding relieved.

“My life would be easier if he wasn’t,” Carson commented. “Let’s get some sleep. We can go over our options tomorrow.”

A few of them muttered something Ricky didn't catch, and then he heard several sets of feet clomping up the stairs to where all the bedrooms were. Still, he remained where he was. He could almost feel Carson glaring at him. And then the last set of footsteps ascended to the second story of the house. Ricky looked blankly at his phone. He'd just realized that, although he wanted to contact Luca and Jules, he couldn't. He didn't have their phone numbers and he suspected that neither were big on social media. Luca was what? Ricky's grandfather's age. Or would be, if he had a grandfather.

GABRIEL

After Jules had consumed even more of Gabriel's home blood supply, she had started to look a little brighter. The burns on her face and chest had already become dark scars. Her broken ribs and leg were healing with time, but the glass in her back had to be removed by hand. She sat backwards on an ornate dining chair while Gabriel cut and pulled glass out of her exposed back. "Hang on," he warned before pulling a particularly long piece free with a pair of tweezers.

Jules cried out and clutched the back of the chair a little too hard. She snapped another piece off the top. Eileen tried to refrain from audibly objecting to Jules's mutilation of her dining room furniture.

Once the obstruction was pulled from the wound, the cut inflicted by it started to heal as well. Eileen patted Jules's shoulder and put another glass of blood with a straw under Jules's downturned face.

“How many more?” Jules asked, through gritted teeth.

“More than a few,” Eileen said, inspecting Jules’s back.

“Do you need to take a break?” Gabriel asked, concentrating on the next one. He pulled it free without warning. This one was rather shallow, Jules just flinched.

“No, keep going,” Jules replied. “I just want this over with.”

Gabriel tugged on another piece, but it didn’t come free.

“Oh, come on,” Jules exclaimed, knowing what he would have to do.

“Sorry,” Eileen said for him as he picked up the small blade and cut the shard free. The chair back suffered another blow. Gabriel cringed. This attack was the last straw. Surely Jules understood that.

“Jules, can I ask you something?” He knew that now was not the right time to bring this up. Or maybe it was the perfect time? With the pain Jules’s was in fresh in her mind, she might be willing to see sense.

“Uh huh,” Jules mumbled.

“Do you see the danger in staying here now?” His question came out angrier than he’d meant it too. “Surely you’ll agree to leave town after this. No human relationship, even yours with Monica, is worth the risk.”

“Gabriel...” Jules began to say but stopped when he pulled yet another shard free of her pale skin.

“How about we talk about this later?” Eileen said, a false chipper tone in her voice. This time, she patted

Gabriel on the shoulder. Gabriel looked up and noticed the 'not right now' face that Eileen was making at him.

"Let's do that," Jules replied in a strained tone.

Gabriel rolled his eyes, he never stood a chance when they were both against him. "Fine," he agreed. "But we will talk about it."

KYLE

Instead of going back to the Den after the attack on Aboit High, Kyle went home and texted Luca to meet him there. If Carson wanted something more from either of them, he could call and demand it. Besides, he guessed Luca was going to need one massive alibi. Kyle was deeply shaken by the whole experience. It was a dark business, protecting Aboit from the undead, but he'd never seen Carson play with a vampire they'd captured before. This was a whole new kind of darkness, one that Kyle couldn't understand.

"We knew Carson had a brutal side, but this..." Hayley's voice trailed off. She squeezed her husband's hand from where she sat next to him on the couch. "Are you okay?" she asked.

"Yup," Kyle threw his head back against the couch. "It's Luca I'm worried about."

"Luca why?" Hayley asked.

Kyle hadn't gotten to that part yet. He took a long, steadying breath. "He's the reason the vampire got away. He begged me to let her... them go. The way he was holding her Hayles, the way he was protecting her.

There's more to it than Carson's brutality. I know there is."

"So, he asked you to cover for him?" Hayley asked, rather than said. "And you did." This she stated.

"Naturally," Kyle admitted with a half-smile.

"What if Carson finds out?" A little bit of panic was edging into her voice now. "You're in enough hot water as it is Kyle. What if..."

"Didn't you know I'm invincible babe?" He rubbed her hand gently. "It'll take a little more than one angry Alpha to end me," Kyle joked, hoping to loosen her up.

"That's not funny," she snapped, yanking her hand away and crossing her arms.

"It's a little funny," he said just as there was a knock on the apartment door. "I'll get it," Kyle said, standing.

"Good," Hayley said grumpily. "Because I wasn't planning to."

Kyle glared at her playfully and then wrenched the door open. Luca stood in the doorway, covered in blood.

"Luca," Hayley cried, running to the door as well. "Are you alright?"

"It's not mine," he replied, referencing his blood-soaked shirt.

"That is," Kyle pointed to Luca's arm.

Luca looked down at the cuts littering his arms like he'd just realized they were there. "They'll heal."

"Is your vampire alright?" Kyle asked bluntly.

Luca's head shot up.

"Don't deny it, dude," Kyle demanded.

Hayley pushed Kyle aside so Luca could come into the apartment. Luca sank into an armchair, head hanging between his knees. "I think she'll be okay, this time," Luca replied after several moments.

"It's true then," Hayley said, dropping down onto the floor in front of Luca. "Kyle wasn't exaggerating. There is more to this than mercy."

Luca nodded toward the floor.

Kyle walked over and joined Hayley, slipping an arm around her back. "What's the real story then?" he asked.

Luca waited a full minute before he moved or spoke. He raised his head and there was water in his eyes. "I'm in love with her."

Hayley gasped, but Kyle reaction was a little less surprised. "Yes, but how exactly did that happen?" he asked.

A small smile brightened Luca's expression. "Because of a blind date."

Chapter

Fourteen

SECRET'S OUT

Jules lay motionless on Gabriel's guest room bed. She could hear them arguing in hushed tones through closed bedroom doors. Gabriel had, yet again, brought up the idea that they should leave Aboit for good. Jules had, once again, refused and then excused herself from the situation by claiming a need to sleep and recover. Which was, of course true, but she also needed time to think. Luca hadn't betrayed her. He'd called her phone, trying to warn her of the attack. She supposed this meant that he'd set the library on fire in a drastic attempt to save her life. He'd protected her when they were discovered by Kyle.

"You can't make this decision for her!" Eileen shouted a little louder now.

Jules was grateful that Eileen appeared to be taking her side on this. Jules knew that Gabriel was just being protective. He wasn't wrong. It was dangerous to stay, now more than ever before. However, if the Alpha was determined to see her dead, she doubted that leaving

town would stop him. She did agree to consider leaving, and she would consider it, but not until she talked with Luca and Monica. This thing with Luca was so very new, she hated the idea of walking away before anything could really get started. Also, time with Monica was precious and so limited. A human's life was very short. And it's not like Monica would leave town, even if Luca would agree to go with her. Their lives, Monica's family, Luca's pack, were here. She couldn't ask them to give all of that up just for her.

Jules stood from the bed, walked to the window, and peeled back the heavy drapes. A dripping, gray sky greeted her. It had to be close to mid-day by now. She needed to check in with Monica and Luca both. She needed to thank them for collectively thinking fast and saving her. However, once again, her phone had not made the trip.

All was quiet behind Gabriel and Eileen's bedroom door now. So Jules crept from the guest room, walked to the kitchen, and scribbled a note. It read: I need to stretch my legs. I'm going home for a bit. And yes, I will be careful. -Juliana.

As soundlessly as she could, Jules walked to the front door, pulled an extra pair of dark sunglasses from a basket in the entryway, and slipped through the door.

Jules's body was protected by a sweatshirt of Gabriel's she'd borrowed and a pair of Eileen's pants. Which bunched around her feet and hung on the ground, making her trip when she walked. She pulled the hood up over her hair as an extra protection and began the trek

home. To her relief, the sun was completely obscured by rain clouds. Her skin only stung slightly where the burns were still healing on her face.

Jules walked straight through the center of town. She didn't figure that the werewolves would attack in the middle of the street. However, she wouldn't have guessed that they wanted her badly enough to burn down the high school either. That level of hatred was unfathomable to her. There were days, not so long ago, that both species resided together in harmony. That they'd come this far in just three-hundred years was devastating. And it all started with *him*.

Jules kept her eyes peeled for signs that she was being tracked, but never saw any. When she reached her home, she walked over and pulled the spare key from under a piece of siding beside the front window. All was dark inside. Jules walked to her room and stopped in the doorway. Her duvet was missing. All signs of last night's traumatic experience were wiped clean. Her phone was off and plugged in by the wall. It's seemed that Monica had thought of everything.

Jules turned on her phone. Then she went to her closet and swapped out the borrowed clothes for her own. Her phone beeped. She flinched when she pulled a shirt over the few cuts on her back that were still healing. The shirt sat just under the burn on her chest, so at least that pain could be avoided.

Her phone beeped again several times, obviously receiving the messages she had waiting for her. The first was from Monica. It said simply, "call me when you

can.” The others were from Luca. The first read, “I need to know that you’re going to be okay.” The second, “I love you.” This went on, for several more messages, with the last one saying, “please let me know you are okay.”

Jules replied to Luca first. She typed, “I’m okay,” added a sparkly heart emoji, and hit send. Then she hit the picture of the phone under Monica’s name and the ringing began in her ear. Monica picked up after three rings. “Jules!” she cried.

“Hi, Monica.” Jules walked to her small living room and sat on the couch.

“You’re better already? I’m kind of surprised, to be honest. You were in really bad shape last night. Those animals! What were they thinking?”

Jules’s phone vibrated in her ear. She pulled it away to read the message. “Where are you?” Luca had asked.

“Home,” she replied and then placed the phone back to her ear.

“...But you’re really doing better?” Monica asked.

“I am. I should be completely healed soon. Wait...” Jules heard the noise of a mixer in the background. “Where are you?”

“I’m at work,” Monica told her. “Do you need me to leave? I can come over.”

“No. I’m fine.” Jules’s phone vibrated again. “Hang on.”

Jules looked at Luca’s reply. “I’m on my way.”

She put the phone back to her ear. “It looks like Luca is coming over actually.”

“Speaking of Luca. That secret you were keeping for him. Not a secret now,” Monica said.

“Oh,” Jules said, surprised. “How did you...?”

“I guessed, and he didn’t deny it. Now I expect the whole story. Promise?”

“Yes. If he knows that you know that part, then I can tell you everything.”

“Good. I’ll call you after I get off. I’m really and truly glad that you’re okay but I’ve got to go. I’m pretty sure I’m about to get fired.”

“We’ll talk later,” Jules told her and then Monica hung up the phone. Monica was so, very human.

Too sore to feel like moving anymore, Jules decided to try television while she waited for Luca to arrive. She flipped straight to the news channel. What the reporter was saying caught her attention. “Reports are that, despite this act of arson, Aboit High will open again on Monday. Sorry, Kids,” the newscaster said over a video of fire trucks surrounding the school. “More on the Fort Miles Phantom, after this.”

Jules’s doorbell rang. She hit the power button on the remote and walked out to get the door. “Jules...” Luca’s voice trailed off as he took in her appearance.

“Did you expect someone else?” she asked, making light of the situation.

Without speaking, Luca took two steps into the house. One of his hands went into her hair, his thumb tracing the edge of the burn on her face.

“You didn’t do this,” she said, taking a guess by his expression that he was blaming himself.

"Forgive me?" he said, guiding her very gently toward him. She accepted the hug but cringed when his fingers brushed an open cut on her back. He released her instantly.

"Luca, there is nothing to forgive." She ran a hand down his arm, noticing several faded cuts there as well. Jules suspected that the glass in her back had not left him unscathed as he carried her. Luca cupped her face softly with his hand and closed most of the height difference between them by bending farther over than normal. Jules kissed him, grateful that he'd come down to her, rather than having to stand on her toes to meet him halfway. In this moment, it felt as if the attack hadn't happened. With Luca, Jules felt like no threat could harm her.

In the back of her mind, in a faraway place, Jules heard her front door open. Luca and Jules jumped apart, both turning toward the doorway. In it stood a very shocked Eileen, her mouth agape.

Eileen dropped the cooler bag she was holding, bent into a defensive stance, and hissed, staring only at Luca.

"I can explain," Jules said, stepping between Luca and the undoubtedly confused and terrified vampire. "Please Eileen. Let me explain."

"Gabriel was right. You've been keeping things from us," Eileen said angrily, not taking her eyes off of Luca.

"I didn't know how to tell you," Jules said honestly. "I know you don't have a reason to trust him but..."

"You're right, I don't," Eileen said, pulling her glare from Luca to Jules. "You do remember I was murdered by werewolves, right?"

“Yes. Of course. But Luca didn’t do that.”

“No. You’re right. He nearly murdered you instead,” Eileen snapped.

“Eileen, please believe me. It wasn’t him.” Jules closed the gap between herself and her friend. “He won’t hurt me, or you.” She put her hands on the taller woman’s arms.

“So, I suppose that it was just his pack that nearly killed you and he had nothing to do with it,” Eileen jerked, trying to pull her arms free but Jules’s grip only tightened.

She had to explain. She had to make her understand. “He’s the one who rescued me,” Jules said. “He brought me home.”

“And that kiss was just your way of saying thank you, was it?” Eileen pointed between them.

Without turning to look at him, Jules spoke to Luca, who remained silent and still behind her. “Luca, could you...”

“I’ll be outside.” Luca opened the sliding door and stepped out on the back patio, closing the door behind him.

Eileen watched him go but visibly relaxed a little once there was a wall of glass between them.

“Jules, what exactly is going on? Is this why you won’t leave town?”

“In part,” Jules said honestly. “But it hasn’t been a motivator for very long.” Jules walked over, picked up the bag Eileen had dropped, and closed the front door.

“How long?”

Jules sighed. "Since that double date with Monica."

"A week! You've known him a week, and you trust him?" Eileen was yelling now, but she did walk over to sit on one of Jules's kitchen stools.

"I can't really explain it but yes, I do," Jules put the bag in the refrigerator and then joined her in sitting at her island counter.

"I feel like there is more you are not saying," Eileen commented.

Jules bit her lip, considering. "There is. You see, I'm in love with him."

Eileen was watching her closely as she spoke. "Like Romantically?" Eileen asked skeptically.

"I love him. I don't understand it, but we just fit together."

"I thought you'd never..." Eileen's comment faded to silence.

"I didn't plan too," Jules said. "Can you forgive me for keeping it from you?" She risked the physical contact and put a hand on Eileen's arm.

Eileen sat and stared at the point of contact for a long minute. "Well." She began slowly. "I guess I can't hate the whole spices. I hate the ones who murdered me of course, and I'm not too keen on this Alpha that obviously has a problem with you, but," Eileen shrugged, "love makes people do strange things. So, yes, I can forgive you."

Filled with relief, Jules jumped off her stool and hugged her.

“But, you have to tell Gabriel,” Eileen said abruptly, pulling back. “I’m not doing that.”

LUCA

Luca sat on Jules’s lounge chair on the back patio. He would have gone out to the beach, if not for the torrential downpour coming from the sky. He normally preferred sunny weather. However, he suspected that he’d grow to enjoy it less, considering that sharing sun-filled moments with Jules was out of the question.

He leaned back and listened to the sound of the stormy waves hitting the shore, the rhythm relaxing him into a tranquil state. The life Jules had carved out for herself here was very peaceful. The glass door slid open and Luca looked up. “It keeps going off.” Jules was holding his phone out toward him. He didn’t even remember bringing it into Jules’s house, but he supposed he had.

“Thanks.” He sat up and took the phone from her.

“Can you give me a few more minutes.”

“Take your time,” he replied. “I’m in no rush.”

“Good.” Jules smiled down at him.

His phone beeped. “At least, I don’t think I am,” he said, not looking at the phone in his hand but watching as Jules walked back into the house and shut the door.

Once she was back inside, he looked down at the electronic device. He’d been expecting it to be Carson barking more orders at him, but it was actually Kyle.

“Really?” he asked aloud. He had nine text messages. The top one in the line asked how his vampire was. The

next seven were just a combination of the word 'hey' and his name. The last read, "Jeeze, you get a girlfriend and blow off all your friends."

Luca chuckled and tapped call contact. Kyle answered after two rings. "Dude come on, I'm with my girl right now," Luca said in a mocking tone. "Just kidding. What's up?"

"How is...?" Kyle began, but paused, obviously not remembering Jules by name.

"Jules," Luca clarified.

"Yeah."

"She's going to be okay. Someone from her coven is here though, which could be bad."

"The guy? Because he seems unreasonably grumpy."

"You have no idea," Luca said. "But no, it's his wife. I'm waiting on the porch. You know, in case she decides to try and kill me."

"So, you've been put outside, are being a good dog?" Kyle asked playfully.

"Very," Luca replied.

"Now that the secret's out, do Hayley and I get to meet this mystery temptress?"

"Let me talk to Jules about it," Luca said as he saw the back door opening again. "I'll call you later."

"Wait, no..."

Luca hung up the phone as Jules walked out to him. "Carson?" she asked, sliding onto the long chair beside him.

"Kyle," Luca replied. He put an arm around her, pulling her into his side. "Is your friend okay?"

“Eileen?” she asked.

He nodded.

“She will be.” Jules leaned her head on his shoulder, seemingly content to stay where they were.

“What did she mean when she said werewolves killed her?” he asked.

“Gabriel only made her a vampire because she was attacked on a full moon. She was dying.”

“Is that the reason for the scars on her face?” he asked, rubbing her arm with his fingers.

Jules nodded. “Turning her into a vampire saved her, but she’ll carry those scars for the rest of her immortal life.”

“I can see why the two of them hate us then.”

“So can I,” Jules said with a sad kind of smile as she turned her face toward him. “But I don’t.”

He kissed her on the forehead.

“She’s right though.” Jules laid her head back down. “I do have to tell Gabriel at some point. I can’t keep this from him much longer, and it’s not fair of me to ask Eileen too either.”

“Speaking of telling our friends...” Luca paused to take a breath. “Kyle and his wife want to meet you.”

“We trust them?” Jules asked.

“We do,” Luca replied.

“Give me some time to think about it,” she said.

He nodded but said nothing.

They sat for several moments until Jules stood and walked to the edge of her covered patio. “Come on.” She waved him over.

"Come on where? It's pouring," he asked, still seated.

She smiled mischievously at him and then pulled her shirt over her head, exposing the nearly healed cuts. But all he saw was beautiful, alabaster skin next to a bright purple bra.

"It's the perfect time for a swim," she said, taking off running toward the sea. He watched her for a moment, completely mesmerized as the rain-drenched her hair and skin. She spun, smiling at him and called to him again. She was more beautiful, more intoxicating than he'd ever thought possible. She was everything he'd ever wanted, and so much more.

GABRIEL

Gabriel was just about to call Jules again when Eileen walked through the front door. "Where were you?" He stopped pacing and stared at her, expressing the worry he felt on his face. It wasn't safe for Eileen to be anywhere on her own in this town anymore.

"I was at Jules's," Eileen said, but there was a tentative note in her voice.

"With Jules?" he asked.

"Yes," she said.

"But she didn't come back with you?" He looked passed his wife, but she'd shut the door behind her.

Eileen shook her head.

"I'm going over there." Gabriel walked across the room as he spoke.

“Gabriel don’t.” Eileen grabbed his arm, anchoring him halfway to the front door.

“It’s not safe,” he said. “I’ll drag her back if I have to.”

“No, you won’t.” Eileen looked him straight in the eyes. “She’s fine. She just needs some time to herself, that’s all.”

“But what if...” Gabriel began but stopped himself. Eileen didn’t deal in ifs. If you leave your house you could get hit by a bus. If you stayed home, you could get hit by an asteroid. Yes, the second was less likely but both were possible if ‘if’ was how one looked at the world.

“Gabriel, she’s fine,” Eileen said, squeezing his arm softly.

Gabriel stared at her a moment longer. “You know something, don’t you?” he asked accusatorily. “You know what she’s hiding?”

Eileen squared her shoulders. “I do.”

“Tell me,” he said, as he dropped onto the couch. *How bad can it be?*

“I won’t do that,” Eileen replied. “But I can tell you that I believe she’s going to be just fine.”

Gabriel opened his mouth to refute this, but she cut him off again. “Just give her time. She’ll come around.”

“Are you sure she’s alright?” Gabriel asked as she sat down beside him.

She picked up his hand and intertwined his fingers with hers.

“Yes, she’s okay.”

Gabriel reached over and pulled Eileen closer to him. He was still angry with Jules for shutting him out, but he couldn't fault Eileen for being loyal to her. He'd chosen to be loyal to his mentor, his friend, his sister, over almost anyone else. Since Eileen was choosing to do the same, he would try to respect that.

CARSON

Carson followed the smell of bacon down the stairs and into the kitchen. There he found Demetria cooking breakfast. She was standing in front of the stove, her back turned toward him. "Thank you for breakfast," Kip was saying as he set an empty plate in the sink. It clanked as it hit another plate in the dishwasher.

"Anytime," Demetria said, smiling up at the charming wolf. Kip put a hand on her back as he moved passed her.

Crossing his arms, Carson cleared his throat. Both Kip and Demetria turned in his direction. Demetria looked at him guiltily, while Kip bowed under the pressure of his Alpha's displeasure.

"I didn't see you there," Demetria said, breaking through the tension.

"Apparently," Carson growled in reply.

"Excuse me Carson." Kip sild past him and left through the front door as quickly as he could.

Carson nodded his approval of Kip's departure and walked into the kitchen. He placed large hands on Demetria's shoulders, giving them a squeeze. He bent and kissed her on the neck.

“Carson.” She said his name quietly.

He wished she'd remain silent as he kissed her jaw, his hand reaching underneath her shirt.

“Carson we're not alone,” she said, pushing against him. It was then that he noticed her son sitting at the small, round table in the corner. One hand suspended over his breakfast.

“Sorry kid,” Carson said, not sorry at all.

The boy just scoffed as he walked over to the sink and put down his dirty plate.

“What are your plans today Ricky?” his mother asked as Carson placed his hands on Demetria's hips.

“Like you care,” Ricky replied.

“Of course, I care,” Demetria said at the same moment that Carson spoke.

“Don't talk to your mother that way,” Carson threatened as he wrapped his arms around her.

Ricky ignored him but glared at his mother.

“Ricky, your Alpha is speaking to you?”

“So?”

Carson took in the boy. He looked so much like Micha. It almost hurt to look at the ghost of his, at one time but now dead, best friend. Carson was almost wistful until he noticed the tee-shirt Ricky wore. It read: *Fang-tastic*.

Carson scowled. “Take that offensive thing off,” he said.

Ricky looked at him defiantly but didn't respond. “Mom? Do you...” he turned and addressed her instead.

“Carson’s right sweetie,” she cut him off. “That shirt is offensive to this pack. Take it off.”

He scowled. “Yeah, right.”

Carson sneered. He would have moved forward to order the boy to do so if Demetria hadn’t touched the top of his jeans. He could take out his frustrations on the lad or he could take the boy’s mother back to bed once more.

Ricky threw one more defiant glance toward them both and then disappeared out the front door. Carson’s mouth came down on Demetria’s hard.

JULIANA

After kissing in the ocean and kissing on the sand, Jules and Luca had retreated to her home. Being with Luca was more than she could have ever imagined. Everything about him only made her love him more.

Through much discussion, Jules and Luca came to the conclusion that this evening was a fine time to let Kyle, Hayley, and Monica in on the secret. After hours of rain, the sky cleared and the sand dried, but the sun stayed safely tucked behind the clouds. As late afternoon arrived, Jules prepared for a house full of guests.

Luca went on a food run and Jules took the opportunity to drain a couple bags of blood that Eileen had brought over. She was finally starting to feel the injuries fade fully. However, she’d have to back off on her blood intake soon, or it’d be much harder to stop consuming such amounts. She cleaned her mouth with the back of her hand, blood smearing up her wrist. She’d just washed it off and pulled on a shirt that covered what

remained of her injuries, save for the one on her face, when her doorbell rang.

Jules walked through the house to answer it, suspecting that Luca had returned with the food he'd run off to purchase. However, it wasn't Luca.

"I'm so glad you're okay!" Monica stepped inside and threw her arms around Jules. She spun Jules and lifted the back of her shirt. "Oh wow, I was not expecting those to heal that fast. You look really good compared to last night."

"Thank you," Jules said, stepping farther inside the house and pulling her shirt back down.

"What are friends for?" Monica asked, following Jules inside.

"By the way, why did you ring the doorbell?" Jules asked, knowing that Monica didn't usually bother with such menial things like alerting Jules she'd arrived before walking into the house.

"Oh, you know," Monica replied. "Luca was here and..." Monica stopped midsentence and moved her eyebrows up and down suggestively.

"Good call," Jules said, winking at Monica.

"No way!" Monica was just about to pounce when the front door opened, and Luca walked through it.

"You're back." Jules walked over, put her hands on his abdomen, stood on her toes, and kissed his lips. All while taking one hand full of the grocery bags from him.

"And that's why I rang the bell," Monica said cheerfully.

Luca chuckled. "Hello Monica," he said while both he and Jules walked into the kitchen, setting the bags down.

"Hi Luca," she said, watching him. "So, tell me about this whole werewolf thing," she instructed.

"Well..." But before Luca could say more, a riotous stream of notes rang through Jules's house.

"It seems my doorbell is throwing a temper tantrum," Jules commented while pulling items out of the bags and putting them in the refrigerator.

Luca rolled his eyes and went to answer the door.

"Who's that?" Monica asked.

"Some of Luca's friends. You met them at the carnival I think," Jules said.

"The carnival, right," Monica said, drawing out the last word. "That seems like years ago to be honest."

"To you and me both," Jules admitted.

Moments later, Luca returned to the kitchen with the werewolf couple behind him. "Jules." He walked over and reached out a hand toward her. She took it. "These are my friends Hayley and Kyle."

"Hayley?" Monica asked.

Hayley turned toward the human, her eyes growing rather wide. "Monica, what are you doing here?"

"Jules is my best friend," Monica answered with a shrug.

"Oh, that makes sense then," Hayley said with a wide smile. "Well, it's good to see you."

"Sorry to interrupt this impromptu high school reunion, but Hayles, meet Jules," Kyle said elbowing her and pointing at Jules.

“You have a lovely home,” Hayley said, turning her attention to Jules, but she didn’t step farther into the kitchen.

Kyle, on the other hand, said, “we met very briefly,” and stuck out his hand for Jules to shake.

She did so, tentatively.

“Sorry about the whole attacking you and burning your library down thing,” Kyle said and then Hayley smacked him and nodded toward Monica standing on the other side of the counter. “Oops.”

“It’s alright, she knows,” Jules told them.

As if on cue, Monica walked around the counter and placed an elbow on Jules’s shoulder. “I know everything.”

Kyle and Hayley looked at Jules, seemingly for confirmation. Jules nodded as she looked at Monica fondly.

An expression came over Monica’s face while she studied the werewolf couple. She looked like she’d just put two and two together and made eighteen. “Hayley Reynolds, you’re a werewolf!” she exclaimed. “I mean that’s totally cool or whatever, but I went to school with you. We were on the cheer squad together! I’ve known you practically all my life and I didn’t figure it out. I discovered that Jules was a vampire in a matter of months, so that kind of surprises me actually.”

“You know about vampires?” Hayley asked, “and us?”

“Yup. When I said I know everything, I meant everything, everything. Except...” Monica clapped her

hands together and turned to face Jules and Luca. "It's about time you two told me about this whole forbidden romance situation."

RICKY

Ricky had been skateboarding around the seaside town all morning. School was canceled thanks to the psychos who burnt it down. So, the streets were teeming with kids from Aboit high, if this crap place could ever be described as 'teaming'. He saw Amy and Landon Reynolds at the mall with very few stores in it. He dodged them. He was in no mood to talk to any pack members. He saw an early movie and then grabbed lunch at some small soda shop on the coast. The whole town was quaint, which to Ricky meant boring.

He missed the city, the overcrowding, the bustle, making people split on the sidewalk as he zoomed by them on his board. He was just about to surrender to his boredom and go back to the Den when Tasha finally answered his text.

He made it to the picturesque little subdivision and stopped in front of a one-story, brick house that was dwarfed by the white one next door. He checked his text messages again. He'd arrived at the address Tasha had given him. He picked up his board and trotted up to the front door. Before he could knock, however, Tasha had it opened and was smiling at him.

"Hey!" she said happily. She looked virtually the same as she had at the carnival, cute, quirky, with more than a little sass.

“Hi,” he said back.

“Mom! I’m going out for a bit!” Tasha yelled back into the house but didn’t offer to let Ricky come inside. She shut the door behind her.

“So, what are we up to today?” she asked him.

He had no clue. She said come over so he had. In all honesty, he would have done nearly anything to stay out of the Den today. Not only was Carson determined to be a slime-ball, but Ricky was still worried about what the pack had done to Jules and wasn’t sure that he wouldn’t let something slip out if he went back

“Actually,” Ricky said, making a choice, “do you by chance know where the school librarian lives?”

“Why?” Tasha asked, eyebrows rising. “You want to egg her house or something?”

“No.” Ricky smiled. This, of course, was an idea he would have loved to act on concerning a few of his old teachers, but not this one. “I heard she was in the fire last night. Kinda wanted to check on her. She seems nice.” He tried to make this sound as nonchalant and he could.

“Wow! Really?” Tasha’s eyes widened as they continued to stand on her driveway. Ricky couldn’t tell if she was referring to Jules being caught in the fire or his obvious concern for a teacher. But he chose not to comment on it.

Ricky nodded.

“Well...” Tasha put her hands on her hips and tapped her foot. She seemed to be thinking. “I don’t know where she lives, but if you really want to be a creeper and check

on your new favorite teacher, we both know someone who does.”

“Who?” Ricky forgot to defend his lack of creeper status at the thought of seeing if Jules had survived the attack.

“Ethan,” Tasha said, pointing to the large, white house next door.

“Ethan lives there?” Ricky asked, pointing at the same house.

“Some people are born rich,” Tasha said. “Come on.”

Ricky followed two steps behind Tasha as she walked across her family's neglected grass and through the perfectly mowed lawn of Ethan's home. Together they ascended the four steps and walked through the round, white porch pillars. Tasha walked up to the door, with large windows on either side and rang the bell. “Oh get up here.” Tasha yanked on Ricky's sleeve, pulling him up beside her to wait.

No sound came from inside.

“Maybe they're not home,” Ricky suggested. Ricky was irrationally uncomfortable, standing there waiting. The house shouldn't have been that intimidating. Many of his friends in Fort Miles lived in gated communities just outside the city. It seemed that Ricky's fall on misfortune had made him think less of the life he lived now.

Tasha rang the bell again.

Ricky took a step back and looked up. A light flicked on. “Someone is in there,” he told Tasha.

“Hey!” Tasha shouted. “Ethan open up!” she shouted again and began punching the doorbell again and again.

“Hold on!” came an exasperated shout from the other side. Finally, the door swung open. “What?” Ethan stood in front of them with wet hair and wearing nothing but a towel around his hips. Tasha stopped and looked him over for a second too long.

Ricky elbowed her.

“Ouch,” she said, rubbing her arm.

“Do you know where Jules lives?” Ricky asked.

“Miss Bristow,” Tasha mumbled.

“Yes,” Ethan said, taking his attention off Tasha and focusing on Ricky instead.

“Well, where?” Ricky asked, standing up a little straighter to make himself taller than the half-naked, rich boy.

“Why should I tell you?” Ethan asked, doing the same, defending his own alpha-male status.

Ricky rolled his eyes, who cares who was the best male at the moment. “Because she was in the fire last night and I wanted to check on her,” Ricky said honestly.

“What are you talking about?” Ethan dropped his bolstering stance as well.

“The library went up in flames last night,” Tasha said, speaking for the first time. “Ricky here says that your sister’s best friend might have been there when it happened. We’ve decided to check on her. What part of this is confusing?”

Ethan looked at Tasha like she was speaking Greek. "The part where someone that I care about could be hurt and my sister didn't tell me," Ethan said defensively.

"Oh," Tasha said, blushing. "Do you want to come with us then?"

Ethan looked at the both of them for a moment. "Yeah," he finally said. "Come in." He stepped aside, allowing them to enter his home. "Give me a minute to get dressed." With this, Ethan turned and ran up the staircase.

"I'll get us an Uber!" Tasha shouted after him.

"This town has Uber?" Ricky asked, surprised.

"One driver," Tasha said. "He's kind of a creep but he has a car," she added.

Chapter Fifteen

BETA'S BETRAYAL

Jules and Luca were asked a lot of questions and gave a lot of answers. Now that the cat was out of the bag, they had no reason to keep any of it from the people they trusted. Kyle and Luca gave their accounts of the attack on Jules to Monica and Hayley, allowing Jules to remain silent. Monica filled in here, or there, on their first date, and everything else was up to them. Once they all felt sufficiently 'in the loop' they moved on to other things. When Jules suggested that they used her fire pit to cook their dinner they were all in.

"Seth is headed over," Monica announced.

"No, he doesn't know what either of us are and I'd like to keep it that way," Luca said before Kyle could ask.

"I wish you wouldn't keep it from him," Monica said.

Jules squeezed Monica's shoulder but didn't speak.

"What? Seth knows I'm lying to him about something. He even asked me if I was cheating on him last week," Monica said with a little whine.

"I'm sorry about that Monica," Luca said. "I just can't tell him. I don't think he'd take it well."

"You're probably right," Monica admitted. "He's too logical. Sometimes I don't think he has the imagination of a bowl of mashed potatoes."

Moments later, Seth let himself in through the front door. "Dude," Seth began, zeroing in on Luca. "Wanting to hang out with your new girlfriend is not an adequate reason to call in sick."

"I um..." Luca didn't know what to say. He had done that. Of course, it was before he'd found out if Jules was alright and he was sick with worry.

"It's fine," Seth continued. "I covered for you. This time," he added, just before he pecked Monica on the lips and handed her a bag full of leftovers from the restaurant.

"You're the best," she giggled.

"This I am aware of," he replied.

"Can we eat?" Kyle asked. "I'm starving."

Minutes later, smoke rose from the fire pit in the sand behind Jules's house. Jules spread out some blankets while the rest of them gathered around to roast part of their meals over the fire. In the end, their dinner was a hodgepodge of left-overs from Panda Plate, hotdogs, and marshmallows.

"I'll be back in a bit," Seth, who had been sitting near Monica but not beside her, said. He then stood and walked into the house. Monica watched him almost sadly.

Jules shifted out of the cradle of Luca's arms and walked over, putting an arm around her friend. Luca watched as Hayley got up from her seat beside Kyle and walked over, plopping down on Monica's other side. He

was amazed by Monica; this human was knowingly and comfortably sitting between two immortal predators like she was in no danger at all.

“So,” Kyle began, taking advantage of Seth’s momentary absence.

“So, what?” Luca asked when he didn’t continue.

“I kinda like her,” Kyle said as he dropped a carryout box into the fire. It curled in on itself as it blackened.

“Jules?” Luca saw Jules through the flames. She was laughing at something, her smile wide and intoxicating.

“She’s pretty cool, for a vampire. I can see why you’re smitten.” Kyle dropped another wrapper into the fire.

“Smitten?”

“Oh, you are so far gone,” Kyle said. “I barely recognize you anymore.” Kyle’s words had merit. Luca wasn’t the same man he’d been before she had walked into his life. He had something to lose again. Which, of course, made him worry more. But he was also happier than he’d been in a very long time. In a matter of days, Jules had changed everything; his future, all that he was and would become. This love was new, yes, but it was a life-altering kind of love. The kind that even immortals dreamed about.

“Ouch!” Kyle swore as a bit of packaging floated out of the fire and landed on his arm.

Hayley rolled her eyes. “Well, that’s what happens when you behave like a moron.”

“I heard that!” Kyle shouted from his side of the fire pit.

A playful growl escaped Hayley's lips.

"That too!" he shouted again.

Hayley stood, walked over to him, and dropped to her knees on the sand in front of her husband. Luca watched them. Their love changed their lives. In fact, Kyle could have died for it. Love has always made people do things they normally wouldn't. Kyle pulled Hayley toward him and began kissing her.

Luca stood and walked over to sit next to Jules. "Hey stranger," he said, smiling.

"Hi," she said. She snuggled under his arm and leaned in against his side.

"Apparently you've received an all clear according to the Kyle test," he told her.

"Did I?" she asked.

"Yup, totally," Kyle called from between kisses.

Hayley smacked him while Jules, Luca, and Monica chuckled.

Luca stilled at the distinct sounds of a car pulling into Jules's driveway. If it was Eileen and her husband, there was no telling how violent this encounter could get. His body tensed. "What is it?" Jules asked.

"Are you expecting anyone else?" he whispered in her ear.

"Not that I know of," she turned around to face him.

Luca listened carefully. One car door slammed and the another.

RICKY

Getting to Jules's house required a completely awkward Uber ride with the three of them crammed in the backseat of a beat up car, Tasha smashed between Ethan and himself. Once they arrived, Ethan paid the driver while Ricky and Tasha sild out of one side of the car. Ricky looked up at the small green beach cottage. All looked quiet from the front of the house, but Ricky heard voices coming from the far side.

"Thanks," Ethan waved to the almost middle-aged man who smelled like Cheetos and basement mold.

Ricky didn't wait, he started around the house with Tasha on his heels. "We could have rung the doorbell," Ethan informed them as he caught up with the other two.

Ricky shrugged.

Someone laughed loudly and Ethan took off running toward the back of the house. "Ethan," Ricky heard two girls say at the same time.

"What are you doing here?" His sister asked as Ricky and Tasha caught up to him. Ricky searched the group, looking for Jules. He found her sitting in Luca's arms. He breathed a sigh of relief. The pack hadn't killed her. She was okay.

"Ricky?" Luca said questioningly.

"Who the blazes are you?" Ethan asked, looking at Luca, whose arms were still wrapped around Jules. Ethan was making a face that Ricky was interpreting as jealousy. So Ethan had a crush on his sister's best friend? Ricky found this to be boringly typical. *The rich playboy wants the one girl he can't have. Pathetic!*

"This is Luca, Jules's boyfriend," Ethan's sister said. "I repeat. What are you doing here?"

Ethan turned on his sister. "Were you ever going to tell me Jules was in that fire at the school?" he asked accusatorily.

"No," she replied bluntly.

"But Ricky said..." What Ethan was yelling at his sister faded to the back of Ricky's consciousness.

"Carson," Ricky said, looking only at Luca, trying to convey the need to speak to his Beta.

Luca exchanged a look with Kyle and then stood, offering a hand to Jules, who took it.

"Ethan stop yelling at your sister, I'm fine," Jules said, walking up to Ethan, who threw his arms around the vampire, hugging her. "Too tight," Jules said, sounding squeezed.

"Sorry," Ethan said, letting go of her immediately and patting her on the arm instead.

Kyle stood and joined Luca in approaching Ricky. "Tasha right?" Kyle's wife asked the forgotten teenage girl.

"Last year's cheer captain knows my name?" Tasha said, but it sounded like a joke.

"I'm actually very nice," she said, motioning for Tasha to walk over and join her in the sand. She did so.

"Let's take a walk," Luca said, motioning for Ricky and Kyle to follow him down to the beach.

"Ricky?" Tasha asked, skeptically.

"It's cool Tash," he said over his shoulder. "I know them."

When he met her eyes and nodded she relaxed and turned back to her conversation with Hayley.

Ricky heard the sliding door open. “Whoa, what’s going on here?” Senior, Seth Yang asked.

The voices near the fire began to fade as Ricky walked away with the pack’s Beta.

“What about Carson?” Luca asked when they were out of human earshot.

“He’s pissed that she got away, that’s what,” Ricky told them. “He’s not too pleased with you either,” he said, pointing at Luca.

Juliana

Jules was assuring Ethan that she wasn’t hurt yet again as she watched, Luca, Kyle, and Ricky walking down by the water. *What did Ricky know?*

“I should get headed home,” Seth told his girlfriend, looking down at her but not sitting.

“You don’t have school tomorrow,” Monica pointed out. “On account of the building getting broken into and the library being burnt to the ground.” Monica glared in the direction of the water, and werewolves, but it was subtle, most would have missed it.

“I know.” Seth sighed and rolled his eyes. “Which means I am going to be very busy. My mother text earlier and informed me that there were many projects at home that needed doing.”

“Fun,” Ethan said, dropping onto the sand between Monica and Jules.

"Since when do you have a boyfriend by the way?" Ethan asked Jules.

"It's new," she admitted.

"I don't like it," Ethan said, teasing.

"You don't have too," Monica replied for Jules. "I'll come over and help," Monica told Seth.

"You would not be a help. You are way too many kinds of distractions," Seth said. "But my mother does love you. She might go easier on me if you're there."

"That's settled then," Monica said.

Seth smiled, but Jules wondered if some of the light had gone out of his eyes. He did look more subdued than normal.

"Will you take Ethan and Tasha home?" Monica asked as Seth turned to go back through the house. "Tasha lives next door," she explained when Seth glanced skeptically toward the younger girl.

"Can't you do it later?" Ethan whined, annoyed. "I just got here."

"No, I cannot," Monica said with her nose in the air. "Seth?" Monica said, her whine sounding a little like her brother's. They were so, obviously, siblings.

"Well come on then." Seth sounded almost as annoyed at his girlfriend as Ethan had been at his sister.

"Whatever," Ethan snapped. "Come on Tasha, let's go," he called as he stood.

"What?" Tasha asked, evidently not catching the previous conversation.

"Seth is taking you guys home," Monica explained.

“What about Ricky?” Tasha asked, brushing sand off her backside as she stood.

“We’ll make sure he gets home,” Hayley assured.

“It’s now or not,” Seth said, jingling his keys as if to make a point.

Jules stood as Ethan did and gave him another hug. “Thank you for checking on me.”

“You’re welcome,” he said, beaming.

“And Tasha,” Jules said to the approaching girl, “thanks for befriending Ricky.” Jules smiled. She knew Ricky hadn’t had it easy the last little while. One friend was bound to help, if even just a little bit.

“No problem,” Tasha said. “He’s cool.”

“That he is,” Jules said. “I’ll let him know you went home.”

“I already texted him,” Tasha said, holding up her phone.

“Oh.” Everything happened so fast in this modern age.

“Coming?” Ethan, who had entered the house behind Seth called to Tasha. She followed him after one last wave.

“I’m going to go see what is going on with them,” Hayley said, pointing out toward the water.

Jules nodded and sat back down next to Monica.

“Toad’s nursing quite a crush,” Monica commented.

“On Tasha?” Jules asked.

“On you dummy,” Monica replied. “You are so blind!”

“He does not have a crush on me,” Jules said.

"Yes he does," Ricky commented as the werewolves rejoined them. Jules thought about that for a second. She always felt so comfortable, sisterly, around Ethan. She'd known him since he was a kid, but maybe he wasn't just that anymore. She'd have to watch their interactions a bit more closely from now on.

"So, what's up with Carson?" Jules asked as Luca resumed his spot on the sand behind Jules.

"Who?" Monica asked.

"Our Alpha," Kyle explained.

"Oh." Monica nodded her understanding.

"Basically, he's a little more than bummed that he didn't kill you," Kyle told her.

Hayley glared at her husband.

"Can you lay low for a while?" Luca asked. "And don't go near the school."

"Actually, I should see Gabriel tomorrow. I have to clear the air with him soon. I can lay low there."

"I'll take the day to deal with Carson then," Luca said.

"Good luck with that," Ricky said sarcastically.

"Apparently, Carson thinks I'm recovering from some injuries on Kyle and Hayley's couch," Luca said.

"It was the best lie I could think of at the time," Kyle defended.

"You did great honey," Hayley congratulated in a mommy-ish tone of voice and rubbed Kyle behind the ear playfully.

The evening ended soon after that, once Hayley had started to fall asleep in Kyle's arms. Monica said her

goodbyes and then excused herself to Jules's room. Jules kissed Luca goodbye as he prepared to leave. "Call me if you need anything," Luca said, allowing her hand to slip through his fingers as he did so.

"I won't," she replied.

"Call?"

"Need anything." She smiled at him as he moved through the front door backwards, seeming reluctant to leave her. But then he sighed, turned, and left the house.

Out on her driveway now, he glanced over his shoulder at her once more. She waved at him, Hayley, Kyle, and Ricky. It felt nice to have befriended werewolves again; it felt familiar, safe.

Then she closed the door and turned back to her, once again, quiet house. She walked over to the kitchen counter and picked up her discarded phone. She had eight missed calls, all from Gabriel, received hours ago. Avoiding him was not fair to the man who had been her friend and companion for more than a century. She took long, steadying breath in and hit call. While it rang, she let the air back out of her lungs.

"You're alive then," the somber voice said as a greeting.

"Of course I am. I'm fine Gabriel." She tried to assure him.

"Really," he snapped quietly. Jules suspected that Eileen was asleep beside him. "So you weren't attacked last night then?"

The anger in his voice tore her up inside. He didn't deserve to be lied to just because she was afraid to tell

him the truth. She had to make this right. No greater wedge had ever been placed between them.

Luca was not going away, this much was clear now. She wanted to believe that she'd been protecting Gabriel by keeping the truth from him, but she knew that she was only protecting herself. There was a very real chance that Gabriel would feel so betrayed that she would lose him. Even still, he deserved to know the truth. However, when Jules opened her mouth to tell him, "can I come over tomorrow?" came out instead.

"I don't know, can you?" he asked sarcastically.

His reaction stung her. He was so hurt already, Jules couldn't even imagine how he would feel once she finally told him the truth? "Please, Gabriel."

"You don't need an invitation. You never have," he said and then ended the call abruptly.

GABRIEL

Gabriel slammed his phone down on the bedside table a little too hard.

"What's wrong?" Eileen spun toward him, looking up from where she lay next to him. "What is it?"

"Nothing apparently. I guess Jules is coming over tomorrow, or so she says tonight," Gabriel said, crossing his arms. The back of his head hit the headboard. He flinched.

"Good," Eileen said sleepily. "Maybe she'll tell you that thing she hasn't told you. So, I don't have to feel bad about keeping it from you," she mumbled while nuzzling up next to him and dropping an arm over his waist.

Before long, Eileen was asleep again and Gabriel was left alone with his contemplations. What could it be? Why had Jules shut him out? He knew her. He knew that she was normally too flippant with her life, be the danger sunlight or werewolves, but this was different. There had to more to this than a lack of dedication to self-preservation.

JULIANA

Quietly, Jules cracked her bedroom door open. Monica lay on the bed still fully clothed, jacket and all. Jules crept into the room, intending to get a pillow from her side of the bed and blanket from her comfy chair when she heard a small snuffle. "Monica?" Jules asked. She touched her friends arm softly.

Monica turned over and there were tear tracks on her face.

"What happened? What's wrong?" Jules lay down on the bed next to her.

"I think Seth is going to break up with me," Monica said through sniffles. "I just know he is."

"What makes you think that?" Jules said, getting out ahead of Monica's tendency to panic.

"Didn't you see the cold shoulder he was giving me tonight?" Monica asked, sounding annoyed. She threw her arms down on the bed and sat up on her elbows.

"I didn't," Jules told her. However, she knew she hadn't been looking very closely. She'd been too enveloped in Luca and the commotion Ethan and Ricky caused to notice much else.

"Of course, you didn't. You're in the honeymoon phase. You probably didn't see past Luca's nose."

Jules raised her eyebrows but didn't comment.

"He knows I'm lying to him," Monica said. "He knows something is up. He's been accusing me of keeping things from him for weeks now."

Jules opened her mouth to speak but Monica continued before she could, "I know you've had reservations about me telling him, and I don't even know if he'd believe me, but Jules, I..." Monica's voice trailed off as she fell into silence.

Jules didn't know what to say. This world she lived in, that she belonged to, was not something humans should be a part of. In all rights, Monica shouldn't know about any of it, let alone someone like Seth. Monica was a fantasy addict, but Seth? He was all numbers, science, and logic. This reality could cause some real damage to the essence of everything he knew. But as Monica stared over at her with pain in her eyes, Jules felt herself beginning to falter.

"Let me think about it. Maybe you should just tell him, I don't know. It's just, bringing someone into this world is a big deal. And it's not just me. Telling him about me could lead to him learning about Luca. And I know he doesn't want that."

"I know that. It's Luca's secret too. And I respect that. I just know Seth too, and I'm going to lose him."

"Monica..."

"Jules please, will you at least talk to Luca? I really don't want to lose my boyfriend over this stupid secret."

The look on Monica's face was clearly one of begging. She sincerely believed that Seth was going to end their relationship if something didn't change.

"Let me think about it. And yes, I'll talk to Luca. If he agrees and you still want to..." Jules hesitated for just a second but then continued, "if it is causing this type of problem then, I guess, I think you should," Jules said with a sigh.

"You are the best dead person I know," Monica said, a smile on her face now.

Jules dropped her face to her pillow while she sarcastically chuckled. "I'm the only dead person you know."

"That's not true. I know Mr. Prentiss."

It was Jules's turn to be silent. Telling Gabriel her secret may not save her from that break-up. In fact, the truth may cause it. Still, Jules's couldn't keep lying to him. She knew it was time. And, if this is how she felt about lying to Gabriel, she didn't think it was right to ask Monica to keep lying to Seth for her sake.

Within minutes, Monica was asleep. The sound of her breaths were deepening by the second. Jules, on the other hand, lay awake, staring up at the ceiling. After several long moments, she stood and walked out of her bedroom, heading for the kitchen, then she saw him. A lone silver wolf was walking across the sand on the beach outside her door. She watched silently as he lifted his nose toward the moon and howled. As she listened, his human face flashed through her mind. He veered up the path to her house. She slid the back door open and stepped

outside. "What are you doing here Luca?" she asked the four-legged animal.

He let out a soft bark as if coaxing her out onto the beach with him. He turned but looked back over his shoulder to see if she'd followed. She had.

The pair raced toward the water, a barefoot vampire with flaming auburn hair pacing a handsome silver wolf. In wolf form, Luca had little trouble keeping up with her. Jules felt the sand give way under her tread as she ran, felt the cold water splashing over her feet and up her legs, felt the wolf beside her losing himself in the adrenaline of the run.

They ran at full speed until she noticed his energy starting to wane. She saw that they were near the cove and came to a stop once they reached the top of the rocks and caves. Jules sat down on the top rock where they'd shared their first kiss and the wolf joined her there. Luca lay his nose on her legs and looked up at the moon. She stroked his ears and stared up at the peaceful stars as well. They were two creatures bound to the night. Two beings, whose existence was hidden from the world. Two beings with one heartbeat.

CARSON

Carson jerked. Something had woken him. A sound. He didn't register what the sound was and rolled over, throwing an arm over Demetria's back and sliding up next to her. She grumbled but did not wake. The soft tapping sound came again, and this time Carson knew someone was knocking tentatively on his bedroom door.

He ignored it until the sound came once more. “Someone better be dead,” Carson said aloud as he threw the blankets off himself and Demetria to stand and answer the knock. “What?” he nearly shouted as he pulled the door open. Jed, stuttering and trembling, stood before him.

“Alpha I... I’m... sorry... to,” he began.

Carson raised his eyebrows to insinuate that the man had better pull it together and say what he had to say.

“It’s the Beta,” Jed finally said.

“Luca?” Carson asked, intrigued enough to step from his bedroom and into the hall.

“You ordered me to.... to keep t-tabs on him.”

Carson didn’t validate this entirely unnecessary statement with a response but impatiently waited for the man to come to his point.

“He’s betrayed you my Alpha. He’s a traitor and I have proof.” Jed held his phone toward Carson with a shaking hand. Carson snatched it away from the man so he could see what the tracker was here to show him. What he saw on the little screen shocked and angered him. The proof, captured on the phone screen, was irrefutable. There he was, his Beta, sitting on the top of a rock cliff in wolf form, muzzle laying on the legs of one very alive and, likely back to full strength, vampire.

Chapter Sixteen

EXECUTION ORDER

The next morning, Monica headed to Seth's parents' house early. So, Jules gathered up her courage and got in her car to drive straight into the conversation she did not want to have.

She walked up the driveway to Gabriel and Eileen's home and raised her hand to knock but couldn't bring herself to connect her fist with the door. She considered going back to her car but knew that she needed to do this now. It was time. So, she knocked.

Moments later, Eileen yanked the door open and smiled at her. "Jules is here," she called back into the house and simultaneously stepped to the side of the threshold, so Jules could enter.

"You did mean it then?" Gabriel said in an almost accusatory tone as he appeared in the bedroom doorway.

"Gabriel, try to be nice," Eileen said, walking up next to him. She slid her hand down his arm and intertwined their fingers. "Won't you sit down Jules?"

Silently, Jules nodded and sat in the armchair.

Eileen pulled Gabriel behind her and made him sit next to her on the couch.

“I have to tell you something,” Jules admitted.

“Should I give you some privacy?” Eileen asked. Jules noticed that she seemed to be silently begging to be excused from this conversation, but Jules couldn’t let her go. Eileen was Gabriel’s stabilizer. He was going to need his wife.

“Please stay,” Jules said, her voice almost inaudible. She let her eyes shut. Her eyelids felt so heavy. Every part of her felt guilty for keeping this from him for so long. The lie felt worse than the secret’s subject. She was in love, she didn’t want to feel ashamed for being in love with Luca, werewolf or not.

“Jules, what exactly is going on? And why do you look like you murdered someone dear to me?”

“I don’t want to hide the truth from you anymore,” she said honestly. “I just don’t...”

“Just rip off the band-aid,” Eileen suggested.

Gabriel glared at his wife, who shrugged back at him and gave his hand a squeeze.

“I’m in love.” Jules felt it was important to make that clear before telling him what she was in love with.

“In love? In love with whom?” He looked taken aback.

Jules spoke at such a rate that a human couldn’t have understood her. “His name is Luca. He’s a friend of Seth’s. He saved me and brought me home the night I was attacked at the school.”

“Jules you’ve buried the lead,” Eileen pointed out as Jules stopped to take an unneeded, but steadying, breath.

Jules looked from Gabriel to Eileen.

"Just say it," Eileen suggested.

When Jules looked back at Gabriel, he was no longer looking up at her but staring determinately down at the floor.

"Please tell me he's not a werewolf," Gabriel said, not looking up at Jules until he'd finished his statement.

"He's the Beta," she admitted and then swallowed hard.

"That beast!" Gabriel shouted, standing now.

Eileen stood also, placing her hand on Gabriel's arm. He shook it off and threw her an accusing look. "How could you not tell me this?" he snapped at Eileen.

"Hey," Jules called, standing too. "Don't yell at her. It wasn't her secret to tell." Jules felt stronger now than she had in centuries. Stronger because she was defending something, someone, whom she loved.

"How long?" Gabriel asked. "How long have you kept this from me? How long have you put Eileen and myself in danger without my knowledge?"

"You're not in any danger from him," Jules said as calmly as she could manage.

"I think she's right Gabriel," Eileen said, speaking up at last. "When I met him..."

"You met him," Gabriel said. It didn't sound like a question.

"Briefly," she admitted.

"You, of all people, know how dangerous werewolves can be. How could you keep this from me? I'm your husband!"

Eileen was looking at him incredulously.

But before she could defend herself, Gabriel turned on Jules. “And you! How could you put us in danger like this?”

“Luca is not a danger to anyone!” Jules screamed back at him as Eileen stared at him, looking livid.

“Gabriel calm down. You’re being unreasonable,” Eileen said.

“Unreasonable! The fact that you kept this from me tells me that you are the unreasonable one. I thought I could trust your judgment, but now I’m not so sure,” he snapped back at her.

Instead of saying anything, she stood and walked to the bedroom, slamming the door behind her. Jules could understand. Gabriel was acting like a real ass right now. She had known that he wasn’t going to take it with a smile but taking his anger out on Eileen wasn’t like him. In fact, this whole thing wasn’t like him. This was not the kind and caring man that she knew.

Silence stretched between them for a few more painful moments; Gabriel seething with anger and Jules staring at the floor waiting for her friend to regain control of his emotions. Finally, once Gabriel appeared to have calmed down a little, Jules answered his question, “Luca is the one who saved me, Gabriel.” Jules’s voice was low, barely a whisper. She sank back onto the chair as she waited for him to respond.

“You keep saying that. Why? And how did this even happen? Last I checked the werewolf species wanted us dead, you in particular.”

"He's that friend of Seth's. The blind date that I went on for Monica was with him."

"So, you couldn't kill him. How does that make you love him?" Gabriel was talking at a more normal volume now, but the tension had not left his voice.

"I don't know how it happened. It just... did."

"He's a werewolf, a mindless beast. How can you love that?"

"He is not a mindless beast at all. He's kind, and caring, and sexy as hell."

Gabriel said nothing but gave her a look that suggested disbelief. Whether it was in her or in what she was saying, Jules didn't know. She guessed it was probably a bit of both. So, she continued. She needed him to understand. "If you and Eileen had met later and she had been a werewolf, would you not have loved her anyway?"

The bedroom door cracked open. Eileen peeked her head out and paused there for a few seconds while Gabriel pondered the question. When he didn't answer, she walked out to sit beside him. He took her hand. He looked up at her and then down at their intertwined fingers. Jules could understand now what had just passed between them. It was love. Even when the person you love screws up, being in love with someone meant truly loving them, mistakes, faults and all.

Gabriel leaned back against the soft sofa, sighed, and answered her, "well considering her death is what caused me to see werewolves' true colors, I don't know," he hesitated but then continued, "but knowing what I do

now, the answer is no. I would not have fallen in love with her. I wouldn't have even given her a chance to get close to me."

"But after? After you had spent a day with her? Could you have still hated her then?" Jules stared into his eyes as he thought.

He sighed. "It would have been a lot harder."

No one spoke for a while. Eileen and Jules were giving Gabriel time to process everything he had just heard.

"Gabriel, I'm sorry I didn't tell you sooner. I don't want to lose you over this, but I couldn't keep lying to you either," Jules finally said, almost under her breath.

Gabriel sighed. "You're never going to lose me. But I don't know how I'm just supposed to accept this."

"If you would just get to know him..." Jules cut herself off. She knew she'd just said the wrong thing.

"No. No! I don't want to get to know him," he said, almost matter-of-factly. "I don't want you knowing him. In love with you or not, he is our enemy." Gabriel's tone had an unwavering finality to it.

"No, he's not." Jules tried emulating his tone. "Gabriel, can't you see it. You are judging the man I love because of his species. What you're doing is no different than judging someone because of their skin color. He was born what he is, he had no control over that. And isn't it our choices that determine who we are? Right now, yours are wrong. Hating all werewolves because of the actions of a few is wrong." Jules looked at him imploringly.

Gabriel met her gaze but said nothing. After a few moments of contemplation, he offered a look full of pain. "I don't know Jules. All I see is danger. I hear what you are saying, but this pack is obviously dangerous and full of their own hate. I can't just live with that. I'm sorry Jules. I just can't see past it." With that, he stood and walked out the door.

Jules just sat there, staring after him. Eileen walked over to her and squeezed her shoulder. "He'll come around. I think with time, he will accept this."

Jules said nothing as a tear of blood ran down her cheek.

"I'm going to go after him," Eileen said. She turned and trotted into the pouring rain as well.

Jules wiped another tear from her cheek, smudging her face with blood. *Well, there is no going back now*, she thought. For better or worse, Gabriel knew her secret. What he chose to do with that information was up to him.

Jules sat for several moments more until her phone buzzed in her pocket. The message was from Luca, it read, "morning Babe."

She typed out, "I told Gabriel," and hit send.

With this, she stood and walked to the sink to rinse the blood off of her face. She splashed herself with cold water once more than was probably necessary and leaned over the sink, focusing on her breathing.

She looked at Luca's next message upon being alerted by her phone. "Meet me at your place?"

She typed out three little letters and then ran out into the rain to see the one person that could make this fight with Gabriel completely worth it.

Gabriel

Eileen caught up to Gabriel several miles away from the house. Once he had started running, he hadn't stopped. If he did he'd have to deal with what he'd just heard. No wonder they had both been keeping it from him. Gabriel could barely grasp the fact that Jules was in love, let alone with whom. *Or what.*

Gabriel heard Eileen walk up behind him. Without a word, she took his hand in hers and pulled him to a stop. She then reached up to kiss him. He accepted the kiss tentatively. He still hadn't forgiven her for keeping this secret from him. In truth, they were probably even. He had openly admitted that he wouldn't love her if she had been a werewolf. *I am a prejudiced ass!* He kissed her back more enthusiastically.

"I'm sorry I took any of this out on you," he told her. And he was.

"And I'm sorry I didn't tell you. I couldn't. It wasn't about you at all. It was about loyalty. If we don't have loyalty to our coven leader, then we don't deserve to be in this coven." She was saying something he'd said to her many times.

"I understand. In most circumstances, I would have done the same." He looked down into her eyes and sighed. "This has made me consider if we shouldn't be though. Jules should never have asked you to keep

something like this from me. I know she didn't mean to put us in danger, but she has. And I do not know how to live with that."

"Gabriel, Jules is in love. You must accept it. Or you will lose her."

"I'm going to try, Eileen. I really am. But I don't know if I..."

She put her finger on his lips, silencing him. "It's alright not to be comfortable with it as long as you don't let it destroy the relationship you have with someone you love. Leaving this coven without giving Jules a chance to prove that he is not a threat will destroy what you two have spent so long building. This is not the kind of decision that can be made in anger. Give yourself some time to think about it. Talk to Jules. Because I love you, I'm begging you, try to work this out. Please."

"You are right, my love. I will try. But I think I need some space. And I need you safe. We need to leave Aboit."

"Leave Aboit? When?"

"Now. Today. Honestly, I don't want to be here another minute." Eileen started to protest, but he continued, "please my love. I will call Jules when I am ready. But I know I won't be able to think straight here. We need to go."

Instead of responding, Eileen looked into his eyes. He didn't know what she was looking for, but she must have found it because, after a few more long moments, she nodded.

Gabriel let out a long sigh of relief and stroked her hair out of her eyes as he held her. "I love you," he said softly.

"I love you, too. Even if you were a werewolf."

Gabriel could have gotten angry at this, but the look on Eileen's face said that she was only poking fun at him. So, without another word Gabriel smiled peevisly, threw Eileen over his shoulder and sprinted back toward their house.

CARSON

After a night of truly restless sleep, Carson lay awake in his empty bed as the rain pelted the roof over his head. Demetria was up and gone already, presumably job hunting. Carson had told her she didn't need to work outside the pack, in hopes of keeping her indebted to him longer. But, for some reason she'd insisted. Regardless, he was quite enjoying the company of his old bedfellow.

This morning though, his mind was on other things. He had the proof he needed to rid himself of this Beta once and for all. This thought should have put his mind at ease and yet he was starting to doubt his hold over the pack. First Kyle, the boy he'd practically raised from a pup, and now Luca, whom he'd taken in during the darkest of times. Both should have been irrevocably loyal to him, and yet both had done unforgivable things. Granted, even taking Hayley Reynolds from him paled in comparison to sleeping with the enemy. Luca had to pay.

By all rights, there should be a pack wide trial but wasn't Carson the judge? Sentencing would come down

to him, and his sentence for this action was death. This thought roused Carson and he stood. Now, who to instruct to carry out the sentencing? Max was loyal and crazy enough; however, he had nowhere near the concentration to carry out the deed. The tracker had the brains, but not the brawn. He would not sully his rightful Beta with the task. There was only one logical choice. All brawn and no brain was what Carson needed.

Carson dressed and then stomped across the hall. He balled his hand into a fist and was about to knock when he heard moaning from within. He took a moment to scowl and roll his eyes and then pounded on the door.

“Busy!” came the male voice from within.

“Now!” Carson shouted back.

There was a great groan and then moments later the door swung partly open. “What can I do for you Alpha?” Kip asked, relatively chipper considering Carson’s urgency. Carson looked passed him into the room. The human was fumbling with a sheet, trying to cover herself.

“I need you downstairs,” he said. Carson couldn’t have this conversation standing here in Kip’s doorway in front of the human girl.

“Kinda in the middle of something.” Kip pointed over his shoulder.

“Yes, and it’s a shame,” Carson replied. “She’s pretty. Get rid of her a get downstairs. You have five minutes.” Carson put an urgent emphasis on this, Kip did not have a choice in the matter.

Kip flinched under the weight of the command.

Satisfied that his instruction would be followed, Carson walked away, leaving Kip rushing around inside his room.

The stairs creaked under his weight as he descended them. He turned the corner and saw the boy sleeping on the couch. "Wake up," Carson said loudly.

The boy didn't stir.

"Up!" he shouted louder. If Demetria was going to go out for the day, she could have at least taken her brat with her. "Now!"

The boy sat up quickly, startled.

"I need the room," Carson said, after a few moments of the teenager staring at him blinking.

"Where exactly am I supposed to go?" Ricky asked incredulously.

"That is no concern of mine," Carson snapped. "Out." He pointed into the hallway to exemplify his order.

"Whatever," the boy muttered, rolled his eyes, took too long to gather some of his things, and then walked out of the room in his boxer shorts and tee-shirt. Carson heard him running up the stairs but was joined by Kip and his mind was put back on task.

"What was so important?" Kip asked, still looking flushed, the human ran from the house behind him.

"I have an urgent matter," Carson said matter-of-factly.

"I figured that one out for myself, funnily enough," Kip retorted.

Carson glared.

The larger wolf coward, dropping his cheerful expression altogether.

"I need you to handle something for me."

"Okay." Kip was ever the simpleton, but that was helpful in this situation. "What?"

"There is a traitor in the pack and I need you to take care of it," Carson explained.

"A traitor?" Kip asked. "Who? What did they do?"

Carson pulled out his phone. If he was going to ask Kip to carry out sentencing than he should at least know the grievance. Carson handed him the phone, clearly displayed on it was the picture of Luca and his vampire slut. "Luca Cain."

"How can you tell that's Luca?" Kip asked, examining the photo closely.

"It's him." Carson's anger flared, questions were not Kip's place.

"Alright," Kip said, conceding. "It's Luca. So, it will need to be addressed at the next full moon. What exactly do you want me to do about it? It needs to be brought before the pack."

"It will not be brought before the pack. No one must know of this repulsive betrayal. I need you to handle it now, today." Carson put all of the Alpha authority he possessed into this order.

"But you can't just..." Kip began to protest.

"I am your Alpha. I can do as I see fit." Carson reminded him. "You will do as I instruct, and you will tell no one that I have done so."

Kip's lips rose into a snarl that was stopped short by a stare. Carson's eyes went yellow.

"What... are your... orders... exactly?" Kip's voice was strained, as if he was attempting to reject the order, luckily, he could not.

"I want you to find Luca Cain."

Kip nodded.

"And I want you to kill him," Carson said.

Chapter

Seventeen

TRIALS OF LOVE

Luca parked his Jeep down the street from Jules's house. He slammed the door and climbed out just as Jules's little silver car pulled into her driveway. Jules stepped out, shutting her own car door behind her. At first, he thought she might have missed the six-foot-four werewolf jogging toward her in the pouring rain until she was in his arms. He lifted her off her feet and held her tightly as the rain soaked them both.

"I'm sorry Gabriel took it badly," he said, loosening his grip but not setting her back on her feet just yet.

Jules studied him a moment. He might have felt awkward if he hadn't been doing the same thing to her. Without warning, she closed the space between them and kissed him. He pulled her close again, chuckling and reciprocating in kind. She was so small, and beautiful, and sexy, and his. Everything about her felt right, here in his arms was where he wanted her to stay. She backed out of the kiss but didn't wriggle free of his hold.

“Gabriel is an important part of my life,” Jules admitted. “But something tells me that you are more significant to my future.”

“Giving everything up for a guy. Sounds reckless,” Luca teased.

“Yeah,” Jules said as Luca set her back on her feet. “And risking your life and position within a pack is a wise decision?”

“I guess we’ll be impulsive together then,” he said, brushing her cheek with his fingers.

“I guess so,” she replied, throwing her head back at letting the rain drip down her face for a moment. The smile on her lips was one of peace and pure happiness. He knew this, he was unsure how, but he did.

“Shall we get out of the rain?” Luca asked.

“Yes,” Jules replied. “But let’s walk.”

Luca slipped one arm around her and, in comfortable silence, they strolled, her side pressed against his. He slowed his long stride to match hers.

When they reached her driveway, she pulled him to a stop beside her car, where she retrieved her keys and phone from the passenger seat and together they went into her house.

“Shoes.” She pointed to a spot beside the front door. Luca slipped off his soaked Converse and left them there. Before she had time to get much farther into the house he spun her around. He lifted her onto her island counter. She laughed, but wrapped her legs around him, pulling him closer. He kissed her again and again, content to kiss her for the rest of his immortal life.

Just as she began trying to free him from his wet shirt, her phone began to ring. He groaned, dropping his head onto her shoulder. It was her turn to chuckle. "It might be Gabriel," she said as she retrieved her phone from the counter beside her. "Forgive me?"

"Never," he said quietly as she put the phone to her ear.

"Hey Monica," she greeted. "I thought you were at Seth's today."

Luca kissed her on the clavicle, and then the neck.

"Wait, slow down. What's wrong?" she asked.

Luca stopped kissing her and stepped back. He could hear Monica's rushed and shaky voice, but he had no hope of making out what she was saying. He leaned on the counter beside Jules.

"Alright. I'll be right over," Jules said and then ended the call.

"You will?" Luca asked. "What's up?"

"Seth broke up with her," Jules said.

"I'm sorry," he replied. "Did she say why?" he asked, stepping in front of her again. His hands came to rest on the sides of her thighs.

"Actually, she did," Jules said. "And I think it's our fault."

JULIANA

Having left Luca, Jules approached the large, white house. Monica's mother appeared at the door seconds after Jules rang the bell. Sherry's human scent hit Jules with extreme force. She hadn't realized how thirsty she

was. The craving was overwhelming. She hesitated before entering but Monica needed her. *I can handle this.*

“Hello, Mrs. Martin. How is she doing?” Jules asked politely and smiled. It was strained but she held it in place just the same.

“As well as can be expected, I guess. He was such a nice boy.” Monica’s mother stepped aside to let Jules in. Jules held her breath. Her vampire impulses were slipping out of her control. The vein in Sherry’s neck pulsed, calling to Jules’s predatory desires.

To Jules’s relief, Mrs. Martin didn’t follow her up the stairs to Monica’s room. Jules cautiously pushed the door open. Monica and a human girl Jules knew worked at the café with her were seated on the bed. Monica was sobbing. When she saw the redheaded vampire, Monica rushed toward her friend and threw her arms around her. Jules stiffened and fought the instinct to sink her fangs into her friend’s neck. Instead of returning the hug, she clenched her fists and teeth.

“Jules?”

Jules tried to smile but instead cringed. All she wanted to do was comfort Monica, but she couldn’t. The bloodlust was too strong. Jules cursed herself quietly. “Will you be alright for an hour?” Her voice was coarse and rushed.

Monica released Jules and backed away. She knew the signs. “Yes,” she said between snuffles. “But you will come back, right?”

"You know I will." Jules hurriedly left the way she had come. She heard Ethan's call as she ran back down to the front door, but she didn't stop or slow down.

Once outside the house, Jules released a frantic breath. She shut her eyes tight, hoping the fresh air would reduce the urge to go back and kill all the humans inside. Without opening her eyes, Jules started toward the backyard. Abandoning her car, she took the shortcut through the woods behind Monica's house. Running at full speed, Jules veered around trees and over fallen logs all the way to Gabriel's place, which was closer than her own.

When she reached it, everything was dark. She tried the front door, but it was locked. Jules swiftly reached under one of the wicker chairs on the porch to find the spare house key.

When she walked inside, there were no signs of Gabriel and Eileen. She went to the kitchen, took a glass out of the cupboard above her head, and pulled open the refrigerator door. Five hospital blood bags sat inside. The sight and smell of it both disgusted and revitalized her. Without hesitation, Jules punctured the plastic with her teeth and poured it in the glass.

She felt her sanity returning as the luscious liquid entered her body. Only after Jules stopped feeling the blood pulsing down her throat and through her body did she open her eyes. She saw a note tucked under the bags in the refrigerator. It was scrawled hurriedly in Eileen's handwriting.

Jules,

I am going to do everything I can to get Gabriel to see reason. But he says he needs space and I'm afraid if he doesn't get it he will do something we are all going to regret. So, we've gone to Fort Miles for a few weeks. I know this is an impossibly bad time. I'm sorry. We both love you, Jules. Remember that.

Eileen

LUCA

Reluctantly, but at Jules's request, Luca walked into the employee entrance of Panda Plate on his day off. He found Seth and his father in the kitchen preparing for the lunch rush. Or what they considered a lunch rush.

"Hey there, Luca!" Mr. Yang greeted him while tossing vegetables into a searing pan. Seth muttered a hello but kept his head down.

Luca moved past both father and son to get himself a large paper cup and fill it with Mountain Dew from the soda fountain. Seth's father chuckled. It was customary for employees to help themselves to soda. Luca slipped a straw into his cup and took several swallows.

"So, Luca, what brings you here?" asked Mr. Yang.

"Nothing much. Just thought I'd drop in," Luca replied, staring at the back of Seth's head. Mr. Yang glanced up from the pot he was now stirring. He looked skeptically at Luca, as if he wanted to say something then changed his mind. The phone rang and without thinking, Luca answered it.

"Seth, why don't you take a break?" Mr. Yang said once Luca had hung up the phone.

"But it's almost lunchtime," Seth protested.

"It's almost ready and I'm guessing Luca didn't come to see my pretty face."

Seth poured the contents of his large skillet into a pan and glared at his father.

"Well, come on then," Seth said as he carried the pan into the dining room and placed it on the almost full buffet. He then grabbed a plate and started fixing one for himself. Finally, apparently reluctantly, he joined Luca at a table in the corner of the dining room. For quite a while Seth said nothing and refused to look up from his plate.

Halfway through Seth's lunch, Luca spoke up. "Are you really going to make me ask?"

"There isn't anything to say."

They sat silently. Luca knew Seth had to have his reasons to break up with Monica. He also knew that if he waited, Seth would eventually say what he needed to.

"Fine."

That didn't take long, Luca thought.

"I just couldn't stand it anymore."

"And it is? You love Monica, don't you?"

"Yeah, I do. A lot, but she's always so secretive. It feels like she's always hiding something from me. I just couldn't take it anymore." Seth started speed-talking, a trait he had picked up from Monica. Luca struggled to keep up but managed to catch Seth's gist.

"Did you tell her all this?" Luca asked him.

“Yes! That’s when she blew up and started raving about how she couldn’t tell me and if I couldn’t trust her then maybe we should just break up. The next thing I know, my relationship of two years is just over. I suppose it’s my fault, but I...”

Luca felt a pain in his chest as he listened. *Was Jules right? Was this his fault? Was the secret Monica was keeping the one about the secret supernatural underbelly of the world? The one Luca had insisted she keep. Can Seth handle the truth?*

He wanted to tell Seth everything, to insist that Monica had a good reason to lie, but instead, he said, “that sucks, man. I’m sorry.”

He sat there with his friend as he finished up his meal, not saying much more. He needed to talk to Jules. Together, they would decide what to do.

RICKY

Ricky reached out to touch Tasha’s thigh. They sat together on her family’s old basement couch. After Carson’s metaphorical explosion, he’d showered and sought refuge in Tasha’s home. Little did he know asylum would lead to kisses. She giggled as he leaned forward to kiss her again. She slid her hands through his silk-like, black hair and bit down lightly on the tender part of his lip.

“Tasha!” someone called.

“Who was that?” Ricky asked as they both stopped abruptly.

"My brother," Tasha said. "Ignore him." Her brother was a senior football player at Aboit high school.

He called out for her again as Tasha pulled Ricky down on top of her by the t-shirt. Ricky tried to ignore his increasingly aggravated calls as they kissed again.

The basement door burst open and Ricky heard footsteps clomping down the wooden stairs. He pulled himself off her.

"You little creep!" her brother screamed, rushing at Ricky.

Ricky was too fast for the large football player and easily avoided the charge. With one last smile over his shoulder, Ricky rushed out of the house.

As he headed into the woods, he peeled the layers of clothing off and leaped into the air. Tasha's brother shouted angrily from somewhere behind him, but he would never catch Ricky now.

Even if he did, he wouldn't be looking for a black wolf. Ricky turned and trotted away from the voice with a toothy, wolf-like snicker. Once he was well out of range, he stopped to stretch, utterly pleased with himself.

"That was reckless."

Ricky spun. Before him, in a random patch of woods behind Tasha's subdivision, was Jules.

He stared at her with his yellow, wolf eyes, and then turned his head from side to side, unsure what to do now.

"Hang on," Jules said and then bolted in the direction he'd come from, returning moments later with the pants he'd discarded. She tossed them at him and then turned her back.

In a burst of light and laughing easily, Ricky the wolf became Ricky the boy and pulled on his returned piece of clothing. "Okay," he told Jules, who turned around to face him.

"What are you doing out here?" he asked before she took the opportunity to question him. "You know these woods butt up against the preserve this pack runs in."

"I did not," she admitted. "This is the fastest way from Monica's to my... Mr. Prentiss's house."

"You and Mr. Prentiss huh?" he teased.

Jules made a face at him that he interpreted to mean you know what I mean.

"By the way," Jules began, sounding like his teacher for a moment. "What if Neal had seen you?"

"Who?" Ricky hadn't the foggiest idea who she was talking about.

"Tasha's brother." Jules pointed back in the direction of the houses.

Ricky shrugged. "He didn't."

"Teenagers." Jules smiled and scoffed at the same time.

"Don't you have somewhere to be?" Ricky asked, thinking about the fact that Jules had been on her way to her friend's house.

"Yes," Jules said, like she may have forgotten that fact. "And where are you headed?"

Ricky shrugged again. He wouldn't go back to the Den, that he knew. But he didn't exactly have plans beyond this particular moment.

Jules bit her lip for a moment, presumably thinking. "Listen, if you don't want to go home."

"Its not my home," Ricky interrupted.

"Well, then, if you need somewhere to be, I think Luca is still at my house."

Ricky's eyebrows raised as he waited for Jules to continued.

"Even if he's not, there is a spare key under the planter by the back door. You can't miss it. The plant is dead."

"Really?" Ricky asked. "Why would you offer that?"

"Honestly," Jules began, "because I see something in you that reminds me of someone I once loved. Someone I loved above all others."

"What happened to him?" Ricky asked, catching the context of the past.

"He died long ago," Jules said. "But what you did back there, that recklessness, he would have loved it."

JULIANA

When she finally made it back to Monica's house, Monica's co-worker was just leaving. "How's she doing?" Jules asked.

"She hasn't stopped crying," the girl said. She looked emotionally spent.

"It's my turn for a shift."

This time, after Jules rang the doorbell, Ethan answered.

"Hi," she greeted.

“Hey,” he said, “what was up with you earlier?”
“None of your business,” Jules said, smiling at Ethan, who glared at her. “How’s your sister?”

Mrs. Martin walked out of the kitchen, smiled when she saw Jules, and then disappeared again.

“The same,” Ethan replied. “She’s been crying like an annoying baby for hours,” he complained as they walked up the stairs side-by-side.

“You want to come and cheer her up with me?” Jules asked.

“No way,” Ethan stepped back and Jules moved toward Monica’s bedroom door. “I’m not going near that with a ten-foot pole.”

“Such a great little brother you are,” Jules teased.

“Oh, I know I am.” He laughed and then walked into his own room.

When Jules pushed open Monica’s bedroom door, she was not surprised to find her curled up in her fluffy chair in the corner; tear streaks down her face and a box of Kleenex on her lap. Her eyes were red and her cheeks were blotchy. She looked so human in this moment, Jules loved her even more.

“Oh, Jules.”

This time, when Monica hugged her Jules hugged back. Both girls sunk onto the bed.

“I can’t believe this is happening. I mean, I know he feels like I’m hiding something from him. I mean I am hiding something from him, a really, really big something. But...” Monica continued to speak, and Jules let her, rubbing her back and waiting.

"Monica, I'm so sorry. It's all my..." Jules began, once Monica had stopped to take a breath.

"Don't you dare say this is your fault," Monica snapped, fixing Jules with a glare. "He should have trusted me!"

"Still, if you want to tell him you should be able too," Jules said. "I'll talk to Luca. I promise."

"No. Don't bother. It doesn't matter now. If he can't trust me, it's over anyway." With this, tears began to run down Monica's face once again.

"Are you sure about that?" Jules moved her head down, so she could look into Monica's lowered eyes.

"I don't know. But he's the one who broke it off. I won't go crawling back to him," she said with what Jules thought was false conviction.

Jules didn't say anything. Monica was being too negative to receive any real advice right now. So, she held her in her cold arms as she cried. Jules remained quiet as Monica finally moved on to silent sobs. Jules stroked her hair. Monica would have stayed with her had the roles been reversed, there was no way Jules was letting her down. Even the emotions that came with Gabriel abandoning her could wait.

"We should have a girls' night," Jules suggested once the tears had stopped and Monica had begun to make an effort to compose herself.

"Maybe... I don't know if I'm up to it."

"Think about it. We could hang out. Maybe watch a movie. You could order in. Take your mind off things."

“That doesn’t sound so bad,” Monica admitted. “We could invite Hayley.”

Jules knew that hanging out with a vampire might be asking too much of the werewolf but if Monica wanted to at least invite her, Jules would.

“Please,” Monica begged.

So, Jules picked up her phone and scrolled through her contacts until she found Hayley’s recently added name. She hit send and waited through the rings.

“Hey, you were supposed to call me,” a male voice greeted. “I’m the one who likes to get phone calls from beautiful women.”

“Hi, Kyle.” Jules laughed.

“Hand it over. She doesn’t want to talk to you,” Jules heard Hayley say in the background.

“How do you know? She might have called the wrong number,” he said but his voice was no longer near the phone.

Jules chuckled. After what sounded like a chase around the living room, Jules heard the sound of a hand smacking bare skin. “Ouch!”

“Jules. Hi, I’m so sorry about that. He’s an idiot.”

“Don’t be.” Jules tried to stifle her chuckling.

“What’s up?” Hayley asked.

“Monica needs a girls’ night; Seth broke up with her.”

“Jerk!” Hayley said. “They were perfect together.”

“Are you up for an evening in? With us?” Jules added to clarify that she, the vampire, would be in attendance as well.

"Absolutely! That sounds really great, actually," Hayley said. "Honey," she called away from the phone. "I need you to run an errand for me."

"What for?" Kyle's distant voice asked.

"A boatload of wine. We are having a girl's night in," Hayley said happily.

"Wait! I'm not a girl," Kyle exclaimed. "What about me?"

Jules could almost see the face he would be making at his wife.

"Sometimes you are just not that important," she said away from the phone.

He groaned.

"I'm back," Hayley said. "See you at your place in two hours." With that, Hayley ended the call and Jules set down her phone.

"Party at my place," Jules told Monica.

She raised her eyebrows.

"Don't worry," Jules said putting her hand on Monica's. "It's girls only."

THE FORT MILES PHANTOM

The unnaturally thick fog granted the Fort Miles Phantom the ability to walk the city streets in daylight once again. The nickname was growing on him. Why not have a label for his misdeeds?

"Hi there," he greeted the attractive, dark-skinned, young man he had in his sights.

The man gave him a sideways look but didn't respond. Instead, he kept walking in the direction he had been headed when he had been stopped by the vampire.

"Alright then," the vampire said aloud, to no one in particular. He'd grown tired of his current lover and was on the prowl for another human one. He liked human lovers, they required very little commitment. Thus, they were the perfect distraction. But, obviously, not that one.

He wasn't looking for a drink but out of nowhere, one presented itself to him. The Phantom had a type, in both lovers and meals. Young and beautiful was best, but never blonds. Killing blonds tended to cause an unreasonable, emotional spiral, so it just wasn't worth it.

"Hi there," said a drunk, and probably drugged, boney girl. He recognized her from a bar he frequented. She looked like she'd come from there. "I know what you are," she mumbled.

"Do you?" he asked her, but it wasn't really a question. Vampire groupies were groupies for a reason.

"You can drink from me if you want," she said, sticking out her wrist toward his mouth.

"You have no idea what you're offering," he told her but walked with her toward a secluded side of the fountain.

"Don't you want to?" she asked, swaying on her feet and dropping onto the seat beside him with a thud.

He put one hand on the back of her neck to steady it. He chuckled a low, breathless chuckle. He watched the pulse under her skin, the vein exposed. She was offering herself for a moment of relief from this mortal coil. How

could he resist? His fangs slipped free of their sheaths. He inserted them into her neck and began to drink.

“Wait,” the woman said after several long moments. She jerked, trying to free herself. The moment had come. He could let her go, he knew vampires that had the ability. He could let her go and when she returned to herself, she'd wouldn't even remember seeing him this night. That was the power of vampire venom. He'd once been told it felt like a drug. Calming the human and conveniently, causing a real case of brain-fog. However, he'd inherited his addictive personality from his drunken father. His grip tightened around his prey, holding the source of his addiction to his lips as he continued to drink.

Chapter Eighteen

THE FORT MILES PHANTOM

The sidewalks of Fort Miles were heavily populated with unsuspecting humans bustling around in the cool evening hours. Gabriel glanced up but could see nothing through the city lights.

He'd left Eileen at the hotel. She had been so understanding about leaving, that is, until they actually gotten here. That's when the bickering started. She wanted him to call Jules almost right after they arrived, but he needed time. It seemed this fight with Jules was also going to put a strain on his marriage. And that aggravated him. He just kept thinking about how selfish Jules had been, how she'd put Eileen in danger.

Gabriel walked until he found an almost deserted park. He needed the space, the silence. The city was a bad choice for an escape. His thoughts suddenly came to a halt. Gabriel listened. The sound was unmistakable. The quiet slurping of a vampire drinking the blood of a human.

He sped toward the sound with practiced silence, trying to assess the situation. All he needed was some psychotic, human-draining vampire feeding out in the open to top off an already rotten day.

He slowed as he neared the far side of the small park. The trees shifted in what little breeze was blowing. This had to be the only place in the city where stars could be seen.

Silently, he approached a huge fountain with a man sitting on the stone side, a woman in his arms. To an untrained eye, it may have looked like an obscene display of affection, but Gabriel knew the truth.

He listened closely to the woman's rapid breathing and racing pulse, to the soft sound of blood being sucked out of a human's body. He waited a few moments more for the vampire to stop and release the woman. But the moment came when the women started to slump in the vampire's arms. Her pulse and breathing slowed. That's when Gabriel knew that this vampire was not intending to spare his prey.

"Stop!" Gabriel shouted and ran toward them. The vampire looked over his shoulder, smiled at him, and was gone before the body hit the ground.

Gabriel rushed forward to catch her, but he wasn't fast enough. The woman lay on the ground beneath the stone ledge. He stepped out around the fountain cautiously. Soundlessly, he crept over beside her. As he approached he listened for a faint heartbeat. *Nothing*. He bent down and gently rolled her onto her back. Lifeless

eyes gazed back at him. On her throat were two puncture wounds. He was too late.

Gabriel took a moment to close the woman's eyes and offer a prayer for her soul. Then, he ran at full speed for several minutes.

KYLE

Hayley had left for Jules's house and Kyle had the place to himself, a man cave. He was prepared to sit around and veg the female-less evening away with some form of visual entertainment. He was flipping through his options when there was a knock on his door.

He scrunched his face in an expression of displeasure and then stood to answer the door. He expected to see one of Hayley's siblings looking for their sister. There were a lot of them and they all stopped over unannounced from time to time.

"We've been cast out," Luca said as a greeting. He and the new kid stood in the doorway.

"Women," Kyle chuckled.

"You want to go for a run?" Luca asked.

"How about pizza?" Kyle never passed up an opportunity to let the wolf out to play but his stomach wanted food.

"Run, then pizza," Luca suggested.

"Let's do it," Kyle said, stepping back inside to grab his phone and keys. He locked the door and the three of them headed back down the stairs. "Are we dropping the minor off at the Den or..."

The teenager opened his mouth to speak but Luca answered instead. "Nope. He's going with us."

"Great," Kyle said but added, "since when do we willingly babysit?"

"I don't need a babysitter," Ricky said.

At the same moment, Luca responded, "Kyle!" He said this in Hayley's favorite tone of voice.

"You watch out," Ricky continued. "I may just run you into the ground old man."

All three of them chuckled at this as they climbed into Luca's Jeep.

In just a few minutes, Luca pulled up to the rusty gates and the woods in which they freely ran. Luca and Kyle took a running start and launched themselves over the fence in wide leaps. When they landed on the other side they turned back toward the teenager, who was standing, staring at them.

"Well, you coming?" Kyle asking, panting a little.

Ricky rolled his eyes and walked several feet to the gate. He pushed it open deliberately slowly as if to make a point that lunging oneself over a fence ceremonially when one could use the obviously provided entrance was simply ridiculous.

Once the boy had joined them, they walked into the cover of the woods together. Each one of them began to strip off their clothes to their own desired degree.

"Ready?" Luca asked.

"I was born ready," Ricky said with a wicked smile.

With a howl provided by Kyle, the three of them took off at top speed. After only a few strides, they shifted

simultaneously. Luca turned into a majestic silver wolf, Ricky a solid black one, and Kyle the standard gray. Kyle tripped on the landing, his muzzle connecting with the mud under his paws. He stood on all fours and shook off his fumble. Luca howled playfully, and the wolves ran further into the woods, escaping the human world and all that was happening in it.

JULIANA

Three glasses of wine each and Jules was worried that she would end up cleaning both human and werewolf vomit out of her carpet. However, Monica had gone from perpetually depressed and crying at the drop of a hat to her happier self.

“So, what are we watching after this?” Hayley asked, her head lolled back on the couch, utterly relaxed.

“I’m up for anything, as long as it’s not a romance,” Monica answered.

“Of course not,” Hayley exclaimed dramatically, sounding a bit like her husband. “A nice action movie where there is a lot a running, and screaming, and explosions is much more appropriate at a time like this.”

“Maybe one where the guy dies,” Monica said, sounding playfully sulky.

Monica smiled and they both laughed just as Jules’s phone rang.

“Your man beckons,” Hayley said, picked up Jules’s phone and handing it to her.

“Sorry Monica,” she said after smiling down at the screen of her phone for a second too long.

"Whatever," Monica said. "I'm going to find us a movie." She stood and plopped onto the floor closer to the television, using the remote to flip through her list.

"By the way," Hayley put her hand on Jules's before she could answer Luca's call. "I've known Luca for a while now and I have never seen him this happy. Be good to him Jules the vampire."

"Okay," she said laughing a little and finally answering the call. "Hi," she greeted him, leaving off any endearing terms for Monica's sake.

"Are you near a TV?"

"Yes. Why?"

"Just turn to channel nine." His voice sounded rushed and was hard to hear. She guessed he was at a loud restaurant or something.

"Okay. Monica switch to channel nine for a second."

"The news?" Monica groaned but did so.

Once the appropriate channel had been found, Jules saw a newscaster talking about the string of murders that continued to occur all over Fort Miles. Cause of death was blood drained through two small holes on each body.

"What is this? Some psychotic, practical joke? And who is this man caught fleeing the scene?" the newsman's voice asked.

Jules cursed outright. The screen had flashed a security camera capture of Gabriel.

"What is it?" Hayley asked, looking up from her phone.

"Is Mr. Prentiss a killer?" Monica asked Jules.

“No. Of course not.” Jules was panic-stricken. *It couldn't be true.*

“Then why do they think he is?” Monica said, pointing toward the television.

“I have to find out. Stay here, both of you. I'll get you rides home.”

“I am not that drunk,” Hayley said, pointing to herself.

“Hayley.” Jules pointed at the inebriated werewolf girl. “Stay,” she commanded.

“Woof,” Hayley said and both Hayley and Monica were swept away in a fit of giggles.

Without another word, Jules grabbed her keys and walked out the front door. She reached the driveway, jumped into her car, and backed out quickly. She weaved through traffic. All she could think about was getting to Gabriel and uncovering the truth. The sound of her phone ringing pulled her out of her mind's confusion.

“You hung up on me. What are you going to do?” It was Luca.

“I have to get to Gabriel. I have to get to the bottom of this.”

“I'm coming with you.”

“No. I need you to and take Hayley and Monica home.”

“You can't go alone,” he said loudly.

“Yes, I can. If Gabriel really is doing this... even though I refuse to believe that... do you think he would hesitate before killing you?”

“Jules, but you...”

"Luca, I'm sorry but I'm not turning around. I love you," she said before hanging up on him.

GABRIEL

Gabriel had run until he couldn't anymore. There were now too many people around that might notice a passing blur. So, he walked at a brisk human pace until he arrived back at his hotel. He avoided meeting anyone's eye as he passed through the lobby. Upon seeing that the hall was empty he bolted down it and into his room at vampire speed.

"Gabriel! What's wrong?" Eileen asked with worry in her voice. He knew she was probably still angry at him. But he saw that anger melt away, most likely due to the expression on his face.

"Are you okay? You look like you've seen a ghost," she said, her tone full of only concern now.

"I feel like I did." He passed her and walked over to the little refrigerator where they had stashed the blood they had brought with them.

"What happened?" She put her hand over the mouth of the glass before he could pour a bag into it. "Gabriel, stop it. What happened?"

"I witnessed a vampire draining a human." He sounded shaken, though he tried to be steady. "I couldn't save her." His voice was strained as he got to the last word. Gabriel poured the contents of the bag into his glass and tossed the bag into the sink.

Gabriel dropped himself onto the plush couch. His mind raced as he went over possible courses of action in his mind. One thing was sure, he couldn't do nothing. He took a long drink, longer than he normally allowed himself. With the blood came the calming of his frazzled nerves.

"You're thinking about calling Jules, aren't you?" Eileen said softly as she sat down beside him and took his hand in her own.

"No." The anger in his eyes flared. "And yes." He dropped his head.

"Maybe we should, Gabriel. She would know what to do..."

"No," Gabriel cut her off. "No, I can deal with this myself." His voice was determined.

"You wouldn't have to handle this alone if you weren't so stubborn." She crossed her arms. "Jules would know how to handle all of this."

"No."

"You are being ridiculous. She fell in love. There really is nothing to be mad about." Eileen's defense of Jules was expected and not without justification. However, Gabriel was his own man. Jules was his best friend. He would decide when to contact her.

"There is more than enough to be mad about Eileen," he said, his voice not as level as he would have preferred. "Not only did she let herself fall in love with a *werewolf*, but she also lied about it." Anger overtook him and he stood roughly, pulling his hand out of hers as he did so. "How can you not understand?"

"I do understand." The anger in her voice rose as well. "I understand that you are allowing hate to dictate your actions!"

He couldn't have this fight again. Not now. He walked into the bedroom and slammed the door behind him.

"Seriously!" he heard her scream at him through the door. Eileen must have thrown something solid at it then because the door cracked down the middle.

Still, Gabriel did not move toward it. A few seconds later, he heard the hotel room door slam. He knew he should go after her. He knew she wasn't ready to be left in the human world alone. And yet, for some reason he didn't quite understand, he let her go.

THE FORT MILES PHANTOM

He was walking the streets again on the way to nowhere in particular. He was getting a little tired of this quiet city. He might be forced to move on if things didn't get more interesting soon.

He was halfway to anywhere when his call for interesting was met. He sensed her before he saw her, he could almost feel her panic. She was a young one. That was for sure. She was untrained in the ways of the world, he could sense it. He stood in his place on the sidewalk, humans skirting by him on either side. Then he spotted her. She was taller than average for a woman and strikingly beautiful, the scars on her cheek only adding to her vampiric allure. Dark hair hung long down her back, the copper skin of the natives of this land had not yet

paled with years. She pushed and shoved through the throng, desperate to get away from the skin-covered blood temptations.

He paced her from across the busy night street until the opportunity to get through the speeding cars arose. One second cars were nearly missing him and the next he was standing in front of her, his hands on either side of her arms. "Come with me," he instructed the overwhelmed and flustered vampire.

She said nothing as he took her hand and pulled her off her current path. He found a secluded alley and stopped them inside the cover of its darkness. "You can breathe," he told her, his hands resting again on either side of her arms.

She took in a long breath.

"Now you let it out," he instructed.

She met his eyes for the first time. Her eyes were still predominantly their original color. She was very young, but not a brand-new vampire like he'd originally assumed. She let a long stream of air out of her lungs.

"Better?" he asked.

She nodded but was still silently staring up at him. It happened with the young ones sometimes. He wasn't a primordial vampire, but he was several centuries old.

"Yes, thank you," she said. "There were just so many of them out there."

"Several billion in the world I'd imagine," he said, smiling.

"Something's familiar about you," she commented, looking up at him once again, her eyes narrowed in concentration. "But I know we've never met before."

"Considering I was made a vampire hundreds of years before your human life began and considering I'm not someone you just forget, I'm guessing we haven't." He batted his eyelashes for effect.

She raised her eyebrows at him skeptically.

"I'm Nick, Nicholas as it were," he said, dropping his hands and stretching one out toward her.

"Eileen," she replied.

"So, tell me Eileen," Nick began, "how is it that you have been a vampire for what forty, fifty years and still get thrown off by large quantities of humans that are not currently bleeding?"

"My coven doesn't feed on humans," she said.

Nick scowled. So, *she is part of one of those new era, 'humans are friends not food' people.* He was about to respond when a loud laugh pulled Eileen's attention back to the entrance of the alley.

She made for the human-heavy sidewalk, but he grabbed her around the shoulders, keeping her concealed in the alley.

"Let me go." She fought against his hold.

"Can't do that, sorry," he said, strengthening his hold against her resistance.

"But I'm so hungry."

He empathized with the desperation in her voice. "Don't worry," Nick said. "We can fix that."

CARSON

“Why exactly have you requested to meet in the yard?” Carson asked the stuttering imbecile of a tracker. He normally would not allow himself to be summoned by anyone and yet the man had said that the information he brought was sensitive. So here he was, standing in the front yard, waiting on this moron to spit out what he had to say.

“Th-the... there is a-another traitor, sir,” he finally said.

“Kyle Cooper?” Carson asked, almost excitedly. He would love to have proof of his fall along with that of Luca Cain.

Jed looked back toward the house as if checking to make sure no one was nearby. Carson’s impatience was growing. However, every time Carson was about to dismiss the stuttering fool the man proved smarter and more valuable than expected.

“No... it... it’s the woman’s s-son.”

Carson stilled. “What did you just say?”

Jed once again handed his phone to his Alpha. “I picked up the vam... vampire at a house n-near the school. This was taken on the way t-to a human home.”

Carson studied the picture. Jed was not mistaken. He was holding proof of the boy’s treachery. The picture showed the boy standing at ease, conversing with one very bothersome, tiny, dead girl.

Carson felt like shouting. How deep did this anarchy run? Not only was Luca a traitor to the pack but he had dragged Demetria’s son down that path with him. He

needed to eliminate these problems, and he needed to do it now. Carson's hand tightened around the phone.

"I..." The tracker began to object.

"Have you mentioned this to anyone else?" Carson asked through a clenched jaw.

"Of... of course n-not," Jed replied, reaching for his property.

"Good." Carson handed the man back his phone. "Keep it that way," Carson ordered and then waved his hand in dismissal.

"Ye-yes, sir." Jed nodded and rushed away, seeming eager to be gone from this situation.

Carson's mind was spinning. Luca was like a cancer spreading throughout the pack. It must be stopped. He had to ensure the safety of those loyal to him. This he must do, no matter what the cost. The hard choices were his to make and make them he would.

As if on cue, Kip pulled into the drive and climbed out of his vehicle. Carson took long strides over to him. "Is it done?" Carson asked.

"Um... no Alpha. I wasn't able to locate Luca," Kip said, looking downright mortified. He should be.

"Did you try?" Carson asked angrily.

"I drove around all day. I even went all the way to Fort Miles looking for him."

"Idiot. The vampire is here. Why exactly would he be in the city?" Carson was outraged. Was this wolf just that simple or was Kip more clever than he'd ever given him credit for, finding a way to avoid his duty, while technically following orders? Was he a traitor as well?

Carson pulled forth every ounce of control he had as the Alpha of this pack and spoke after a long moment. "Find him. I do not care who gets in your way," Carson snarled.

Kip paled. Everything in him seemed to be fighting against this instruction. This angered Carson greatly. His orders had to be obeyed. Carson backhanded the taller man across the face. The wolf stumbled back against his vehicle. "Do it tonight or you will suffer the same fate."

GABRIEL

Gabriel heard Eileen's phone ring. Apparently, she had left it on the counter when she stormed out of the hotel room. Gabriel walked from the bedroom, picked it up, and stared at the name of the caller. The whimsical ringtone died while Gabriel was still holding the small phone in his hand, starting at Jules's name.

The phone rang again. The ringtone ended, and still, Gabriel hadn't answered. He could imagine how upset and worried Jules must be by now. It was possible that Eileen had been right all along. He was being unreasonable. He didn't have to forgive Jules but avoiding her was childish.

Gabriel's phone started vibrating in his pocket. Finally, he chose to answer. Jules didn't have to know he was the one ignoring her calls to Eileen. "Hello."

"What is going on? Where are you? I saw you on the news." Jules's rapid-fire questions came out in place of a greeting.

“What do you mean, you saw me on the news?”

“The woman you found,” Jules explained, “the media has tied you to the murder.”

“Oh.” Gabriel was stunned. How did trying to help a woman connect him to her murder?

“I’m assuming that you didn’t do this.” Jules sounded almost accusatory. Her tone stung. This wedge between them needed to be mended sooner or later.

“Of course I didn’t,” he said softly, almost remorsefully.

“But it was a vampire.”

“Yes.”

“Where are you?” she asked again.

Gabriel hesitated for a moment. He could tell that she was in the car. He could hear the hum of her engine and the rolling tires. “I can handle this on my own Jules.” He spoke so softly that he wasn’t sure that she’d heard him.

“I know that Gabriel.” Jules spoke almost as softly. “But you don’t have too. No matter what you think of me, I will be there to help you.”

Gabriel considered this for a moment and then he said, “alright Jules. I’m at a hotel in downtown Fort Miles. I’ll text you the address.”

“I’ll be there as soon as I can.”

He lifted the phone away from his ear, preparing to hang up but then he thought the better of it. He needed to know her answer to his next question. He had to prepare himself. “You aren’t bringing the werewolf, are you?”

“No, I’m alone,” she replied then ended the call.

Relieved, Gabriel rolled the tension out of his shoulders. He had no choice now. Jules was coming. Together they would get this rogue vampire situation sorted out and, with any luck, some time away from Aboit and that dog would open her eyes to his concerns.

LUCA

Once Luca, Kyle, and Ricky had eaten their fill of pizza he'd dropped Ricky off at the Den. Then he and Kyle made their way to Jules' s house to pick up Monica and Hayley, upon Jules's request.

When they arrived, both girls were fast asleep on the sofa, a movie continuing to play with no one watching. Kyle stopped Luca with his arm and then he himself crept into the room, looking down at his sleeping wife for a few seconds too long. He seemed enchanted by the delicate drape of her hair and the way her chest rose and fell slowly. Then Monica sorted in her sleep. Luca and Kyle laughed in unison and both girls sat up, startled.

"Don't scare me like that," Hayley grumbled, smacking Kyle's leg with a soft thwap.

Monica threw herself back down onto the couch, her head resting on her arm. She looked toward Luca.

"You ready to go home?" he asked, raising his eyebrows at her.

She nodded and yawned at the same time in response.

"Come on then." Kyle reached both hands out toward Hayley, who took them and allowed herself to be pulled from the sofa.

Monica sat up and looked around. "Let me clean up before we go." This sounded more like a question than an instruction. She started to stand and then dropped back down. Luca was by her side in an instant.

"I'll do it. You sit." Luca walked around the couch and started to clean up the mess the girls had made.

"Keys Hayles?" Kyle asked.

"Kitchen counter." Hayley pointed.

Kyle nodded. "You want help?" He motioned around them.

Luca looked around the room and then shook his head. "No, you guys go. I'll finish up and take Monica home." He gathered up discarded carryout boxes, paper plates, and drinking glasses.

"Are you coming back to the apartment after?" Hayley asked.

"I should probably show my face at the Den," Luca replied.

Hayley nodded.

"Good luck," Kyle commented and then they were gone.

It took only a few minutes to get Jules's house back in perfect order. He walked through the house, locked the front door, and made his way back to Monica. Her tipsy state had her almost passed out on the couch once again. He chuckled and held out a hand to help her onto her feet.

She took it but let it go once she was fully vertical. She stumbled, and Luca caught her by the shoulders. "Okay let's go." Luca gently guided Monica through the

back door and locked it. He placed the spare key back in its hiding place and the pair walked to the Jeep.

Monica was fairly quiet on the way back to her house, Luca was just hoping she didn't end up vomiting all over his Jeep's upholstery. To his relief, she seemed to be looking a little more stable once they reached her driveway and he dropped her off.

"Do you need me to come inside with you?"

Her hand rested on the door handle a moment and then she spoke, "I think I'm good."

"Goodnight Monica."

"Night."

He waited until the front door was open and she waved back at him before he backed out of the drive.

The night sky was dark and the roads back to the Den were almost completely deserted. It was a peaceful drive on a quiet road around the preserve. That was, until a large vehicle appeared right behind him, their headlights reflecting off his rearview mirror and into his eyes. Luca would have sworn it hadn't been there a second ago. He thought it looked like Kip's truck, but he couldn't be sure in the dark, despite its close proximity to the Jeep's backside.

Luca tried speeding up. He tried slowing down but neither resulted in the truck going around him or backing off even slightly. He sped up again. And again, the truck paced him. He had to slow as he approached the place where the forest road curved, with a steep drop on his passenger side. The truck sped up, filling the lane beside him. It paced him a moment and Luca looked to his left.

He was startled when he saw the driver. It was Kip. He was looking out his passenger window at Luca with an unreadable expression on his face.

Luca was about to give him a what the hell look when Kip swerved, slamming into the side of the Jeep. Luca countered, trying desperately to stay on the road. He was just about to slam on the brakes when Kip slammed into him again. This time, Luca lost control. He swerved unavoidably, and the Jeep's tires skidded off the road, hurling down the steep drop he'd slowed down to avoid. The front tire must have hit something because the Jeep flipped. It all happened so fast that not even Luca had time to react. The soft top of the jeep gave easily, and the weight of the car came down on Luca's body.

Luca's consciousness waned. All he felt was pain and pressure. He registered that there must be a cut on his forehead as blood began to drip into his eyes. He looked down at the parts of his body that he could see and noted that there was a long gash running along his abdomen. But then, everything went dark.

Chapter

Nineteen

NIGHT-LIFE IN THE CITY

Jules pulled up in front of an extravagant hotel. A valet was waiting to take her car keys from her. She took the ticket, thanked the young boy and walked straight to the elevators in the lobby.

Once inside, she pulled her phone from her back pocket to confirm the room number Gabriel had texted her. She punched the button for level sixteen and waited. The door slid open twice before reaching her desired floor. She stepped out into the hallway and moved down the hall to the left, stopping in front of door number 1617.

She knocked and waited a few moments for Gabriel to answer. When he did, after a few long moments, her instinct was to hug him. However, a barrier of tension seemed to be floating between them. He stood rigidly to one side of the doorframe to allow her to enter.

Jules walked into the room and dropped gracefully onto the elegant and hard sofa. "Tell me what happened. What do you know about the killer?" Jules looked around

the room, realizing for the first time that she and Gabriel were completely alone. "Where is Eileen?"

"We had a fight," Gabriel said speaking for the first time. "She left." He closed the door and walked over to sit in the straight-backed chair to one side of the glass coffee table.

"What do you mean she left?" Jules said astonished. "You didn't go after her?"

"Everything is falling apart Jules." Gabriel looked at the floor as he spoke. He sounded hopeless. "I lost you. Eileen left me. The media is pinning a woman's murder on me." When Gabriel raised his face there was blood dripping from his eyes and sliding down his cheeks. Jules didn't think she'd ever seen him cry before, but he was crying now.

Jules handed him a tissue and leaned forward, placing a hand on his hunched shoulder. "You haven't lost me. Eileen likely only left because she needed some space. But we both know she didn't leave you, she loves you. And the murder thing, we'll figure that out too. We've never seen a challenge we couldn't overcome together."

He sat up and leaned against the back of the chair. Her hand dropped from his shoulder.

"So that's enough self-pity," she said sternly. "Wash off your face, grab some sunglasses and a hat, and let's go find your wife."

"Sunglasses? It's dark outside. It will be for hours yet," Gabriel said as he stood.

“Nighttime or not, your face was plastered all over the news. I recommend taking some sort of steps to obscure your identity before intentionally entering the local populous.”

Gabriel chuckled lightly and smiled sadly but nodded as he moved toward the bathroom to wash the blood off his face.

NICHOLAS

Nick approached an unmarked building in the underbelly of the city. This was a place one could only find if they knew where and what it was. It had been intentionally well-hidden and very exclusive for decades; as it catered to a very specific clientele. It was obviously a club, as the long line outside nightly could attest. The only truly conspicuous thing about it was that the bouncer would turn away even the wealthiest and well known of humans if they didn't know the passphrase. He was currently rejecting admittance to three humans whom Nick recognized from a movie he'd seen recently.

As Nick and Eileen walked up one side of the long line, he met the bouncer's eyes and nodded silently. They were waved through without any spoken word at all. Age did come with perks.

“Where are we?” Eileen asked breathlessly as they breached the blood-red velvet curtains, revealing the scene within. It was a mass of human's and vampires alike. Some dancing, some drinking; both whiskey from a glass and blood from the source. Dimmed lights set the

mood, while an odd assortment of music from many eras played at random.

"A club, of the vampire variety," he said, putting an arm over her shoulders. "They exist in every major city in the world." He leaned down to whisper in her ear. "You don't have to hunt unsuspecting humans to drink blood the way real vampires should. And these people get compensated generously."

She looked up, a look of incredulous astonishment on her face. Obviously, whoever her puritan coven leader was had decided that by keeping this vampire in the dark about the world of which she was now a part, they were protecting her humanity.

"You poor thing," Nick said and placed a hand on her shoulder. "You've never drunk from a human before, have you?"

"Of course not! I am not a monster," Eileen said, but it lacked venom. She was listening to him.

So, he continued with a smile, "I mean, I am one due to an unfortunate genetic predisposition for addictive behavior. However, not all vampires are monsters. There are ways to live that don't include murder or abstinence. It is possible to drink from a human directly and not end their life."

Eileen again looked surprised but nodded for him to continue.

"It's a skill that takes practice, but it can be learned. Places like this provide a sort of safeguard. You see those two men over there."

Eileen nodded.

“It’s their job to make sure you don’t drain the club’s human patrons. Not even I end up draining my drink in this place.”

As if on cue, the two men in black moved toward a couple along the far wall. A female was obviously drinking the blood of the middle-aged man she had in her clutches. One of the black-clad men leaned over to whisper something in the vampire’s ear. When she didn’t release her prey, each man clasps down on one of her arms and pulled her away from her now quite dazed looking meal. The women sat back a little and wiped at the blood that was dripping down her chin. She then stood and was safely escorted to the other side of the club.

“I see,” Eileen said after a few silent moments.

Nick smiled peevishly.

“Whose, your friend?”

Nick and Eileen turned at the question. A round vampire that Nick knew in passing was sauntering over to them with wide clomps. *Here we go*, Nick thought to himself.

“Carlos, old man,” Nick greeted with false cheerfulness. This vampire may be twice Nick’s age, but he was a pain in his dead ass.

Carlos ignored Nick like a fly on the wall and bent over Eileen’s hand, kissing it. “Who, may I ask, am I addressing?”

“Eileen Prentiss,” she said skeptically, yanking her hand back. “And you are?”

“Carlos my dear. I’m sure you’ve heard of me.” A wide smile spread across his face while his nose lifted into the air.

Nick rolled his eyes and scoffed.

“Sorry, I haven’t,” Eileen said, taking one step closer her Nick.

“Surprising,” Carlos said, reaching for her hand again. “Well come and I’ll educate you.” He placed one hand on her lower back.

Nick was about to step in when Eileen shifted out of his reach and replied. “Not interested, sorry.”

“Excuse me?” Anger flashed in his eyes. He was not used to being rejected by those beneath him.

Eileen looked questioningly up at Nick. He couldn’t interpret if she was unsure what to do now or if she wanted to know if this guy was for real.

“Okay Carlos,” Nick said, stepping in front of her. “The lady isn’t interested.”

“Step aside, you insignificant worm,” Carlos instructed, shoving Nick to one side. He bumped into a nearby table, knocking it and all its contents to the floor. One of the humans occupying it stumbled backward. Hands outstretched she slammed into the glass littering the floor. More than one vampire turned toward the miniscule cut on her hand, Nick and Eileen included.

However, in a fraction of a second, one of the men wearing black, picked the woman up and whisked her away to some back room, assumedly to get her cleaned up.

“The excitement’s over. Everyone go back to your drinks and dances,” called the bar’s owner.

In less than a second, Nick was between Carlos and Eileen once again.

“Nick let’s just...” When Eileen began tugging on his arm, his attention was pulled to yet another vampire.

“Is there a problem, boys?” asked the copper-skinned vampire, that had spoken to the bar as a whole moments ago. Her hair was stick straight and glossy black. Her four-inch heels clacked, and her A-line skirt restricted her steps as she glided toward the trio.

“Not on my end Cleo,” Nick said without backing down from his stance against Carlos.

“This flea is my problem,” Carlos told Cleo, shoving Nick again. This time no catastrophe followed.

“Carlos, dear one.” Cleo put one hand on the older vampire’s arm. “You know very well that I don’t tolerate fighting within these walls.”

“His insolence shall not stand,” Carlos said, getting even more aggravated that the proprietor wasn’t taking his side.

Cleo’s steps sounded as she moved closer to Carlos. “You may be the oldest thing in my bar at the moment Carlos, but Nick here is not someone you want to mess with.” She motioned to him. “He has very powerful friends.”

“This may be your bar missy, but my age will grant me the respect I deserve,” Carlos snapped.

"In the grand scheme of time, you are nothing," Nick said. "My 'friends' are twice your age and have eyes you've only dreamt of."

Carlos snarled, the recognition of what Nick said seeping slowly into his expression.

Nick relaxed, knowing that the situation was again under his control.

Carlos looked from Nick to Cleo to Eileen, whom he looked all the way up and down. "The infant's not worth it," he finally said and then sauntered off the way he had come.

"Speaking of important vampires, where is your other half?" Cleo asked, addressing Nick as if the whole mess hadn't even happened.

"We sort of broke up," he told her honestly.

"Think it will stick this time?" Cleo asked laughing.

Nick shrugged, smiling down at her.

"Well regardless," Cleo began, "a drink on the house, for you and your friend." She motioned toward Eileen.

"Thanks, love," Nick replied, kissing Cleo on the hand. He managed to do this without the creep factor that Carlos had used on Eileen.

"I'll have a martini," Eileen said as Cleo walked back to do something bar-owner related.

"She doesn't mean that kind of drink," Nick told her. His mind back on why they had come.

GABRIEL

Together, Gabriel and Jules had checked the streets and every darkened corner near the hotel but had had no

luck finding Eileen. Originally, he'd thought that she'd just gone down to the pool or bar. He hadn't imagined that she was angry enough to go out on the streets by herself. He was also finding that sunglasses at night were a real problem. He might have been drawing more attention with them on than if his face was clearly displayed.

While they searched for Eileen, he told Jules all he knew about the Fort Miles Phantom, which wasn't very much. He looked to be in his late teens, close to Jules's human age, and yet he was at least several centuries old. Gabriel couldn't remember any distinguishing features beyond that. It was over so fast, and he'd been focused on the one losing blood, not the one doing the drinking.

"Great, thanks again," Jules said into her phone and then replaced it in her back pocket.

"Anything?" Gabriel asked. Jules had been on the phone with a vampire acquaintance that lived here in the city.

"Yes. There is a place on the north side. A blood club?"

"That's a waste of time. She doesn't even know they exist," Gabriel said.

"But someone there might have seen her," Jules countered. "This way."

Jules turned down a lesser populated street. Gabriel was watching her with new eyes. She raised her face to the moon and sighed. She seemed so calm, more at peace than he had ever seen her before.

"Jules."

"Hmmm?" Jules turned toward him while still moving steadily forward.

"About the werewolf..."

"Gabriel don't," Jules said sternly. "Please," she added more softly.

"Can you just tell me why?" he asked, pressing on even though he wasn't sure he would like her answer.

"Why did you choose Eileen?" Jules asked. "Yes, I know she was dying. But before that. Why did you fall for Eileen in the first place?"

"Her kindness," Gabriel said. It was the first thing he'd noticed about her, after her striking looks.

"And after you turned her, you were under no obligation to marry her. Why did you?" Jules continued.

Gabriel thought for a moment. Life with Eileen just made sense. He loved her. He loved all of her.

When Gabriel didn't speak Jules answered for him. "Her personality fit yours. Though you are two whole people alone, she enhanced who you are, didn't she?"

Gabriel smiled slightly. He knew what she said was true. Then he put together what she was telling him. "Are you saying that this wolf completes you? But he's an animal!"

"And we are demons," Jules said, keeping her tone level. He knew that she didn't feel this way. That she knew they were more than that. Not all vampires were demons, therefore, not all werewolves were animals. He wanted to believe it, he just didn't know how too.

"Alright," Gabriel conceded. It was clear that Jules was not going to back down about this. Gabriel decided

that he would have to let her learn the truth the hard way. Hopefully, it didn't end up getting her killed. But if he couldn't talk her out of this madness, it was a risk he'd have to allow. "I won't say any more about it."

"Thank you." She smiled at him slightly and he smiled back. At least the fight between them was over.

"Did you know that when you first brought Eileen back, I didn't like her either?" Jules asked.

Gabriel looked at her skeptically.

"It's true." She chuckled a little. "I spent months wishing things would just go back to normal."

"But you didn't ever say anything."

"No, I didn't. You were so happy," she stated.

"It's true. I was," he said, smiling toward the sidewalk, thinking of his incredible wife.

"And now, I love Eileen. She's part of our family."

Gabriel nodded. He knew where this was going. It was leading back to the werewolf.

"And that never would have happened if I hadn't given her a chance."

Gabriel sighed. "I don't know if I can learn to like him, Jules, but I will try to give you space to be with him." He stopped walking. Following his lead, she turned to face him. He reached his hands out, took her head between them, and brushed her forehead with his lips. "I love you. And I do want you to be happy."

"I know," Jules replied. "Come one we're almost there."

Nick's lips were pressed against the woman's neck. Her head lolled back, not in death but pleasure. He knew why most human's frequented clubs like this. Some because they liked the mental blackout that came after the bite, it gave them a kind of escape. Some simply did it for the money. While others were hoping that some vampire would turn them. All that was required was for the human to consume blood from a vampire and the change would begin. However, this occurrence was rare. Vampires generally didn't like to share, for whatever reason.

Just then, Nick saw something he hadn't wanted to. An image. A memory, belonging to a woman whose blood he was drinking, slipped into his mind. This dark-skinned beauty and another woman, happy, in love maybe. Nick fell into the trap and pulled the woman closer until he saw the tragedy of her lover's death, the event that brought her to this moment.

He felt for her. He also felt for himself. Her blood was rejuvenating him, exciting him. He wanted to finish her. He wanted to drain every drop of her blood and set her free from her pain.

A hand clamped down on Nick's shoulder tightly. He knew this was the first warning for him to stop. He wanted to shake it off but that's not how things were done here. You stop drinking when you're told to or you get thrown out for good.

He pulled back and removed his fangs from her neck. Her blood dripped down his lips onto his chin. He rested her head in his hand. Her dark skin glistening where his

fangs had punctured her neck. He wanted the rest of it now, all of it. But he couldn't have it.

With difficulty, he retracted his fangs and licked off his lips. Then he laid the beautiful woman down gently on the bench they were both sitting on and stepped away.

Nick looked at the pair who had been sitting next to him. Eileen was delicately sipping from her partner's wrist. The countenance of a vampire in complete control of her own desires. A twinge of jealousy swept over him, and then it was gone. It was what it was. His father had been an alcoholic, Nick was cursed with an addictive nature and he had to live with that. He walked over and tapped Eileen gently on the shoulder.

She pulled back easily and looked up at him, temporarily-red eyes, fangs, blood and all. "What's up?" she asked.

"If you don't want to become an addict like me, you'd better stop."

She whimpered, stuck out her lower lip for a moment, then thanked her woozy host, and wiped off her mouth. "You didn't tell me it would be like that!" Eileen almost bounced in place. "Normally I just feel peaceful, comfortable. But that was a rush! I mean, wow!"

Nick chuckled. "Come on, let's wash it down with a whiskey." He held out a hand for her, and she took it, standing.

"Why could I see his memories?" she asked as they approached the bar.

He waved his hand at the bartender. "Part of drinking from the source," he replied. "It gets pretty

intense at times, but you'll learn to block it out eventually."

The bartender hurried over. Nick ordered two shots and waited. They arrived in front of him moments later, two small shot glasses of whiskey with a drop or two of blood in each. "Drink this." He handed her one of the glasses. "Won't do anything for you, but it tastes good." Nick tossed back the shot.

Eileen copied him and then sputtered, her face contorting in disgust. "That so does not taste good."

"To each their own," he said shrugging.

"I want more blood," she blurted out just as the red in her eyes began to fade away, exposing her original color once again.

"Take it easy, tiger," he said, patting her on the arm. "Pace yourself, the next one we have to pay for."

JULIANA

Jules and Gabriel approached the unmarked building, walking to the back of a long line of humans to wait. After a few seconds, however, they were waved forward by the bouncer. Jules approached tentatively. Silently, he inspected both Gabriel's and Jules's eyes, determining their approximate age and species. He nodded low to Jules and waved them inside the club.

The sights and smells hit Jules hard. A long bar sat to the right while to left was a crowded dancefloor. Lights flashed, loud rock music blasted over the speakers, humans and vampires surrounded them. Across the open space was a section set apart by velvet ropes. Inside it

were vampires consuming fresh, human blood. Jules could smell it from the front of the club. It burned her nose and made her mouth dry out. Her body tensed. Her fingers twitched. Jules took a step toward that part of the club. Gabriel's hand on her shoulder held her in place.

"We're here for Eileen remember," he whispered sharply in her ear.

Jules swallowed against her dry throat but nodded. This was about her coven and trying to stop an out of control vampire.

"Gabriel."

Surprised, they both turned toward Eileen's call.

"And Jules, you're here together." She approached, smiling widely at them. Jules was unnerved by the relaxed and happy expression she wore. She looked at ease in this place that was making Jules's skin crawl.

"We were looking for you," Gabriel said, sounding exasperated. But he could just be yelling to be heard over the music. Jules couldn't tell for sure.

"Well here I am," she said, throwing out her arms. Gabriel looked her over, presumably making sure she was unhurt.

"You missed a spot," he said down his nose, pointing to a blood drop that had run down her white top.

"Oops," Eileen replied.

"Never mind all that," Jules said, stepping between Gabriel's tense expression and Eileen jovial one. "How did you get here? Did someone bring you or..."

"Nick did." Eileen pointed nonchalantly toward the dance floor.

"Nick who?" Gabriel asked.

Eileen considered the question for a moment. "You know, I don't know." She turned back to the dance floor and scanned it. She zeroed in on a couple grinding together to the music. The red-haired vampire's back was turned toward them.

"Nick!" Eileen shouted.

He turned at her call.

If Jules's heart had been beating it would have stopped completely.

"That's the murderer," Gabriel hissed.

Jules barely heard him. The vampire on the dance floor mirrored her frozen expression. He had her eyes, her hair, even her lips.

Gabriel stepped out in front of both woman, and in a flash, punched Jules's twin brother square in his matching nose.

NICHOLAS

"Gabriel, stop!" The person Nick thought was long ago dead, shouted at the man who had just punched him in the face.

Nick barely registered that Eileen ran up and put a hand on his assailant's chest, holding him back from repeating the punching.

He was too focused on the tiny vampire running toward him to even address the blood gushing from his nose. Before he knew what was happening, he was holding his sister in his arms, his twin. The part of him that had been missing for centuries. His arms grasp her

desperately. After a few seconds, that felt like years and yet the briefest of moments, he set her back on her feet and looked down at her. She was just as she had been the last time he'd seen her, except she was a vampire like him. Four-hundred years and the memory of her face hadn't faded.

"Juliana?" he asked breathlessly, his hands in her hair, hers on the sides of his neck.

"How?" she asked him.

"Well, I'm a vampire of course," he teased with a wide smile. He didn't think he'd ever been this happy before. "As are you, obviously."

She punched him on the shoulder hard. He flinched but the identical smiles on their faces widened.

Red tears of joy streaked down his sister's face. "You disappeared," she said in a quieter tone.

"I know but I came back for you. As soon as I knew that I wouldn't accidentally kill you, I came back," he said. "But they told me that Aunt Millie had been murdered. And that you..." his voice trailed off. He thought she was dead. He never would have left England if he hadn't.

"Jules, what are you doing?" The male said as he and Eileen approached the twins. "This is the murderer!" Gabriel shouted.

"Murder?" Nick asked. Looking at the man.

"You're the Fort Miles Phantom." Jules took a step back from him, her expression one of confusion and pain.

"That's what they call me," Nick admitted.

Eileen looked shocked while Jules was looking at him like their parents had died for a second time.

"Julie..." The joke fell from his next comment as he put two and two together. She'd come for Eileen. If they were in the same coven then she didn't drink from humans either. It made sense. She would be one of *those* vampires. The ones that abstained.

"Jules," she corrected, the look on her face hardening into resolve. She looked from him, toward Eileen, and then the other guy.

"Jules let's go," the guy said, stretching out a hand for her to accept. Nick felt panic grip his un-beating heart. She couldn't leave like this. This couldn't be the end of this insanely miraculous second chance.

JULIANA

Her heart breaking, Jules took Gabriel's hand and turned from the one person she'd always loved above all others. The other half of herself.

She felt a hand grasp her arm. He spun her, his grip tightening. "Don't leave me. Please, Jules." The tone of voice Nick was using meant that he felt as if his life being was ripped apart, again.

"Jules..." she heard Gabriel's voice call, but it felt far away.

Looking up into her brother's eyes, pure silver, like her own, she saw only him. His face was just as she remembered it. He still looked like an angel, or maybe he was a ghost now.

"Please..." he begged softly.

As he held her gaze, she saw all the gentleness and love she remembered so clearly. This was her twin, her blood. She loved him. Despite all of his faults, she always had. He was a murderer, but so was she. Yes, she'd found a way to control it, but could she blame him if he had not?

As she worked through the tidal wave of emotions drowning her, she heard Gabriel walk out from behind her. In the blink of an eye, he was standing threateningly in front of Nick.

"Get your hand off of her," he said firmly.

"Gabriel," she said, throwing an arm across his chest, restraining him.

"Who the hell are you?" Nick spat.

"Back down. Both you, now!" Jules ordered.

Both her blood and chosen brothers took one step back. Jules looked around them, they were drawing quite a bit of unwanted attention. A woman was approaching them, her arms crossed, looking livid.

"We can talk about all of this back at the hotel. The sun's coming up and we're making a scene. Let's go."

"Really Nick..." the irate looking woman began.

"We're going, Cleo. I'm sorry," Nick said but Jules found that he hadn't taken his eyes off of her as he spoke to the woman.

Gabriel took another step back, putting an arm over Eileen's shoulders and guiding her from the bar.

Jules's hand found its way into Nick's. She felt that if she let him go, he may just disappear into thin air.

Phantom or not, she wouldn't go through the pain of losing him for a second time.

He looked down at their hands a moment and then whispered in her ear. "Did you miss me?" he asked.

"Every day."

Hand in hand, she left the vampire bar, her life forever altered.

Chapter Twenty

TRAGEDY UNDER THE SUN

Luca woke as the sun began to rise over the upturned Jeep. Though his injuries had begun healing themselves, there was blood all over his surroundings. One of his shoulders had probably been dislocated but it had slipped back into place as his muscles began righting themselves. He reached for the seatbelt, which was still holding him upside-down. With a great yank, he freed himself. He fell onto the grass and glass beneath him. His hands and arms were inflicted with fresh cuts as he shifted to kick what was left of the driver door clean off. He crawled out, still clutching his abdomen. Carson obviously knew about Luca's attachment to Jules. *What am I supposed to do now?*

Jules was in Fort Miles and, for the first time, he was grateful that Gabriel's dilemma had taken her far from here. However, there were others who might now be in peril. If Carson had somehow learned that Kyle and Hayley consorted with Jules as well, they could be next. He had to warn them.

With a yell of pain and a flash of light, he went from man to wolf. His paws carried him more swiftly than his

feet would have, and his blood covered cloths disappeared under his fur. He climbed up the steep incline and across the road, heading straight through the heart of town.

RICKY

Ricky practically jumped off the bed when he was awakened by a loud pounding on Luca's bedroom door. He'd walked up the stairs late last night to wait on him to return and had fallen asleep across the end of Luca's bed.

Ricky didn't respond to the knock, choosing instead to lay back down and yawn. Whoever it was was most likely looking for Luca anyway.

Just as Ricky started to drift back to sleep, Carson burst through the door, eyes blazing. He froze in the doorway for a fraction of a second and then came at the still half-asleep Ricky, grabbing his shirt and lifting him off the bed. Ricky wanted to scream for his mother but kept his mouth shut.

"What the..." Ricky grabbed at Carson's fist. "Let go."

"Traitors don't speak in my presence," Carson snarled.

Ricky didn't know why he was a traitor but decided that he'd keep his mouth shut for the sake of his own preservation. Especially since the veins in Carson's neck looked as if they might explode at any moment. Ricky jerked his head toward the door when he heard his mother calling Carson's name.

“We will finish this later!” Carson said through gritted teeth just as Demetria reached the bedroom door.

“Carson!” she shrieked, running toward them.

Carson shoved Ricky back onto the bed. He bounced upon landing. Demetria ran to him, her hands hovering over her son helplessly.

He sat up, shaking himself. She hugged him around the neck, kissed his hair, and then placed herself between her lover and her child.

“In the future, Carson,” Demetria’s voice rose, “You will keep your hands off my child.” For the first time since his father’s death Ricky felt like he had his mother back.

Carson closed the space between them and struck Demetria across the face with the back of his hand. “You will never speak to me like that again!”

Demetria’s hand covered her reddened cheek, but she did not move or shrink away.

Ricky stood to defend his mom, but she grabbed him by the wrist, holding him back.

“Your son is a traitor to this pack,” Carson shouted, pacing menacingly in front of them but did not move toward them again.

“You are our Alpha.” Demetria bowed to Carson. “But he is my son, please allow me to handle this,” she begged, her head bowed submissively.

Carson glared at her and then at Ricky and back at her. Instead of responding, Carson growled and exited the room.

Ricky stepped away from his mother, dropped onto the bed and rested his elbows on his knees.

"Ricky, honey, what was Carson talking about?" Demetria asked, turning to face to him.

"I don't know," Ricky said honestly. It's not like Carson had been transparent with the details of his supposed betrayal.

"What did you do?" she said, grabbing him by the arm and shaking him.

"I don't know!" he shouted yanking his arm away. Other than not censoring his actions and making friends with Luca and Jules, he really wasn't sure what he'd done.

"We have a good thing here, Son. Why are you intent on screwing it up?" she spat accusatorily.

"A good thing!" Ricky snapped, astonished. "He just hit you Mom! Dad would never have treated us like that and you know it!"

"Not another word about your father, do you hear me?" She pointed her finger at him angrily. "Your father is dead, and he is never coming back. It's time you accepted that."

Her words stung. They hadn't even spoken about his father since arriving here. She really was content to sweep Micha Harrison under the rug and never think of him again.

Leaving his mother's cold words behind, Ricky ran out of the room, down the stairs, and as far from the Den as fast as his feet would carry him.

LUCA

As Luca approached Kyle's apartment, he shifted back into a man once again, bloody clothes and all.

He stopped when he heard raised voices coming from inside. Kyle was protesting someone's actions and they weren't Hayley's.

"If we find out something else!" a voice was shouting.

Luca walked to the open doorway and peered inside. Adam and Kyle were having a standoff while Hayley's father stood nearby, his shoulders slumped under some unseen emotional weight.

"You'll what?" Kyle spoke sharply, his hands clenched. In all the time he had known him, Luca had never seen Kyle this angry.

Hayley stepped between her husband and Adam, pushing each of them back forcefully.

"Hayley, come." Her father closed the distance between them and grabbed her by the arm. "This marriage is over. I'm taking you to Carson now!"

Luca stood his ground, although he wanted to step forward and punch Hayley's father for treating his friends this way.

She yanked her arm away as Kyle stepped up behind her. "You're not serious?" Kyle growled.

"You can't mean that," Hayley added, her voice trembling.

Her father's tone softened a little. "We must. Your Alpha still desires your hand in marriage. We must assure him of our family's loyalty."

"He'll accept no other form of proof," Adam said. "Carson wants your marriage annulled. He called this morning demanding it." Adam's tone didn't sound as impassioned as his father's, just resolute.

"I won't do it." Hayley glanced up at Kyle who slipped his arm protectively around her waist. "It's too late."

"You will do as I tell you, for once in your life!" her father yelled.

"I can't! I love Kyle. My loyalty is to him, before you, before the Alpha, before anyone."

"Your loyalty is to your Alpha first," her father said angrily. "Always."

"My Alpha is wrong," Hayley shouted back.

"That is treason!"

"Then I accept the consequences for my treachery." Hayley squared her shoulder's determinately. "I am an adult Father; my choices are my own."

Adam looked from his father to Hayley, to Kyle and back to his father. "Father let's go." He stepped between his father and Hayley. He glanced over his shoulder at his younger sister. "She's right. We can't make her do this."

"Carson said..."

Adam put his hand on his father's shoulder, cutting him off. "I know what Carson said and we'll do what we must, but not this."

Hayley's father looked back at his daughter and her husband. He sighed and nodded. Both men turned toward the door and Luca bolted, tucking himself into a darkened corner as they exited the apartment.

Once they were out of sight, he crept through Kyle's door, shutting it behind him. "Holy hell!" Luca said.

Both of them jumped a little and looked toward Luca. Kyle had both arms wrapped around Hayley, who was crying softly.

"How much did you hear?" Hayley asked.

"Enough," Luca said.

"The pack is all riled up," Kyle said. "There is a lot of talk about a betrayal." Kyle looked as though he was winding up for a joke. "But, of course, everyone in this room already knows who the traitorous creature is. Don't we?"

Luca rolled his eyes, but he'd made Hayley smile. Kyle wiped a couple of tears from her face.

"So," he said, holding Hayley close again. "Why do we have the pleasure of your company, my traitorous Canadian friend... in my living room... unannounced... looking rather rough?"

Luca dropped onto the couch. He had momentarily forgotten about his bloody state. "I'm in trouble."

"Um... dude. I think we already know that. You're in love with a dead person."

"Very funny."

"Thank you."

"I mean that I was run off the road last night. I think Carson sent Kip to kill me." Luca's voice had become serious.

"Oh, that kind of trouble," Kyle said raising his eyebrows.

A phone beeped. Luca had the reaction to check his own even though he knew it was back at the wreck in teeny-tiny, unsalvageable pieces.

"Okay, so problem one hundred and two just text me," Kyle said, looking down at his phone.

Luca did not respond but smiled at his friend's sense of humor and waited for him to continue.

"Ricky says that he couldn't get ahold of you, we all know why, so I was next on his 'help me' list. Carson accused him of treason this morning."

"Considering the execution attempt I just survived, I'd say the kid is in danger for sure. Carson's lost his mind," Luca said.

"Where is he? Is he safe?" Hayley asked.

"Hold on," Kyle said and typed out the question.

After a few tense seconds, the response beeped in his hand.

"Yeah, he's okay. He's at his girlfriend's house."

"Hand me your phone," Luca said, and Kyle did so. He pulled up the number and hit send.

RICKY

Ricky knew he had been very cryptic since he'd arrived at Tasha's. Probably because he knew that he shouldn't be here. What if he put her in danger? But in all honesty, he really hadn't known where else to go. Just then, his phone rang. This startled Ricky. No one actually called anymore. He glanced down and saw that it was Kyle's contact info staring back at him, so he answered.

"Ricky, are you alright?" It's was Luca.

“Me. Yeah. Are you?”

“I’m fine.”

Relief flooded through Ricky. When Luca hadn’t come back to the Den like he’d said he was going to, Ricky had worried that Carson had done something to him.

“Does Carson know where you are?” Luca asked.

“Don’t think so,” Ricky responded with a shrug.

“Where does your girlfriend live?”

Ricky said nothing but handed the phone to Tasha so that she could relay the address. She did so and handed the phone back to him.

“Stay there. We will come to get you soon,” he heard Luca say from the other end of the line.

Ricky looked around the basement of Tasha’s family home and shrugged. “Mind if I hang here a while?” he asked Tasha, who was sitting on the couch beside him.

She nodded and flashed an adorable smile his way.

“I’m good, text when you get here,” he told Luca and ended the call.

“My family isn’t here so of course you can stay. But you should at least tell me why you’re hiding and who you’re hiding from. And who is coming to rescue you.” Her eyes were alight with curiosity.

“Why is complicated. Who is, my mom’s boyfriend, and who is Luca. You remember, you met him at the bonfire.” He explained the basics.

“I’m good with complicated. What happened?” Tasha said. “You know you can trust me, right?”

"I know I can... It's just..." Ricky didn't even know where to begin to explain what was happening in his life at the moment.

"Oh come on Ricky, I want to help. And I promise that I won't laugh or get scared or anything. Why are you hiding from your mom's boyfriend? He didn't hit you, did he?"

"Not exactly," Ricky admitted.

Tasha waited silently for him to continue. Ricky interpreted the determined and honest look on her face which made her even more endearing. He felt comfortable with Tasha. *I want to trust her with all of it, even the truth of what he was.*

If she freaks, what happens then? he asked himself.

He was stuck between not wanting to involve her and wanting to get her out of the dark. Deciding, he stood and took a few steps away, standing in front of Tasha.

"I really hope you're ready for this," he said aloud, but more to himself than her.

"Ready for what?" she asked, looking confused.

Ricky took a deep breath and then in a flash of bright light, released the black-haired, yellow-eyed, four-pawed beast within him.

Tasha shrieked but it was momentary. She looked surprised, not scared. She studied him closely, deliberating. After a few seconds, her mouth spread into an intrigued smile. She hesitated only a second more before she climbed off the couch and knelt down to look into his eyes. She reached out and touched his face, her finger caressing his fur gently.

Ricky stood very still, afraid that he would still frighten her. He may have hoped for this reaction but never, in his wildest dreams, would he have believed he would get it.

Relieved, he took a few steps back and in another flash of light, from which Tasha shielded her eyes, he turned back into his human form.

“Wow!” Tasha exclaimed. “You’re a werewolf! Or a lu-garu or lycan... I want to know everything!” Her eyes were wild with excitement.

“Okay,” Ricky said, as they settled back onto the couch. Ricky began with his father’s murder and continued until he’d told her everything: about this pack, about Jules, about the feud between vampires and werewolves, and about that fact that Carson seemed to think he betrayed him somehow.

CARSON

Carson had gathered those close to him. Kip had assured him that Luca had been dealt with. Pictures of his Jeep upside down in a ditch confirmed it. And thus, to the majority of the pack. All Carson had to do now was wait for the body to be discovered, and it was over. There were only two more wolves on the list that stood between him and restoring peace to his life, and safety to his subjects.

He’d sent Kip out to locate the Coopers and Max and Jed to find the boy. Neither had reported back yet.

"Are you sure he's dead?" Ben asked, the shock of Luca Cain's untimely demise still having an effect on him. Carson waited patiently for it to sink in.

"I'm afraid so," Carson nodded sadly, his mind on the tasks to come. Joe Reynolds had not assured him his daughter's marriage would be annulled yet, as Carson had demanded. If Carson had to widow the girl to claim her, then it's what he would do. He'd grown tired of Demetria's sadness. Besides, a traitor's mother was no choice for a queen. It was an ugly business, making the tough calls. But he was the Alpha, it was his call to make.

RICKY

"You know, I'm not entirely surprised," Tasha admitted sheepishly from under Ricky's arm.

"You're not?" Ricky asked. They were sitting on the couch together, enjoying each other's closeness.

"Not really. I mean, I never would have voiced my observations. I never would have hoped it could be true." She spoke with an excitement Ricky couldn't understand.

"Hoped? You hoped I was a werewolf?"

"Well, yes, and do you know how exciting it is to be involved, even ever so slightly, in a forbidden romance between a werewolf and a vampire? It's a nerdy girl's ultimate fantasy!" Tasha gushed. "Of course, I always wanted to be the vampire in that scenario but getting to be a girl who has made-out with a werewolf is pretty cool, too."

Ricky started to laugh.

“What’s so funny? How many girls get to make-out with a werewolf?”

“More than you think...”

“Yes, but how many know that they have?”

“Less.”

“Right, and on top of that,” she said, stopping to bat her eyelashes, “how many can say they got to make out with you?”

“One.” He leaned in to kiss her.

She giggled and ran her hands through his hair.

Ricky almost jumped out of his skin when the unmistakable cry of a wolf shattered the safety of his hideout.

“What was that?” Tasha asked. He released her. The howl had come from right outside the house. Ricky wasn’t sure who it was. *Hard to tell*. A second howl was followed by the scraping sound of claws on glass.

“Who is that?” Tasha shouted, pointing.

Ricky followed her indication to the basement window. Through its muddy glass, he spied a standard gray wolf.

“Is it Luca?” Tasha asked.

“No,” he whispered in Tasha’s ear. He looked into her eyes a moment more and then, without warning, he grabbed her arm and flung her into the small basement bathroom. “Call Kyle,” he said, shoving his phone in her hand.

“Ricky. Don’t!” she screamed as he slammed the door shut. Ignoring her banging fists, he shoved the couch against the door so she couldn’t follow him.

Glass shattered and Ricky bolted for the stairs. He could hear Tasha screaming in the bathroom but didn't turn back. The wolf who had just come through the window turned into his human self. It was Jed. He grabbed Ricky and shoved him up against the cinderblock wall before he had a chance to escape. Ricky cried out and felt it crack under his weight.

Tasha screamed again. Ricky growled and planted his elbow into Jed's side. He felt the man shudder with pain and watched as he stepped back, clutching his ribcage. Ricky bolted up the stairs. He dodged through the open door and found himself face to face with the human form of Max.

He swore just before he was hit over the head from behind and everything went dark.

LUCA

Luca, Kyle, and Hayley had left the apartment almost immediately after Luca's conversation with Ricky. Hayley, being the safest of all considering Carson's obsession with her, had gone to see if she could get any information out of Adam.

They were being hunted, they knew that. What they did now had to be strategic. They didn't want to go down for kidnapping Ricky, but they also couldn't leave him in Aboit by himself if they decided to run. Which was looking like the best option right now.

"Pull in here," Luca said referencing the public beach. "We'll dump the car and then cross the beach to

Jules's place." For the time being, Jules's empty house seemed like a fine place to lay low.

As they got out of the car and headed to the public access point of the beach Kyle's phone began to ring.

"Ricky what's up?" he said, answering the call.

"It's Tasha," said a panicked voice. "They took him. They just came, and they took him!"

"Who took who? Tasha, calm down," Kyle ordered as they started in the direction of Jules's house.

"Wolves," Tasha said after a long breath. "Wolves took Ricky."

"Where are you?" Kyle asked, immediately stopping on the sand.

"Trapped in the basement at my house."

"Are you hurt?"

"No, but Ricky..."

"Can you hear them or are they gone?"

Silence ensued while Tasha listened. "I can't hear anything. I think they're gone," she finally said.

"Have her call Monica. If the wolves are gone she can take the girl home for safe keeping. It's unlikely that the pack would attack two human girls."

Kyle nodded and relayed the important parts of the message.

"Ricky..." Luca heard Tasha say.

"We'll find Ricky. You just get yourself out of there. And keep your head down. Understand?"

"Yes," Tasha said after a short pause.

"Good girl." Kyle hung up the phone and then turned to Luca. After only a second, the two men bolted back to

the car and took off toward the place where Ricky was last seen. If they could pick up his scent they could track him easily enough.

RICKY

When Ricky woke, he was lying face down in the mud. He wanted to spit out a clump he could feel in his mouth but resisted. He lay there, playing dead, listening to what the pack members around him were arguing about.

"Carson, what's the plan?" asked a voice Ricky couldn't place.

"Should I send you away, Ben? Have your loyalties shifted as well? Should I count you among the traitors?" Carson asked. A wild, accusatory tone in his voice.

"No, no, I'm not." Ben paused, but then continued, "I only meant that even though he is a traitor, he's just a boy." Ben's voice sounded shaken.

Ricky's heart started to pound. He wouldn't put murder past Carson, but he didn't think he would do it in cold blood. *No. First Carson would make him grovel for his life and confess. Well, I won't do either. I'll die first.*

"I will do what I feel is necessary to protect my pack. It's my responsibility!"

Like I care, stupid tyrant can...Whoa!

Ricky was lifted off the ground with excessive force. His eyes shot open and his nose was now inches from Carson's furious face.

“So little one, finally come to, have you?” Carson sneered.

Ricky spat and mud splattered across the sneer in front of him. Carson’s fist connected with Ricky’s mouth. He felt his t-shirt rip and his lip split. He hit the ground and licked the blood and mud off the wound.

CARSON

Carson stopped to listen and sniff. *Humans*. Humans were headed their way through the woods. Not only had this band of anarchists consorted with a vampire but they must have also revealed themselves to humans. Jed had confirmed that the human girl that had been with Ricky was frightened but not surprised. Humans could kill and destroy his charges if they had a hankering to. Ricky had endangered the pack twice now. The treachery could not stand.

“Carson wait. Don’t!” Ben bolted toward him just as Carson brought the knife across the boy’s abdomen.

Ricky cried out and clutched the cut. Carson let the boy’s t-shirt go and he hit the ground with a thud. He then turned and punched Ben square in the jaw.

He stumbled backward, a look of shock on his face.

“It is done,” Carson said with a tone of finality, as he placed the silver knife back in its sheath. “Bring him,” he ordered Max and Jed, gesturing toward the man he had just punched. They grabbed Ben by the arms and pulled him in the direction of the previously abandoned vehicles.

Cason didn't look back as they left the boy gushing blood into the mud beneath him.

Chapter

Twenty-One

SILVER'S BANE

The sun had risen high and bright over Fort Miles. Gabriel, Eileen, Jules, and the Phantom were all safely tucked away in Gabriel and Eileen's hotel suite. Eileen was sleeping next to Gabriel in the bedroom, the heavy drapes pulled over the window.

Eileen had assured him that she understood why he had made the decision to keep her in the dark about the ways of the vampire world. However, she wasn't any longer. Somehow, he'd have to deal with the consequences of that. He knew Jules wasn't going to be much help either. She could never control herself when fresh, human blood was in the mix. He was starting to think it was a family trait.

"Gabriel, get some sleep." Eileen's breathy instruction came without her turning to look at him. It was clear that she didn't want to talk any more.

"Am I losing her Eileen?" But he knew that he was. First to the werewolf and now to her long-lost twin

brother. She wouldn't even entertain his suggestion that Nicholas find somewhere else to spend the day. Gabriel didn't trust him. He was a murderer.

At this, Eileen turned to look at him over her shoulder. "Maybe it's time," Eileen suggested.

He glared at her in response.

"Not to turn your back on her Gabriel, but to let her go. People come in and out of our lives. Some stay forever, some for a while, and some for just one day. Each one is important. Each one impacts the lives we lead." She took his hand in her own. "Going your separate ways doesn't mean either of you did anything wrong, it simply means that it's time. That you are both beginning a new chapter in the lives we lead."

Eileen was right. Of course, she often was. Gabriel had no other choice but to let Jules live how she felt was right for her. The path she was obviously choosing, he could not walk with her. He would not. A single tear slipped from his eye and down his cheek. Eileen moved from her spot on the bed and straddled his legs with her own. She put her hands in his hair and bent forward, kissing away the blood. "I am not going anywhere," Eileen told him. "Ever."

This he knew. For the entirety of his immortal existence, she would be beside him. Maybe it was his turn to let her lead the way.

LUCA

Luca and Kyle dumped Hayley's car about a mile from Tasha's house and continued into the woods on

swift paws. Luca led the way, following his sense of direction and his nose through the trees. He stopped to sniff at the same moment that someone cried out, *Ricky!* Luca bolted, running as fast as he could in the direction it had come from. He started to smell blood. Werewolf blood. He could only hope that he wasn't too late.

He and Kyle broke into a small outcropping. There, Luca saw what he was dreading. Lying on a mess of blood-soaked leaves and grass was Ricky, bleeding from the abdomen and clutching the hand of his human girlfriend. Tasha was bending low over him, begging him to hold on while Monica stood a few steps back clutching her side. Monica looked startled to see the wolves approaching them, while Tasha barely looked away from Ricky's face.

"Who are you?" Monica demanded, picking up a stick and holding it out in front of them. "You better be werewolves because if you're not I feel really stupid right now!" she shouted.

Luca nodded at Kyle and in simulations flashes of light, they returned to their human forms.

"I told you to stay inside," Luca snapped at the human girls as he walked up and knelt beside Ricky.

"Oh, I'm so glad it's you," Monica said, taking a deep breath. Kyle walked over and took the stick from Monica's shaking hand.

"Let me see," Luca instructed Tasha, who was putting pressure on his wound with a jacket. Tasha lifted away the makeshift bandage, revealing the bleeding and blistering cut. Luca gently touched the edges of the

wound with his finger and brought the substance to his nose. The foaming blood smelled of silver. The one thing that was as deadly to werewolves as the sun was to vampires.

Tasha cried out when Ricky started to cough and dig his fingers into her arm. Blood smeared his lips.

"We have to get him out of these woods," Kyle said, looking down on the scene. "Monica, can you get a car?"

Monica nodded and then took off running in the direction of her house.

"Where are you taking him?" Tasha asked.

"Jules's house. It's the only place the pack still doesn't know about," Luca replied.

Luca lifted Ricky off the ground. Tasha protested as Ricky shrieked in agony. "He needs a hospital," Tasha yelled.

"A hospital can't help him now." Kyle placed a hand on the girl's shoulder.

Luca could feel Ricky's blood dripping down his torso as he ran. Kyle was keeping pace with Tasha, unwilling to leave her out in these woods on her own. By the time they reached the edge of the woods, Monica had her car parked and the back and passenger doors open, waiting for them. Kyle and Luca placed Ricky down on the backseat as carefully they could. It wasn't carefully enough because he screamed out in pain. Luca started to crawl into the back seat with him as Monica climbed into the driver's seat but Ricky's girlfriend grabbed his arm.

"Please, let me stay with him," she said softly, with a surprising amount of steadiness.

He said nothing but nodded and moved away so she could hold the dying boy. She crawled in and placed Ricky's head in her lap. He groaned in pain but grabbed her arm and held on tightly. Then she placed her jacket back onto the cut and pressed down, trying to slow the bleeding.

Luca's heart twisted in pain. He knew that the bleeding would not be stopped. Luca shut the door behind them and then turned to Kyle. "Go back to the car. Call Hayley. Tell her to go and get Ricky's mother and meet us at Jules's house," Luca instructed in whispering tones.

"Telling her where we are going is a risk," Kyle said.

"I know," Luca said, looking over his shoulder at the back seat. Ricky was writhing in pain while Tasha clung to him, soothing him gently. "But that cut was made with a silver blade," he continued, turning back to Kyle.

Kyle's eyes widened for a moment and then he nodded, stepping away from the passenger door so Luca could take that seat. They all knew Carson was an animal, but what he had just done was truly abhorrent. This Alpha had just crossed a line that couldn't be uncrossed. Carson must be stopped, no matter the consequences.

"To Jules's house," Luca instructed.

Monica pulled away as soon as the last door was closed.

"What am I missing, Luca?" Monica asked. "Don't werewolves have super-fast healing or something?"

"We do," Luca replied in a low voice, trying not to be overheard. "There is only one thing that we can't heal from."

"Silver bullets," Monica supplied.

"Silver of any kind. That cut will kill him." The gravity of the situation fell over the occupants in the front seat of the car. Death was coming for this teenage boy and Luca was powerless to stop it. Nothing could stop silver's bane.

RICKY

Ricky cried out in pain as Luca pulled him from the back seat of Monica's car. He felt like he was being eaten from inside his abdomen. He found himself wishing they had let him die in the woods. All this moving and jostling was making things feel even worse. "Hang on Ricky," Luca pleaded.

Ricky was carried into Jules's house and set on the soft sofa as carefully as possible.

He looked passed Luca and searched for her. Tasha ran into the room after them, clutching the jacket drenched in his blood. Her hands were stained, her clothes and face splattered, and yet, she never looked more beautiful.

Moments later, Tasha was again by his side. He never appreciated her more than he did right now. She was so strong and so calm considering the trauma he was putting her through. He totally would have told her he loved her if he didn't need something else in this

moment. More than anything, right now, he needed his mom.

As if on cue, he heard shouting from the other room. His mother cursed Luca when she saw him. "Mom," he called softly. Demetria rushed to his side, pushing Tasha away as she dropped to the floor.

"It's going to be okay, honey." She stroked his hair. "I'm here."

For a moment he felt safe, like a child again. He was happy that his mother was beside him.

"I'm very sorry Mrs. Harrison," Luca said, walking up beside her.

"You beast!" Demetria exclaimed. Standing, she slapped the Beta across the cheek.

Tasha shrieked.

"You did this!" Ricky's mom shouted again, shoving Luca, who made no move against her. Instead, he let her beat him in the chest and shoulders without flinching or moving away from her. Ricky heard the malice and desperation in his mother's voice. Tasha dropped back to her knees by Ricky's head.

"Leave...him...alone," Ricky managed to choke out, drawing his mother's attention back to himself.

"He didn't do this," Tasha added and once again gripped Ricky's shaking fingers. Demetria stopped and looked down at the teenagers, their clasped hands, Tasha's disheveled appearance.

"It's okay baby," Demetria whispered, leaving her attack on Luca and returning to her son's side. This time, she moved in beside Tasha, not in place of her.

"I'm right here. You're going to be okay."

Ricky nodded and took her hand. His mom had such a capacity to not see the reality of a situation. But he knew what was happening to him and he knew without a doubt who had sentenced him to this torturously, painful end.

LUCA

Luca watched dazedly as Tasha and Demetria comforted Ricky. The teenage, human girl was also showing an extraordinary amount of strength for one so young. She was crying quietly now as she sat with him. He had her hand in his and had not yet let go, but Luca could tell he was weakening. His eyes were opening less, and the groans of pain had stopped altogether. There was nothing to be done. It was almost over now. Hayley, Kyle, and Monica were all sitting and standing around the kitchen counter in silence.

Luca stood at the door of the living room watching as Tasha took her fingers and brushed some hair off Ricky's sweat-slick forehead. Maybe as a reaction, his eyes opened once more. He held her gaze for a few seconds. But then, Luca watched in horror as his eyes closed, his grip on Tasha's hand slackened, and he slipped into unconsciousness.

"Ricky?" Tasha asked, but received no response.

Torturous screams escaped from Demetria's throat as she shook her son's shoulders, gripping him tightly.

"What can we do," Monica asked quietly as she came up beside Luca.

“Nothing,” Luca replied. “There is nothing we can do.”

Monica placed a comforting hand on his arm. He looked down at the touch and noticed he was covered in the boy’s blood. His hands, arms, shirt, and much of his jeans were soaked with the leaking life force.

Tasha began to cry and scream hysterically. Monica gave Luca’s arm one more squeeze and ran over, wrapping the teenager in her arms.

After another moment, and a glance back at the scene, he walked from the room and into Jules’s bathroom. He peeled off his shirt and started to wash the blood from his body. He watched numbly as it dissolved in the stream of water and disappeared down the drain. He wiped his hands on a dark-colored towel and, in a surge of anger, ripped it and the towel holder off the wall.

The desire to kill Carson surged through him. Trying to execute him was one thing but to brutally murder Ricky? “He’s just kid!” Luca shouted at no one. He threw a punch at the wall, smashing a fist-sized hole in it. Then he just stood there for several long moments, breathing heavily.

Luca was startled when there was a hesitant knock at the door and Hayley opened it slowly. He just stared at her. He didn’t know what to say. There was nothing to say. She must have felt the same because she walked over and wrapped him in a hug. He dropped his head onto her shoulder and hugged her tightly, finally letting out all the pain he was feeling.

CARSON

“Demetria!” Carson shouted as he entered the Den. He couldn’t fathom where she would have gone. “She’s probably out looking for the boy,” he said, more to himself than to the comrades who had followed him into the empty house.

None but Jed and Max would even look him in the eye since Carson had decided to exact the punishment he felt fit the boy’s crime.

The boy had told his human girlfriend what they were. This was a traitorous offense, even without his alliance with the vampire and traitorous Beta. Because of this boy’s carelessness, humans could be coming for his pack, even now. Death was the only worthy punishment of so many significant misdeeds.

“This is madness. Punishment without a pack vote is not our way,” Carson heard Kip whisper to Ben, who shushed him. Carson felt his temperature rise and the veins in his neck pulse.

He could feel himself losing control of his pack. He inserted the absolute authority that being Alpha granted him and shouted, “you will all hold your tongues!” More than one of them flinched and shrunk away from him as he continued. “I am the leader of this pack. It was within my rights to decide his fate.” He was still shouting. “You will all stand behind me in this.” Carson felt a pang of emotion he didn’t normally comprehend. Regret maybe? Regardless, he plunged on. “I will not hear any more about this! Is that understood?”

There were several meek murmurs of submission before Carson turned on his heels and left the room. He tromped up the Den's creaky stairs to his bedroom.

"Demetria?" he called, pushing the door open.

She wasn't there. He rummaged through some of their things. It was all still here, his and hers. So, she had not left him; she was simply not home. He left his room and walked into Luca's where the kid had slept. Carson still couldn't understand why Ricky thought he had the right to occupy one of the bedrooms without his permission. He started to sift through the things in the room. He didn't know what he was looking for.

Rummaging through a desk drawer, he found some old photographs of Luca and his family. In one he held two little girls. His nieces, Carson supposed. Another was of him and a female that looked just like him. His sister, no doubt. The last appeared to be the whole family standing in front of a small mountain cottage.

Carson told himself he was just trying to get to know his enemy. Remembering that Luca's family had been killed might have provoked compassion, but Carson stifled the twinge of forgiving emotion he was feeling. He threw the pictures back into the drawer and slammed it shut. He'd done this for the greater good of the pack and it was almost at an end.

KYLE

Kyle watched in shock while Tasha clutched Ricky's limp hand in her own. Monica was holding her as she cried. His mother held him tightly in her arms, but she

had stopped rocking back and forth. Now she just held him, silent, staring straight forward. Tasha looked up as Kyle walked into the room and leaned over the back of the couch. He placed his fingers on the boy's neck, checking for a pulse. He was alive, but barely.

A few seconds later, Hayley appeared in the doorway; Luca at her side. His eyes were red and puffy, and his arm had some fresh cuts, but they were already healing.

"How do you know my son?" Demetria asked flatly. Her voice betraying no emotion at all.

"I'm his girlfriend," Tasha said after a few more moments.

"You're his first love." Ricky's mother smiled sadly.

"And he's mine," Tasha said softly.

Demetria nodded but said nothing more.

Kyle walked over to Hayley and pulled her close. Her puffy eyes also betrayed tears. She was the sweetest, strongest soul he had ever met, and he loved her. Kyle also reached over and squeezed Luca's shoulder.

LUCA

Luca, Hayley, and Kyle stood in the kitchen. No one spoke for a long while. Luca tried to relax his body by leaning against the kitchen counter. Kyle had wrapped his arms around Hayley again, who had buried her face in his chest.

"We should kill the bastard," Kyle said quietly.

Luca had been thinking this also, he just hadn't voiced it yet. "We can't just barge into the Den and kill

him, Kyle,” Hayley said, looking into Kyle’s eyes. “It would be suicide.”

“Hayley’s right. We have to be smart about this,” Luca said.

Kyle absentmindedly stroked her hair.

Luca thought of Jules. He wanted her there with him. He wanted to be able to hold her. He needed her.

“If we attack Carson, we will all die too,” Hayley said.

“We need more support,” Luca added. “We need allies, or this fight will be over before it even begins.”

“What about Demetria?” Kyle asked.

“What about her?” Hayley replied.

“Did you tell her this was Carson?”

“Not yet.”

“Don’t you think if she knew, she’d be on our side,” Kyle asked.

“Maybe,” Luca said.

“But will she believe it?” Hayley asked.

Luca didn’t look up as he spoke, “she won’t if she hears it from me.”

“I’ll tell her.”

Luca’s head shot up. Tasha and Monica had just entered the kitchen. Monica’s arm was still around the younger girl.

“What?” Luca asked, stunned.

“I’ll tell her it was Carson.” Tasha fidgeted. “Ricky told me all about... everything. Who he is, who you are, who you’re dating.” She pointed at Luca. “And who was going to come after him if someone did.”

All the wolves in the room were now looking at Tasha, astonished. "You're extremely brave to be standing here with all of us," Kyle said.

She chuckled softly. "Ricky thought so too. I think it's cool." She gave them a half-smile. "So, I'll tell her. I think she'll believe me. I don't know any of you. I only know what Ricky told me."

"If you're willing to try to convince her..." Hayley said.

"I'll do it." She paused a moment. "For Ricky, I'll do it."

JULIANA

Jules and Nick had settled onto the hard sofa in the common area of Gabriel and Eileen's hotel suite to wait the sunny day away. They looked like complimenting bookends, each facing the other.

Jules blinked, trying to keep her eyes open. Sleep was calling her, and yet, she was refusing to give into it. Wanting instead, to continue getting to know her twin once more.

Nick yawned through his last comment. Jules found that her ability to understand the babble meant that their twin connection was still strong.

"Well, I never gave up on you." She glared at him playfully and used her bent leg to kick him lightly above the knee.

"I only disappeared, didn't I? You weren't told without a doubt that I was dead." Nick paused. "They found two sets of remains Jules."

Jules raised her eyebrows at this. She'd never gone back to their sleepy hometown, once Hector had gotten his clutches into her. Someone must have planted a second body.

As they had talked Jules had chosen to skip over the first hundred years she'd spent as a vampire. She was determined to leave that part of her past in the past for good.

Nick yawned again, obviously fighting the same call to rest that she was.

She shifted higher on the arm of the sofa, looking past her knees toward Nick. He was lounging across from her, hands behind his head holding it upright and legs stretched out, taking up most of the space on the couch.

"Any epic romances worth mentioning?" Jules asked him, wondering if her brother was still the same indecisive, fluid, flirt he'd been in his human life. "Girlfriends, boyfriends, spouses?"

"Me a spouse? As if I could love with that kind of commitment." Nick laughed loudly. "You, same question."

"I just started something new actually," Jules admitted. She knew that she would have been blushing if a vampire could.

"Someone special?" Nick prodded.

"He could be," Jules replied, thinking momentarily of Luca and Aboit and the fact that all she wanted to do now was go back to him.

"Tell me more," Nick instructed, smiling mischievously at her.

"His name is Luca Cain and he's a werewolf," Jules said, feeling a little defensive.

Nick sat up higher. "No way! My little sister is dating a dog." He laughed loudly.

"By fifteen minutes! And Don't call him that!" Her arms crossed in annoyance.

Nick looked stunned. "I only meant that it's not what I expected. You know, werewolves can be dangerous."

"Not you too." Jules rolled her eyes.

"Me and who now?"

Jules nodded her head toward the closed bedroom door.

Nick made a sound that conveyed both mild dislike and annoyance. At least to Jules it did. "Who cares what Golden boy thinks?" Nick said after just a few moments.

"I do Nicholas. Before a couple hours ago he was the only brother I had."

"Yeah, well we need to talk about your so-called brother replacement..." Nick began.

Jules could tell that he felt slightly betrayed by the whole Gabriel thing. She was just about to remind him that over a century had gone by before she'd even met Gabriel when her phone began to ring from where she'd left it on the small dining room table.

In a fraction of a ring, she was standing, had checked who was calling, and answered Monica's call.

"Hi Monica," she greeted.

"It's me Jules."

The way Luca sounded, something was very wrong. Why was he with Monica? And why wasn't he calling from his own phone?

"Are you alright?" she asked when he continued to breathe into the phone but not speak. Jules noticed from the corner of her eye that Nick had stood also. Walking to the heavy curtains, he peeled one away tentatively but dropped in back in place as soon as the bright sunlight stung his face and hand.

"I'm okay," Luca finally said. "For now."

"What do you mean for now? Luca, what's going on?"

"He knows about us Jules. Carson knows."

Jules waited for him to continue.

"He tried to have me killed."

"What?" Jules almost shouted. "Is everyone alright? Are you?" Jules heard Nick come up beside her. He hovered nearby, obviously sensing some distress.

"I've healed."

Jules sighed in relief but something in Luca's tone told her there was still something he had to say.

"Luca, what is it? Tell me," she encouraged softly when he hesitated to continue.

"It's Ricky," Luca said finally.

"What about Ricky?" she asked very tentatively but wasn't sure she wanted to know anymore.

"Carson attacked him. He's been cut by a silver blade. Jules... I," but the sound of his voice died out.

She couldn't speak. She couldn't think. *Cut by a silver blade.* Silver was fatal to werewolves once it had entered

the bloodstream. Ricky was not going to make it. She tried to wrap her brain around that reality.

Jules vaguely felt herself drop to one of the hardback chairs, her elbows resting on the table. "Is he...?" she couldn't finish her question.

"Not yet. But I don't think he has much time," Luca said, sounding a little steadier. "Listen, Jules. Carson is coming for us, all of us. Hayley will likely be spared but he probably has an execution order out on Kyle by now too. I want you to stay where you are. This fight is going to get bloody and I don't want you to get caught in the crossfire..."

"That's ridiculous Luca," Jules said. "This is my fight too. I am not going to hide in the shadows while people I love are dying. You are going to need me in this fight." Her voice was as final as her decision. This was not a discussion. She was a centuries-old vampire and she knew how to fight an enemy that was out for blood. "I'll leave at nightfall. I love you."

"I love you too," Luca said and then they both ended the call.

"So, who are we fighting?" Nick asked. Gabriel may not, but Jules knew that Nick would stand by her side.

Chapter

Twenty-Two

DEAD AND BURIED

Luca could hear Tasha talking to Demetria in the other room. “How the hell would you know that?” Demetria yelled.

“Ricky told me,” Tasha replied.

Luca felt bad for eavesdropping on such a private conversation, but Jules’s house wasn’t big enough for a werewolf to get out of earshot. Monica and Hayley were in the kitchen talking in low whispers, while he and Kyle sat silently enraptured by the conversation happening in the living room.

“He told me Carson was coming for him,” Tasha continued. “He even called Luca for help.”

“How do you know it wasn’t Luca? He consorted with a vampire. He’s a traitor to our pack.” She said the middle part in a very hushed tone like it was almost an unspeakable fact.

“If that makes him a traitor, then so is Ricky,” Tasha said confidently. “He consorted with a vampire too. Jules, the vampire whose house we’re in, our school librarian.

he cares about her... for some reason, they're kinda friends."

Demetria was silent for many moments. Luca didn't walk over to see what was happening. He simply waited.

"He said..." Demetria's voice trailed off a few moments more. "Carson really did this?" Demetria said, her voice sounding miles away.

"I'm sorry Mrs. Harrison," Tasha replied softly.

"Excuse me. I need a moment," Demetria said then walked from the living room and out the back door.

Luca went to check on the teenage girl.

"Well, at least now she knows." Tasha wasn't talking to Luca, but Ricky. She sat on the floor beside Ricky's face, holding his limp hand in hers.

"Is he going to be okay?" Tasha asked, without looking up at Luca. Luca walked over and sat on the floor next to her.

Luca could lie and tell the girl he'd be fine. He could send her home and let her find out the truth in a few days, but he didn't. "No Tasha, he's not."

Tasha's eyes grew wide. She looked up at Luca, tears already forming.

"What?"

"The silver has made it into his bloodstream. He won't wake up. His body is shutting down."

"Is he... in pain?" she asked.

"Not anymore." Luca reached out and placed one arm around her shoulders.

"Excuse me," Tasha choked out. Dropped Ricky's hand, stood shakily, and walked from the room.

Luca heard a door slam.

“Tasha,” Monica called after the girl, and the door slammed again. Then the screaming and crying started, coming from Jules’s bedroom.

NICHOLAS

Night had fallen, and they’d been on the road for at least an hour. They had been conversing sporadically and had discussed many things, but one thing was obvious to him now. Jules was determined to defend Gabriel’s right to stay out of whatever danger they might currently be driving towards. Nick, however, thought Gabriel was a disloyal prat who had turned his back on his coven leader when she needed him most.

The silence had stretched out between them for several minutes now, and Nick jumped, startled when Jules’s phone began to ring. He picked it up from the center console. “Monica,” he said the name that was displayed on her phone along with a picture of a cute, curly-haired girl.

Jules reached out for it. He slid his finger across the screen, answering the call, and handed her the phone. She tapped the speakerphone symbol.

“Luca?” Jules asked when no one spoke.

A male voice said, “he’s gone Jules.”

Jules’s lost control of her emotions and the vehicle all at once. Her phone dropped to the floor, her hand slipped on the wheel, and the car swerved. Her young friend had died.

Nick grabbed the wheel. She would have raced into oncoming traffic if Nick hadn't been beside her. "Ease your foot off the gas slowly," Nick instructed as red tears slid down Jules's face "Jules?" the voice on the phone questioned.

Nick steered the car to the shoulder and the car rolled to a stop.

"Are you alright?" Luca asked.

He picked up the electronic device and handed it to her. "I'll be there soon." Jules choked out. "I love you." With that, she ended the call. Nick put a hand on hers and wiped her face with his sleeve. "Let me drive," he suggested.

She nodded. Jules climbed over to the passenger seat while Nick walked around the car to take her place. She spent the rest of the way mumbling directions and looking out the passenger window. Nick stayed silent as well, letting her process this sad news in peace. He reached over and squeezed her hand, she didn't let go.

When they pulled up in front of a small, green house, a tall, tan man was waiting on the driveway for her. He held his arms open and she ran into them. He stumbled backward, losing his footing but remaining upright. Luca bent and kissed Jules softly.

Nick watched the werewolf with his sister for a moment more before he climbed out of the car and approached them both. "Who are you?" Luca asked, noticing him for the first time.

Jules stayed in Luca's embrace while turning to look at her brother. "I'm Nicholas Bristow." Nick stuck out his hand toward Luca. "Jules's twin brother. Like from birth," he added at Luca's confused expression. Luca looked at Jules for confirmation. She nodded at him. "Surprise," Nick added with a hint of his usual sarcasm.

"Hi." Luca took Nick's hand and shook it. "But how...?"

"I'll explain later," Jules said, putting a hand on Luca's chest. One of his hands covered her own. "What is Seth doing here?" Jules asked as Monica's ex-boyfriend pulled onto the street in front of Jules's house in his father's rusted pick-up truck.

"I'll explain later," Luca said, giving her waist a squeeze. "Do you need me to come inside with you?" he asked while waving at Seth, who waved back.

Jules could see that Luca had something to say to his friend. "No." She would face this on her own. "Talk to Seth," Jules said. "I'm okay."

Luca looked down at her for a moment, kissed her on the side of the lips, and then walked toward the end of the driveway.

Jules turned back to her brother, "Nick?"

"I'll be out here when you need me." Nick pointed back to her car. She knew that he was just giving her space to deal with her friends and grieve on her own. She'd always been like that, even when their parents died. He'd needed her with him, and she'd needed to face the pain alone.

She nodded her thanks and then opened her own front door. Monica came rushing toward her, hugging her

tightly. Jules hadn't had a drink in a while but found she didn't care in this moment. "Seth's outside?" Jules said, looking at Monica questioningly.

"I know. Luca's going to tell him everything," Monica said. Her eyes were red and puffy despite her somewhat cheery voice. "I should probably go outside with him. You know, in case Seth freaks out. Which he probably will." She kept her voice low so as not to disturb the others.

Jules smiled at her friend and released her.

"Where...?"

Monica pointed toward the living room. Jules could hear soft crying coming from that direction. Monica gave her hand a squeeze and then walked around her to go help Luca with Seth. Jules could see Hayley and Kyle through the back sliding door. They were sitting on the back porch, facing the ocean.

She took tentative steps toward the room in which Ricky's body lay. Soundlessly, she entered. First, she saw Tasha, the source of the crying. Her back was pressed against the far wall, her face covered by her shaking hands. Then she saw the woman kneeling beside the couch, stone-cold and still. Then the blood that had soaked into her white carpet. It trailed up to where the young wolf lay, fur, four paws and all.

Jules knew when a werewolf died the last ounce of magic they possessed returned them to their animal state. The state in which they truly thrived. She'd seen it before, but never a wolf so young.

Ricky was lanky, all legs and large paws. Yesterday she'd seen the same wolf fleeing his new girlfriend's

house. Thinking of their last, lively encounter Jules felt tears fall from her eyes.

At that moment, she was pulled from the memory by a feral growl. Jules saw the woman stand and in one stride she slapped Jules across the face. Jules's hand rose to her stinging cheek, but she did not move away.

"It's your fault he's dead," Ricky's mother shouted.

LUCA

"What am I doing here Luca?" Seth asked, looking over Luca's shoulder, seemingly worried about who might be inside the house.

"Honestly," Luca began, "I need the truck and Monica needs you."

"Monica does not..."

As if on cue, the front door opened and Monica walked out of the house and started toward them. She got half the way until she noticed the vampire lounging against Jules's car. "Who the hell are you?" she asked.

Nick sat up. "Juliana's brother."

"But you're dead," Monica stated.

"I am," Nick said. "But I am also living. I am, like Jules, living while dead."

Monica narrowed her eyes and looked over at Luca.

Luca nodded and shrugged to indicate that what Nick said was true and yes, he was confused as well.

"What's he talking about?" Seth asked, looking confused as well as annoyed. "One: Jules doesn't have a brother, does she?"

"Apparently she does," Luca told him.

“And two: what does he mean dead? Jules’s isn’t dead? She just walked into the house. I saw her. You saw her. What’s going on?” Seth stammered, looking from Monica and Nick to Luca.

“We’re going to tell you everything,” Luca said.

“Come on long-lost, surprise, twin brother,” Monica said motioning for Nick to follow her. “We’re going to need your help.”

Nick hopped off the car and followed her toward them with an expression that implied that he had nothing better to do anyway.

Luca turned back to Seth. “Monica has been keeping something from you.”

“I know. I’m the one who told you she was hiding something from me. What does that have to do with anything?” Seth asked defensively.

“It has to do with me. Me and Jules. She was hiding what she was hiding from you because it wasn’t her secret to tell,” Luca said.

“Huh?” Seth raised his eyebrows and crossed his arms.

Luca took a steadying breath and opened his mouth to speak, but nothing happened.

“Luca, what the hell is going on? You are making absolutely no sense.”

Luca sighed and tried again, but still, nothing came out.

“Let me tell him,” Monica requested, placing a steadying hand on his arm.

Luca nodded. *Why not?* He wasn’t having any luck.

“You know how I have a crazy obsession for all thing supernatural, yes?”

Seth nodded.

“Well, part of it is because part of it is true.”

“What?” Seth asked.

“I’m a werewolf,” Luca said finally.

“And the reason Jules’s brother here said that Jules is dead is because she’s a vampire,” Monica added.

“Okay,” Seth began. “Very funny guys. Actually, you know what, it’s not funny. It’s ridiculous.”

Nick looked over at Luca who’d taken four steps back. In the same moment that Luca turned from man to wolf, Nick released his fangs and hissed.

Seth jumped and cried out in shock.

“It’s okay Seth.” Monica reached out and took his hand, which he yanked back, glaring at her.

Luca returned to his human form while Nick and Monica shielded their eyes.

“That’s impossible,” Seth stammered.

“Nope. It’s supernatural,” Monica said with a grin and everyone but Seth began to chuckle.

JULIANA

Jules didn’t know how to react. She couldn’t find any words. Not of comfort. Not of guilt. Nothing.

In a matter of moments, Kyle and Hayley were between Jules and the woman who’d slapped her. “Demetria don’t!” Hayley yelled as she put her arms out, blocking Jules from her attacker.

"She did this!" Demetria shouted, pointing toward Jules.

Kyle grabbed her as she moved to attack Jules again.

"No, she didn't," Tasha said softly.

All the supernatural beings turned toward the human girl. Tasha stood and walked passed the werewolves. "Ricky would never put this on you." She addressed Jules alone. "He stood by you and Luca to the end. He chose you over his pack. Don't let her take that away from you." Tasha took Jules's hand and pulled her farther into the room.

Demetria looked stung but, without another word, she stood and left out the sliding, glass door. Hayley and Kyle follow Demetria out of the house. But Jules felt like she couldn't move as her eyes again fell on Ricky's body. "I'll give you a minute," Tasha said and left the room out the internal door.

Jules sighed deeply and fought back tears as she took in the young boy's wolf form. "I don't know how to do this," she stated aloud as she took Demetria's spot on the floor. It'd been centuries since someone that she cared about had been taken by death. Especially, someone so young.

She looked down at Ricky's unmoving face. Gently, she reached forward and caressed one of his velvety ears. She let her hand trail along his neck, over his shoulder, down his leg, to his front paw. She took it in her hand and kissed it. Then the tears started to flow helplessly. One dropped onto his paw. She wiped it clean almost frantically, for no reason other than grief. Her head

dropped onto the couch where the blood of her tears added to the trail from the wound that had long ago dried.

“Jules it’s time.”

Jules looked up as Luca spoke to her. Monica had followed him into the room carrying one of Jules’s blankets.

Luca crouched down in front of her. He stared at her for a moment, taking in her blood tears. She thought he might be repulsed by them until he reached up and wiped one away with his thumb. His finger trailed down her cheek. She should have felt embarrassed, or ashamed. He’d never seen the ugliness of her cry, but she didn’t feel either.

“We have to move him now,” he said softly.

Jules looked back at the unmoving form of the boy; wolf. She nodded and allowed Luca to help her stand. He hugged her. She wanted his embrace to make the pain go away. It didn’t, of course. But there, in his arms, she did find some comfort and peace.

With one last look at Ricky, she nodded. “Excuse me.” She stepped around him, his hand falling away from her’s slowly. She touched Monica’s wrist. “Use the blue one.” Jules spoke of a more precious piece of cloth.

“The one from Pelmoore Manor with the silver stitching?” Monica said skeptically.

Jules nodded. “For Ricky.”

Monica turned and went to Jules’s bedroom to retrieve the treasured quilt. Jules left the living room and entered

the kitchen. She saw Seth hovering near the front door and saw Hayley's eyes go wide as she joined them.

"You got a little something on your face," Kyle said, smiling down at her.

She laughed twice sarcastically but smiled sadly up at him nonetheless.

Then Jules turned, walked back past the stunned-looking Seth. She saw Luca carry the blanket-covered body out of the living room as she shut the bathroom door behind her.

GABRIEL

Eileen lasted for about an hour after Jules and Nick had left for Aboit, but then the arguing had started. "Where do you think you are you going?" he asked, as he watched her shove her things unceremoniously into her suitcase.

"Aboit," she said sternly. She walked past him to get something from the far side of the hotel room. "You're wrong Gabriel and you know it."

"I'm protecting us," he reminded her, pulling a pile of clothes back out of the case.

"By abandoning your oldest friend?" Eileen spat back, replacing the items.

Gabriel put a hand on Eileen's. "It's not our fight." He looked into her eyes, pleading with her to understand. He wouldn't put them at risk, not for a bunch of werewolves.

“They killed a boy,” she said, the anger in her voice dropping to sadness. “One of your students. They let their prejudice murder an innocent child.”

Gabriel nodded. On this, they could agree. Ricky Harrison’s murder was unacceptable.

“They killed him because you started a fight with their Alpha. I will not sit here and pretend we’re not involved in this.”

Gabriel didn’t speak, her words stung. Eileen approached him. She placed her hands on either side of his face. “What if she dies Gabriel? What if you sit here and do nothing and Jules gets killed?”

“What if we go to her aid and you get killed?” he asked, gripping her wrists gently.

“I’m going to be in this fight with or without you. Your overreaction started this. I will help Jules end it.”

“Do you truly believe this is my fault?” he asked.

“No. It’s the Alpha’s,” she admitted. “Killing the boy was his choice. However, they may have gone on ignoring us if you hadn’t stepped in when Jules instructed you not to.”

His face fell. The reality of what she said was sinking in.

“It’s not your fault Gabriel, but it is partly your responsibility.”

JULIANA

Jules, Monica, and Tasha arrived at the small, hidden cemetery located a couple hours walk deep in the forest of the preserve. It was farther than most werewolves ever

bothered to travel unless they were bidding farewell to a loved one.

"I heard of this place as a child," Hayley commented quietly as a hush fell over them all.

The werewolf burial grounds were deserted. Jules had been surprised that no one seemed worried about being attacked here. But, when she asked Kyle about it, he'd said not to worry. He explained that the burial grounds were a sacred place. That to disturb the peace in a place like this was considered treason among all werewolf packs. They all knew that they were in danger, but both he and Luca were sure that Carson could never justify an attack of any kind here.

Luca came to stand beside Jules and put an arm around her after they laid Ricky in the hole they'd dug up during the daylight hours. Jules kept her gaze above the still body, instead taking in the view around her once more.

The little group had gathered on the top of a hill. Down one side, was a peaceful stream and the other, dense trees. Fog was rising from the ground in the night air. What Jules saw was painful and beautiful. She could think of no better place to lay this young soul to rest.

Demetria stepped forward, kissed a small wooden box and placed it in the ground beside her son. "Goodbye my loves," she choked out almost inaudibly.

She stepped back. The silence stretched on as they each said a quiet goodbye.

Demetria began to cry. Hayley joined her, comforting the mother as she mourned the loss of both husband and son.

Jules closed her eyes for a moment and then let them fall on the blanket she'd had for over three hundred years. It was the last piece from her past. She felt that using it was a fitting way to honor the young soul and to say goodbye.

"I'm sorry," she said, apologizing to the boy for the part she'd played in his death. *You deserved more*, she thought but couldn't bring herself to say such a thing aloud.

Luca gave her waist a squeeze. She looked up and spied the tears running down his cheeks. Her instinct was to look away, but she didn't. Instead, she took his pain into herself and held it in her heart.

Demetria freed a shovel from the soft ground and dropped a pile of earth onto her fallen loved ones. Silently and, to Jules's surprise, held the shovel out to her.

Chapter

Twenty-Three

BLOOD-ADDICTS ANONYMOUS

Carson sat on the couch. His hand was hovering over his phone every few moments, willing it to notify him that the traitors had been found, or Demetria for that matter. No one had seen her since that afternoon. He was still trying to decide what to tell her about her son. He was undoubtedly dead by now. Any human who stumbled across him would simply think that he was some poor, dead animal. And the rest of the pack involved had been gagged by their Alpha's command. So, Demetria need never know how the boy had met his fate.

As he was about to slide his finger across the screen once again, he heard the front door open. Shoving his phone in his side pocket, he walked out to see who had returned. To his surprise, it was Demetria. Tear tracks stained her face, not that that was an uncommon sight since she'd returned to him. The grief of her husband's death had not yet released her.

“There you are, my dear.” Approaching her, he wrapped her in his arms. She stiffened. “It’s late,” he said quietly in her ear. “Shall we go up to bed?”

“Not tonight Carson.” She looked up at him, her eyes red and swollen. “I’m tired. I just want to sleep.”

He was stung by her rejection but decided to let it go for now. “I’ll walk you up and tuck you in.” He gave her shoulder a squeeze and ushered her toward the stairs. She let herself be led to his room where he stopped at the doorway. His fingers slid down her arm to her hand, which he did not release, but pulled her back into him. With one hand on the back of her neck, his lips came down to hers. She moved her face to one side.

“Not tonight Carson,” she repeated flatly.

His annoyance peaked but he stayed in his spot by the door frame. He released her, and she entered the bedroom alone.

He watched, arms crossed, as she walked over and placed her phone down on his dresser. She picked up the silver knife that he’d cleaned and replaced in its designated location after he’d carried out his judgment. “Don’t worry my love,” he began as he watched her, “we’re closing in on them all. We’ll be safe soon.”

Demetria paused her examination of his weapon for the briefest of moments and then set it back down without a word. She walked to her open bags in the corner and pulled out a change of clothes. It was then, that he noticed that she had dark stains on her clothing. *Blood.*

She picked up her phone once again. "I'm going to take a shower," she said as she made to move past him. He clutched her upper arm, stopping her.

She reached up and planted a kiss on one of his cheeks, so soft he almost didn't feel it. "Good night Carson."

Satisfied, he released her. "Good night," he said as she walked around him, shutting the bathroom door behind her.

He contemplated joining her until he heard the lock click, decidedly uninviting that idea.

His phone sounded in his pocket. It was Jed, he had news.

NICHOLAS

Jules and her strange assortment of friends had been gone for nearly a half an hour before Nick decided to walk into Jules's house alone. It felt like her. The colors she chose, the simple, chic style it was decorated in, and the books. So many books. The one thing out of place was the putrid smell of werewolf blood.

He found the source easily once he breached a room to his right. The dried blood stung his nose and eyes but didn't send him into a need-to-drink frenzy as human blood did.

"Well, somebody has to do it," he said aloud to no one and then he set to work purging the boy's blood from his sister's home. He pulled the covers off the sofa cushions and threw them in the washer. On his hands and knees, he scrubbed at Jules's carpeting. There was no

getting the smell out completely, but the death of a friend was hard enough without having clean up after it.

Under the sofa, his hand hit something smooth and hard. It's was a phone, covered in blood. He flicked the side button and it powered to life. There was no code or lock on the device. And although he knew it was none of his business, he was a natural born snoop, so he flipped through its contents.

He pulled up the pictures. Obviously, the phone belonged to the teenage girl that was here earlier, but that wasn't what caught his eye. In the first photo, sitting next to the young girl, was a face that had recently burned itself into Nick's subconscious. The teenage boy who'd died here, Jules's friend, was the boy that had run away as Nick had ripped the heart from his cop of a father's chest.

The phone dropped to his side in a limp hand. Jules would never forgive him for this. After a few moments, Nick came to his senses. The only witness was now gone. So, the only one who knew this fact was him, and Nick wasn't going to tell her. Nick sighed a sigh of relief. But as he looked down at the young couple staring up at him from the phone screen, he felt something. *Was it remorse?* Nick shook his head, attempting to shake the thought from his mind. Of course, it wasn't. It couldn't be. Nick was who he was, and he had never questioned it. However, this feeling continued to nag at the back of his mind as he wiped the phone off with a clean corner of a towel, set it on the coffee table, and resumed his attempted to clean up.

He was just throwing the last of the towels in the washer when the front door opened and Jules and the werewolves returned. "You're back," Nick commented as he walked toward them all.

"Kyle, Hayley, this is my brother Nick," Jules introduced flatly. Nick noted the sadness that had dripped down his twin's face. His heart ached with her pain.

"Where are the humans?" Nick asked, noting their absence.

"Monica and Seth took Tasha home," Jules replied.

He nodded like that meant something to him. He was honestly relieved that they had not returned. He wasn't feeling the most in control at the moment.

Jules looked toward the living room. "I should..." Jules began.

"It's already done," Nick said, placing a hand on his sister's arm.

"Thank you," she replied.

The grief was palpable. Nick could feel it wafting off of the people who had just entered. Without a word, the werewolf couple, apparently named Kyle and Hayley, walk through the living room and out the back, sliding door. Nick assumed they might be going for a midnight stroll.

"So, Luca, tell me about yourself. Hobbies, interests, bad habits. If you're as great as my sister seems to think, I simply must know why." Nick said this with a smile on his face. If he was good for anything, it was to lighten a dark mood.

“Luca don’t answer any of that.” Jules elbowed Nick in the stomach as he wrapped her in a hug. “Let noseys here suffer a little longer.”

“Well that’s just rude,” Nick said in mock horror.

Luca smiled, grabbed Jules by the hand, and pulled her away from Nick and into his own arms.

“Oh, so that’s how this is gonna be?” Nick joked. But before anyone could respond, the front door opened again. Nick’s attention shot toward it. The humans were back and looking as sad as the others had before. Nick leaned close to his sister and whispered in her ear, excusing himself from the gathering of grieving friends. He shut the front door behind him just as the human girl began to cry, falling into Jules’s arms.

Too many displays of turbulent emotion, mixed with the fresh, luscious smell of human blood was overwhelming him. So, he settled into the straight-backed, wicker chair on the front porch to wait out the grieving. He was about to contemplate going for a walk down Jules’s darkened street when another vehicle pulled up in front of her house.

The people inside this one he recognized. It was Eileen and her snob of a husband. He waved to them as Eileen opened the passenger door. He stood and met them halfway up the crushed-shell driveway.

“Jules inside?” Gabriel asked.

“Her, two humans, and three werewolves last time I checked,” Nick replied. “Which was like five minutes ago.” He added as an afterthought.

Eileen shrugged and took a few steps toward the house. Gabriel grabbed her wrist.

"Gabriel, I'm going in to give my condolences to our friend," she said, looking over her shoulder at him.

"There's three of them," Gabriel hissed.

"And if they were going to hurt vampires, Nick wouldn't be sitting outside avoiding the emotionally awkward situation. He'd be inside protecting Jules from them. Isn't that right?" Eileen turned on him, looking for confirmation.

"Right. It's pretty doom and gloom," Nick said. "But I don't think there is any danger in there. More like, out there somewhere probably coming for us all." He waved his hand in some general direction away from the house.

"If you want to face the werewolves then fine, but I will not accompany you. If you decide to put yourself in that kind of danger you do so alone." The tone of Gabriel's voice implied that he thought his wife would cave to his wishes. Nick didn't think it was very likely.

A few awkward moments later, Nick's assumption was met. Eileen pulled her arm away, raised her eyebrows at him, and stood her ground.

"Fine," Gabriel said, turned, and walked back to their car. He climbed into the passenger seat and slammed the door.

Eileen watched him go but did not join him.

"Come inside with me?" Eileen asked, obviously a little more unsure than she was letting on when she'd stubbornly refused to change her mind via ultimatum.

“But, I’m uncomfortable in awkward situations with new people,” Nick said, looking at her with mock seriousness.

“Yeah, right,” she said with a laugh as they entered the house together.

JULIANA

Jules was surprised to see Eileen accompanying her brother back inside. She walked over to meet them.

“I’m sorry for your loss,” Eileen whispered in Jules’s ear.

Jules hugged her for a long moment. “Thank you so much for coming,” Jules said. “Where is Gabriel?”

“In the car, pouting.” Eileen scowled.

Jules let out an exasperated sigh and took a step toward the door. Eileen caught her by the arm. So, she turned to look at her friend.

“Just give him some time,” Eileen suggested. “He won’t leave me and I’m not leaving you. So, I think he will come around.”

Nick looked past them both toward the rest of them. “I’m gonna go outside and pretend I care,” Nick said, playfully excusing himself and walking back out the front door.

Jules rolled her eyes but made no comment. She found herself studying him as he disappeared from view. She felt like there was more that he wasn’t saying. Jules let that thought leave her mind and said, “come meet everyone.” She smiled and motioned for Eileen to follow her.

"Everyone, this is Eileen." Jules introduced Eileen to each person in turn.

CARSON

Carson's fury exploded from him. "Where is that insolent fool!" he yelled as he paced up and down the street in front of the Den. He'd received Jed's text over an hour ago and was impatiently awaiting his return.

The thought of the mutiny this traitorous Beta had caused made his blood boil. He had been so naive to trust the wolf on legacy alone. Never again would he make that mistake. The thought of the vampire coven that Luca had decided to align himself with made every nerve in Carson's body and mind unravel. This danger, this anarchy had lasted long enough.

Carson punched the Den's mailbox in a desperate attempt to relieve some of his frustration. Leaving it bent in and unusable, he began his pacing once again just as Jed's beater car came rattling up the road.

"So?" Carson said once the shaky, gangly wolf had parked his car in front of the Den.

"I-I found th-them," Jed said, pushing his glasses up on his nose. "A-all of them."

"Great." Carson's hatred spiked. It was almost over.

"There are... c-complications," Jed stuttered.

"What?" Carson questioned impatiently, wishing the fool could just spit out what he had to say.

"There are hu-humans with them s-sir. Two."

Humans were indeed a complication, he didn't want to kill any, but he would do what he must. "Anything

else?” Carson crossed his arms impatiently, letting Jed know he should continue.

“Lu-Luca C-Cain.”

“He’s dead,” Carson said. Kip had assured him of this.

“No... no, sir.” Jed shrunk away as he spoke. “He is the-there. W-with Kyle Cooper.”

Luca Cain cannot be alive! This treachery had to be extinguished. “What about the Reynolds girl?” Carson asked referencing the woman he intended to pardon and marry.

“Sh-she... is with th-them... sir,” Jed stuttered.

Jed’s words were drowned out by Carson’s roar of fury. *How could she do this to him? How could she align herself with murderers when he had given her a way out?* “None of this changes anything,” he said, grabbing the front of Jed’s shirt angrily. “Summon the pack,” he commanded before releasing him and walking into the Den, slamming the door behind him.

With his jaw clenched, he tried to restrain his anger over what he had to accept. Luca was alive and the woman he was going to take as his queen was now irrefutably his enemy.

Carson could hear Jed calling each hand-picked member of the pack in turn, bringing them to their Alpha’s aid. They would all be by his side soon enough.

JULIANA

Once Eileen had been officially introduced, Kyle asked, "so how do we deal with Carson?"

Both Monica and Seth, the only humans present, shuddered.

"I think we should let it sit for just a little while," Jules stated. She put a restraining hand on Luca's arm. It seemed he was going to violently disagree. "Not let it go, Luca. Just let it sit. Give everyone a little time."

"Let it sit?" Kyle said. "He killed a kid! He has to go down for this!"

"Although I'm ready to follow Jules, my coven leader and friend, to the end. I think that everyone who loved this boy should try to accept that vengeance isn't going to bring him back. Our main concern now is to stop anyone else from being unjustly slaughtered. So, we all need to think before we act," Eileen said boldly.

Some faces looked at her with shock, some with pride but all seemed to know that Eileen was right.

"So, how long are you proposing we wait? Not that I'm in a rush or anything, but Carson will find us. If he hasn't already," Hayley said.

"Then we wait as long as we can," Luca answered sternly.

Kyle nodded begrudgingly. But seemed to relax a little after he'd done so.

"Can we slip away a moment?" Luca whispered in Jules's ear.

Jules looked skeptically toward Eileen who had just entered into a conversation with Monica and Hayley.

“Yes,” Jules said as soon as she was satisfied that Eileen was going to be fine on her own.

Hand-in-hand, Luca and Jules walked out to the beach behind her house. He brought their intertwined hands to his lips and kissed her’s.

“Hi,” she said, stopping to stand in front of him and looking up, searching his face.

“Hi.” His smile was small but breathtakingly beautiful.

“So...” She put her free hand on his abdomen. “Was there something specific you wanted to talk to me about?”

He let out a long sigh and his hands came to rest on her shoulders. “Kyle is right,” he said looking over her head instead of at her. “Carson can’t live through this, Jules. Not after what he’s done.”

“I agree. That said, please don’t go rushing in.” She took a fistful of his shirt in her hand, pulling his attention down. “I can’t lose you.” The statement was painfully true. “I love you.” Her eyes pleaded with him to be careful and think.

He nodded silently. “I love you, too.” Leaning down, he lifted her onto her toes to kiss her cold lips.

He put his hands in her hair and she wrapped her arms around his waist, pulling him even closer. He pulled back and rested his forehead against hers.

“We will be smart about this,” he assured her. “I promise.”

“Okay.”

"I should probably find Kyle," he said as he rubbed her arms gently. "He can sometimes be a hothead, and I don't want him to do something stupid."

It was her turn to nod. She wasn't ready to let go of this moment, but she'd left Eileen alone long enough.

Silently, they walked back to the house. Kyle and Hayley were outside on the back porch, seemingly arguing. Or, at least having a heated discussion. Luca released Jules's hand and walked over to them. Jules passed them all and walked back into the house to check on Eileen and Monica.

LUCA

Luca walked right into the middle of a lovers' quarrel. He was still listening for the root of their issue, though he figured he could probably guess.

"Jules is right," Hayley shouted. "We have to think this through. I won't have you and Luca getting yourselves killed. What am I supposed to do if you die? Huh?"

"Oh, I don't know, live on," Kyle snapped angrily.

"Guys..." Luca began but Hayley responded over his comment.

"No!" she shouted at Kyle. "I won't raise this child on my own!"

Both men stopped short and stared. Luca immediately felt as if he was inappropriately interrupting something, but it was too late to leave now.

"What?" Kyle asked. His eyes were wide and confused.

“I found out this morning.” Hayley rested her hand on her stomach. “I wanted to tell you but there wasn’t a right time.” She started to laugh and cry at the same time. “I’m pregnant, Kyle.”

“What? Really!”

She nodded through happy tears.

Kyle scooped her up in his arms and spun them both. He kissed her, and she giggled. Luca was still frozen, watching the scene. *How can so much good be happening along with so much bad?* Despite all the pain, all the hate he was currently harboring, Luca started to laugh as well.

“I’m going to be a father.” Kyle chuckled, glowing at Hayley. “I’m going to be a father,” he said again looking over at Luca. He released Hayley and Luca hugged her.

“Do you really want to let some poor kid have this as a dad?” Luca joked at Kyle’s expense while hugging him as well.

“I’ve been wondering about that,” Hayley said, tapping her chin.

“Ha Ha. Sure, you have,” Kyle said sarcastically and then kissed her on the hair.

“You bet I have,” she joked back.

Luca said his congratulations a second time and bowed out gracefully, to let them have the rest of this precious moment alone.

JULIANA

Jules walked out the front door with Eileen and looked toward Gabriel’s car. Eileen said he was there, but

the car windows were tinted so darkly that she couldn't see anyone inside. She watched as Eileen walked around the vehicle, opened the driver door, and joined him there. Jules did not follow. Instead, she stopped when she saw her brother laying across the front of her car with his hands under his head. She tapped his knee and he sat up.

"Hey, it's me in girl form."

"Only in looks."

"True. I've always been the fun one," he joked and slid off the car.

She rolled her eyes but stared at his smiling face. She couldn't get enough of his familiar features, all of which had been fading for centuries, even though she'd fought it with everything she had to remember every detail. Now that he was standing in front of her, though, she had noticed that he looked a little different than she remembered, but she was sure she did as well. *Death will do that to you*, she imagined him joking. She chuckled at herself.

"What?" he asked, watching her with the same intense gaze.

"Nothing." She smiled. "Just you."

"I know, I'm still amazing, but which of my wonderful traits has you smiling?" he asked.

Jules ignored Nick's call for compliments and answered honestly. "Actually, I was scrutinizing the changes I see in you."

"And what did you find?" he asked, crossing his arms.

Jules leaned against the car next to him. "I don't remember you being this tall," she said, noting that he towered over her.

"To you little one, everyone is tall." He reached over and measured the height difference between them.

She elbowed him.

"Still height sensitive. Got it." Nick said. "So... to blatantly change the subject, how did you meet Luca exactly? More specifically, how did you get tangled up in a werewolf war and then fall in love with one? Or was it the other way around?" Nick said.

"It was option B," Jules replied.

"Luca and I met on a blind date actually. After that, we were just kind of drawn together. It happened so naturally, it seems like it has always been this way. Like loving each other comes naturally. He's the first person I've loved since..." but her voice trailed off. Hector was the last thing she wanted to be thinking about right now.

An astonished look appeared on Nick's face.

"What?" she asked.

"Since when? You were human? Are you implying that you haven't been in love in over four hundred years? That's so sad. I love falling in love!"

"No, that's not the since I was referencing." Jules laughed out loud. "But, do you remember your friend Laurence, he was my betrothed after you disappeared."

Nick laughed out loud. "Boring old Laurence! I bet that didn't end well."

"I turned into a vampire," Jules said. "He didn't take it in stride, that's for sure."

“That bloody bastard! Couldn't handle having a vampire as a fiancé, eh?”

“That is a very kind way to put it,” Jules said with a sigh. But she didn't want to talk about her past romantic relationships anymore. This one would undoubtedly lead to the next and she was determined to avoid that. “What about you? Mister ‘I love to fall in love’. Has there been anyone significant in your existence?”

“No...” Nick said too quickly. “I mean...no. We'll go with no.”

Jules looked at him like she very much doubted the authenticity of this answer. Which she did. Nick's return had made her feel lighter than she had in centuries, despite all of the bad happening around her. And yet, this being, her brother, was still a killer. How could someone who felt things so deeply, because Nick did, even if he didn't admit it, be the Fort Miles Phantom?

“What has your face all squished like that? What do you want to know?” Nick asked.

Jules chewed on her lip nervously. She didn't want to spoil the moment. “Why do you still kill like you do? Human life deserves to be protected, no matter the personal cost.”

“Not you too!” He rolled his eyes, let go of her shoulder and slumped back onto her car.

“Me and who exactly?” she asked leaning over him.

He sighed. “Never mind. It's just an old fight I seem to have every fifty or so year.”

“Nicholas. What are you...”

But he cut her off. "It doesn't matter right now. I've already agreed to battle my nature and lay off the killing to stay with you. Can't that be enough for now? Will I slip up? Probably. But I feel like I have part of myself back... with you here. I felt it from the first moment I saw you. I don't want to lose you over this."

He seemed to be having a conversation with himself that she wasn't privy too. "Nick, I just found you. I'm not going anywhere. But you have to understand, I don't live like that. I can't."

He raised his eyebrows at her.

"I mean, I literally can't," she said exasperatedly.

"You're an addict too!" He smiled.

"A recovering one," she admitted. "And I won't go back, do you hear me? I love you Nicholas, but I won't be that again."

Nick placed his hand over her mouth, silencing her. "Okay. I hear you." He looked her straight in the eyes. "I'll work on it. Okay?"

She nodded.

He moved his fingers just as the front door opened and Luca walked outside.

"Hayley has something she wants to tell you," he said as he walked over to them and wrapped Jules in his arms. He placed a kiss on her forehead. Jules was surprised to see him looking rather happy.

"Okay, let's go." Jules laughed lightly, as she and Luca began to walk toward the house. But then she stopped, walked out of Luca's embrace, and grabbed Nick by the hand, pulling him with her.

Chapter

Twenty-Four

BATTLE FOR IMMORTAL LIVES

Jules let Luca lead Nick and herself through the house and out the back door where the rest of the group was chattering excitedly.

Eileen must have managed to convince Gabriel to join the rest of them because the two of them approached the commotion seconds later. Gabriel looked awkward and nervous, but his presence was a step in the right direction.

"Hello Mr. Prentiss," Hayley greeted.

Gabriel's eyes widened.

"Hayley," he said stiffly, "you are part of this?"

She nodded. "Wait," Eileen said. "You took my husband's English class, didn't you?" Eileen asked with a smile.

"We all did," Monica interjected.

"Duh, he is the best teacher at Aboit High," Hayley said with a smile.

Jules walked over to Gabriel, while Eileen chatted easily with Monica and Hayley. She crooked her arms

around his and whispered in his ear, "I'm really glad you're here."

Gabriel shrugged, and half smiled. "I'm here for you."

"I know."

"Okay, okay, everyone listen up!" Kyle waved his hands and the chatter faded, leaving silence in its wake.

He seems happy. Jules wondered what could have possibly happened to make Kyle forget how angry he was at Carson.

"My wife has an accountment." Kyle motioned to Hayley.

Jules's confusion grew. Kyle was glowing and fidgeting with excitement.

"Hayley and I have a surprise," he said while bouncing on his heels. "Honey, you should tell them."

Hayley rolled her eyes but smiled and joined him, taking his hand in her own. "I didn't want to say anything now, but..." She paused, and Kyle squeezed her fingers. "We're going to have a baby!"

Monica squealed, Luca gave Kyle a high-five, and Jules ran to give Hayley a hug. "Congratulations."

Gabriel did not join in but stayed rooted in his spot. At first, Nick hung back as well, as if he wasn't sure if he should be involved or not, but he was soon drawn into the quiet revelry. "I don't know you but congrats," Nick said, shaking Kyle's hand. Laughing, Luca reached out to him and clapped him on the back. Gabriel even cracked a smile.

"There's more," Hayley said, her arms still wrapped around Jules. She looked over at Kyle, who nodded. "Kyle and I talked about it and Jules, Luca would you be our baby's godparents?"

"Of course," Luca said rushing over to give Kyle a quick hug.

"Me?" Jules asked as Hayley turned to look at her.

"Yes you," she said quietly in Jules's ear.

"Jules?" Kyle asked.

"Of course I will," she said, walking over to Kyle and hugging him as well. For a brief moment the companions had a reason to feel true joy, even if it was fleeting.

CARSON

By the time all the expected pack members, including Hayley Reynold's father and oldest brother, had arrived, Carson had gotten his emotions under control. Each of them looked nervous; as if they weren't sure they wanted to be there. Nonetheless, each was there, faithful to the one who ruled and provided for them.

Carson stood, cleared his throat, and addressed his subordinates. "We've found them. It's time to eliminate this threat and anarchy once and for all."

Some of their eyes brightened. Some of them shifted uncomfortably.

"Jed, what are we up against?" he asked.

"Va-ampires and were-were..." Jed began to reply.

Carson's eyes shut aggravatedly and twisted his tense neck. "How many are there?" he asked through gritted teeth.

“Um...well...t-two humans, th-three traitors, and four of... of them.” He meant the vampires.

“Four?” Carson questioned, his eyes opening to look at the tracker.

“Yes, th-there was ah-a fourth,” he stammered and cowered.

“Fine. At least we know going into this.” Carson started to calculate a strategy.

“Who are the traitors?” Ben asked.

“Luca Cain, Kyle Cooper, and Hayley Reynolds-Cooper,” Carson said, staring down her family, daring them to object to his ruling of her traitor status.

More than one wolf looked at them, some with what might have been pity.

Hayley’s father dropped his eyes, defeated, while her brother looked like he wanted to speak against Carson’s words. Carson silenced him with a look laced with his Alpha given authority.

“Reynolds.” He held a UVB light out to Hayley’s father. “You and your son...” He blanked on the boy’s name as he looked at them both.

“Adam,” the boy said, taking the light in place of his father.

“You will depose of the male vampire.”

“Th-he new...”

Carson growled at Jed for interrupting.

“T-two males,” Jed said, cowering.

“The blond male,” Carson clarified.

They both nodded at him.

He put a firm hand on Joe Reynold's shoulder. "You have no need to go up against your daughter, leave that to another."

Adam scowled but Joe nodded. He didn't know if Joe and his son could take down the vampire but if they died in the attempt it was no great loss.

Carson turned his attention toward another. "Max, you will handle the young female vampire," Carson instructed, handing Max a light as well. "Kip, help him out."

Kip nodded while Max bounced on his heels excitedly.

"And Ben," he held out another light.

"You will finish off whoever this new one is."

Ben took the order and the light submissively. Carson didn't know anything about this new vampire. Ben had the likeliest chance of defeating him. Besides, if he did lose, his loyalty had been shaky since Carson's sentencing and execution of the boy.

"And I will defeat the last vampire," Carson announced. "None of you will interfere. That red-headed-demon is mine," he growled. It would be a pleasure to bring her existence to its finale and irrevocable end.

Two of the younger wolves were instructed to take care of the humans, while the rest were assigned to handle the rogue wolves and help against the vampires.

"Wolves," he addressed the gathered pack members, "majestic ones, it is time for this threat to be eliminated. Once and for all."

Cheers and shouting erupted.

“It is time for the law of the pack to be upheld. The traitors who have thrown away the pride of their pack must answer for their betrayal. And Aboit must be freed from this vampire plague!”

More cheers rose into the air. Several of the followers threw hats and fists upward.

“Wolves, dawn approaches. The plan is set,” he said. Of course, he hoped it would be a bright, sunny day. Making the vampire’s demise easier. But, according to the weather report, this was unlikely. “Who’s with me?” He rallied them. “Who’s with me?” he said again. “Let’s move!”

With this, he stomped toward the front door. Ripping the screen off the hinges, he led the war party down a back street and toward the traitors, the demons, and their retribution.

GABRIEL

Gabriel knew he was alienating himself, but he didn’t care. He was hiding in Jules’s living room, putting some much-needed distance between him and the strange group of allies. Hayley Reynolds, now Reynolds-Cooper apparently, complicated his cut and dry thoughts about werewolves. The Reynolds children had always been some of his favorite students, despite their werewolf status.

He opened the blinds to the star-filled sky and then wished he hadn’t. Jules and Luca were lying together in the sand. He had his arms around her and they looked peaceful. Even with all that had happened, they looked

happy. Despite himself, Gabriel smiled sadly. That type of happiness was rare and many never found it. Just then, the sound of the sliding door pulled him from his thoughts. Within moments, Eileen entered the living room alone.

"Isn't it great, Gabriel? About Hayley, I mean?" she asked. He could tell she was genuinely happy for the wolf couple.

"Sure," he said half-heartedly.

"Seriously?" she asked accusingly. "You're still holding on to your anti-werewolf prejudice."

"It's not a prejudice," he defended.

"Yes, it is. It's a hatred based solely on an individual's race. That is the literal definition of prejudice. You're stuck in the past Gabriel, you're..."

"Enough, Eileen" he cut her off harshly. But the hurt in her eyes caused his expression to soften. "You're right." Gabriel walked to her side and kissed her on the forehead. "I just need some space to think." He kissed her on the lips before exiting the office and walking out the back door.

He walked right passed Jules and Luca but didn't stop, although he heard Jules yell after him. Only when he reached the water did he slow and look around, taking in the beauty he had been refusing to see. *I am prejudiced.* He knew that now. Since he learned that Hayley Reynolds was one the werewolves Jules was spending time with, this reality had been nagging at his mind. Contemplating this, he began walking down the beach at a leisurely pace.

“Boo,” a voice said from behind him.

He spun, ready for a fight. “Oh, it’s you,” he said to Jules’s twin brother.

“So, why did you decide to get out of the car? What changed your mind?” Nick asked as he stepped up to walk beside him.

“Eileen,” he admitted. “And Jules. I haven’t exactly been agreeable where the werewolves are concerned,” he admitted. “My cooperation means something to them both. I think I am hoping to make up for my bull-headed beliefs somehow. Why are you sticking around?”

“For Jules,” Nick answered. “And penance,” he added after a long pause.

Gabriel considered asking what Nick had to be penitent for but decided that there were likely a great many reasons and made no comment. After a few more long moments, Gabriel spoke again. “Jules and I have been a coven for hundreds of years. I love her like I did my own sister. But I...” Gabriel’s voice faded but then he plunged forward. “That’s part of why watching her fall for... Luca... was so hard for me,” he admitted. “I still don’t think he’s...”

“Luca seems like an okay guy to me,” Nick cut him off.

Gabriel sighed but then admitted, “yes, I believe he is.” No matter how much he still didn’t like it, Jules was with the werewolf now. And, as far as werewolves go, Luca had done nothing to prove he wasn’t a decent human being as well.

"I just want her to be happy, ya know. I mean, I'm sure you feel that way too, being her family for so many years and all," Nick said with another shrug.

But the problem was, Gabriel didn't feel that way. Not really. Because of this, and now that Nick was back in Jules's life, Gabriel had a sinking feeling that it was time for Jules and himself to part ways. "Can I trust you?"

When Nick raised one eyebrow but said nothing, Gabriel elaborated. "Romantic relationships come and go. But Jules needs a constant in her life. I fear that that can no longer be me. But, maybe, it can be you."

"I literally just found my supposedly dead twin sister. I'm not going anywhere without her for a very, very long time," he said with a bright, devilish smile. "Where will you go?"

"I think it's time I take Eileen home."

Nick nodded. "Then yes, you can trust me. I will take good care of our sister." He extended his hand.

"Thank you," Gabriel replied, accepting his handshake.

Gabriel felt peace in leaving Jules with Nick. He would love her and protect her if the need arose. *And with Jules and Luca together, there is bound to be trouble.*

"Wait," Gabriel said, throwing out his arm to stop them both.

"What is that?" Nick said, listening beside him.

"Run!" Gabriel said and they both bolted back in the direction of Jules's house.

JULIANA

Jules heard Gabriel calling her name. His voice was coming from down the beach. She sat up, staring in that direction. Luca, who had fallen asleep, stirred in the sand beside her. Jules could tell the sun was rising, but it was a blessedly overcast day. It even looked like it might be about to rain.

“What’s going on?” Luca mumbled as she stood to her feet.

“Gabriel! Nicholas!” she called as she spotted the two vampires running toward her.

“The werewolves are coming. They are almost here,” Gabriel said calmly.

“And it doesn’t look like they are open to negotiations,” Nick said with a mischievous smile. Then Jules watched as Nick shot over her head and perched on the roof of her house.

“What do you see?” she asked him.

“The ocean,” he said with a devilish grin.

She rolled her eyes and looked up at the roof. It would not be hard to make that jump. She took three steps back and shot into the air. Then, landing on the roof in a crouch, she spun to face the direction her brother was looking. With vampire sight, she saw what she was looking for. “There!” she said, pointing off in the direction of the rock caves.

“I can see them. There is a large group moving toward us,” she called down to Luca. Jules jumped from her perch, landed silently in a crouch, and stood beside the now awake Luca. She turned to Gabriel. She would

wager he knew what she was going to say to him. "We need you."

"Jules, I..."

"Please Gabriel. There are too many of them, I'm not sure we can win this fight without you."

His jaw twitched but he nodded. A surge of relief swept over her. She nodded back, turned, and ran inside. Luca, Gabriel, and Nick trailed her.

"Seth!" she shouted.

He meandered out of the bedroom. "What?" he asked, his eyes droopy and his hair ruffled.

"Take Monica and get out of here!"

"Wait, what's going on?" Monica protested appearing next to her boyfriend.

"They're coming. You need to leave," Jules said sternly. She would not risk Monica or Seth's human lives for this fight.

"I'm not going anywhere!" Monica stamped her foot and stormed over to where Jules stood by the back door.

"Yes, you are," Jules said, hugging her.

"Seth." Jules handed Monica off to him. "Make sure she stays away."

He nodded in compliance. Monica protested harder and started to cry.

"You have to go." Jules stretched up and kissed her friend on the forehead. "Be safe."

"You guys too," Seth said as he began to drag Monica toward the door.

"Now, what's the plan?" asked Kyle.

"Maybe we should leave, too," Hayley said.

“Run and you can never come back. None of us could,” Gabriel said.

“No. This ends here,” Luca said.

Jules watched as Luca nodded at Gabriel and he nodded back.

“We fight,” Gabriel stated, and Jules knew without a doubt that he was with them now.

For just a moment, no one did or said anything. Jules felt love for everyone in the room. She looked at each of her new and old friends, feeling responsible for the lives of each and every one.

“Don’t worry about us,” Hayley said, walking over to Jules.

“You should leave,” Kyle said to his wife. “The baby.”

“I’m not going anywhere.” She turned to her husband. “You know I’m not leaving you.”

“If we are going to do this, it can’t happen here. My neighbors will be waking up soon. Right now, the pack is just under a mile away. We need to go out and meet them. If we do, that beach is private, and the families that own those houses are only here once or twice a year. The last thing I want is the police getting involved, or worse, killed.”

“Jules is right, we should go now,” Luca said.

“In a moment.” Gabriel took Eileen’s hand and lead her into the kitchen. “Jules,” he called her after him.

“Nick,” she called over her shoulder and he followed them as well.

Gabriel opened her refrigerator.

"This is the last of it," he said, as Eileen pulled glasses down from the cupboard. He handed each vampire a bag of blood and Eileen handed each one a glass.

Nick stared at it. "But it's cold." He grimaced.

"Just drink it," Eileen commanded.

He shrugged, poured the blood into the glass, and drank. Jules took a deep breath, drank, and felt the red liquid course through her like instant strength. She stood in bliss for a few long seconds until she heard Luca calling her name. Her eyes opened, and she saw his widen. Instinctively, she shut her eyelids over her red eyes.

"Sorry, I..." She hadn't ever wanted him to see her in her most demon-like form, revealing the monster inside.

"Jules," he soothed, lifting her chin. "I love every part of you," he assured, reaching a finger to touch beside her eye. "Even this."

Jules reopened her red eyes. She let out a long sigh and closed them again as he kissed her.

Nick faked a cough and cleared his throat. This made Jules roll her eyes as she pulled back from Luca.

"We have a battle to win," Luca said, looking down at her.

As they rejoined Kyle and Hayley in the living room, everyone moved toward the back door. The battle for their immortal lives was about to begin.

The heavens opened. Rain began to pour down, drenching them all. Anticipation and adrenaline made Kyle shift back and forth as he watched their adversaries approaching quickly.

Leading the charge was what was left of the Den members. Ben, Kip and Max, were flanking Carson. Just behind them, Kyle spied his father-in-law and brother-in-law. Adam was carrying one of the UVB lights, not yet flicked on. Then came the rest. Twenty or so wolves, some he knew and some he didn't, but he recognized all of them.

Kyle glanced past Jules, who was standing next to him, to where Hayley was positioned. She growled, her shoulders hunching over angrily. Obviously, she'd spotted her family as well. Participating in this fight must be part of the actions Carson was requiring so the Reynolds family could prove their loyalty to their Alpha. Apparently, in addition to delivering their eldest, already married, daughter to him as a mate. Hatred toward Carson trickled through Kyle and he growled as well, taking a step forward.

"Kyle hold your ground," Jules whispered, reaching her hand out toward him, though the distance was too great for her to actually restrain him.

He glanced at her to his right and Eileen to his left. The group stood stretched across the beach in a line, alternating vampire and werewolf. Gabriel had suggested this order. He figured they would have the best chance at staying alive if they helped each other through the battle.

Carson brought his army to a halt. Kyle nursed a glimmer of hope that he would consider negotiating, and there would be no battle. However, before this could even be suggested, Carson gave a growl and the pack began to charge toward them, closing the gap quickly.

Kyle ran at his soon-to-be-attackers. He tried not to register who exactly they were. In his purview, he saw the flash of light as Hayley become the majestic white wolf. She charged the wolves in front of her. Some four-legged, some still running on two legs. Eileen and Jules sped out from either side of him. He picked up the pace, running faster than he ever had before into the fray.

Kyle let his teeth and claws extend but didn't turn fully yet. He growled and punched a wolf-shaped nose jumping up at him in the furry face.

GABRIEL

"Dad, catch!" Adam Reynolds shouted, tossing an illuminated UVB light past Gabriel's shoulder. Gabriel spun just as the light was jammed into his neck. He inhaled as the manufactured sunlight burnt him. He lashed out with his arms and the man fell. Gabriel turned on him, about to lunge for the kill when he heard a crunching sound and then a yelp. Hayley had bitten down on the lighted weapon, rendering it useless.

"Hayley are you okay," Adam asked her as he ran to her side. This was wrong. It was all wrong. Adam had taken Gabriel's class only a few years ago. He couldn't be more than twenty years old, and he was always a good kid. He was a little surly and serious, but Gabriel

remembered him as a good student with genuine character. This fight did not seem like something the boy he remembered would choose to be a part of. Unless he was only acting due to the orders of the Alpha. Gabriel's head cocked to the side in contemplation.

However, in the moment of distraction, the Reynolds father had gotten his feet and Gabriel was hit hard in the gut. Rather than fall, he spun; lifting the werewolf off the ground as he went. His fangs extended, preparing to bite into his neck.

"Mr. Prentiss don't!" both Hayley and Adam shouted together.

Gabriel's attention moved to Hayley, now in human form, kneeling on the sand beside her brother.

"He's our father, please," she begged.

He looked down at the werewolf man and then at both of the children. He let out a long hiss. This was war. He knew, better than many, that war meant death and sacrifice. One wolf dead would help even the battlefield.

"Please." Hayley's plea was barely a whisper. The expectant mother's eyes were wide and tearful.

After another moment, Gabriel threw the man down on the sand. "Take your father and go," Gabriel instructed Adam. "If you stay here, I will be forced to kill you both."

"Dad, get up," Hayley said, as she ran to their father's side.

"Carson's orders are for us to take on the blond, male vampire. Apparently, that's you," Adam told him. "We won't be able to resist a direct order very long."

Gabriel said nothing but nodded and placed an encouraging hand on the boy's shoulder. He flinched but didn't pull away. Just then, their father lunged at him. Both of his children grabbed him by the arms, holding him back.

"Fight it as long as you can," Hayley told them. "We may have a new Alpha soon."

"That's treason," her father grunted. It seemed as though he might be in pain.

"If fighting for what is right is treason, then I am a traitor." Breathing heavily, Hayley helped her brother drag their father to the edge of the fray.

"Since when is our English teacher a vampire?" Adam asked his sister almost conversationally.

"Pretty sure the whole time," Hayley replied.

"So, vampires are not all bad then. I mean, for a teacher, Mr. Prentiss is alright," Adam said like he was trying to work something out in his mind.

Gabriel almost smiled at this but then he saw it. A wolf collided with the young werewolves. Knocking them both off their feet. Gabriel ran at them and threw the wolf-shaped werewolf at full strength. It landed back into the middle of the battle.

"Adam, get away from here," Gabriel shouted.

Adam pulled his father to the far end of the fray. It looked as though it was taking all his strength to do it. Gabriel knew that they would be forced to try and kill him again soon, but he certainly hoped they could hold out. Though the father's resolve seemed faulty at best.

“Thank you Gab...” Hayley let out a cry as she was flung down onto the sand. Gabriel had pushed her out of the way, kicking a wolf who had charged her in the shoulder.

Hayley stood, shook herself off, nodded to Gabriel and resumed the fight as a white wolf once more. Gabriel noticed that she was, in fact, beautiful in this form as well as her human one.

“Gabriel look out!” Gabriel spun at Jules’s shout. A wolf in human form charged forward. The gangly wolf was easily thrown backward when Gabriel kicked him. He sputtered and charged again. This time, changing into a wolf along the way. Anticipating the flash of light, Gabriel covered his eyes and took the wolf’s impact square in the chest. The two fell backward but Gabriel was too strong for his opponent. With a threatening hiss, he lifted the animal up and tossed him so hard that he hit a rock cliff and landed on the sand with a thud.

Gabriel spun, ready to take on the next challenger. To his horror, he saw Eileen across the beach, cowering. A light was laying along her neck like the blade of a deadly knife. He knocked over a few charging wolves in his attempt to get to her. He knew he shouldn’t leave his assigned post, he was leaving Jules and Hayley exposed. This formation was his was his idea, but he couldn’t leave Eileen to die. Before he could reach her, however, he saw Kyle shove the man off Eileen, pulling the light out of his grasp as they fell, the light landing feet from them both.

Luca, in wolf form, took the light in his mouth and bit down. The blub shattered and flickered and Luca shook blood out of his mouth.

Gabriel was knocked sideways again, and again he moved to overpower the attacker.

LUCA

Luca heard a yelp from behind him, he knew someone was dead by Nick or Eileen's hand, but he didn't have time to register who. The cuts in Luca's mouth began to heal as he sputtered. *That would have been easier with hands.*

To his right he saw that Carson had left his spot on the sidelines. Carson and Jules seemed to be facing off, but she was holding her own.

Just then, a wolf's nose and ears barreled into his ribs. Luca rolled out of the impact, turned, growled, and bit down. He felt fur and blood in his mouth and heard a yelp from Kip. Luca had successfully put a gash across his pretty muzzle. The two clashed again, a flurry of bared teeth and sharp claws. As he fought, he couldn't help but feel it was payback for running him off the road.

Luca bit down again and Kip stumbled backward. Luca took this moment to returned to his human form in a flash of light. He spat out Kip's blood and whipped his mouth on his arm.

Kip growled.

"Back off," Luca barked at him.

Kip became human as well. "I'm under orders," Kip shouted.

“You’ve been ordered to kill me?” Luca circled him.

“Actually, yes. Days ago,” Kip said, panting. “I, personally, have nothing against you or your girlfriend. I really couldn’t care less who you’re banging. But you know I don’t have a choice.”

Luca growled audibly. Carson turned friend against friend and cared for no one but himself.

Luca stopped and gathered what power he carried inside him by his position in the pack. He felt it from his fingers to his chest, drawing on all the wolves around him. Condemned traitor or not, he still held the power of the Beta. Letting out a slow breath, he searched for the hold Carson’s order had in Kip. The roots were deep, he could not erase it but maybe he could manipulate it. “You may carry out your orders after the battle has reached its conclusion. Your Alpha needs you elsewhere.”

Kip stood up a little straighter, some of the burden having lifted. He nodded at Luca, who nodded back.

Of course, Luca was banking on the fact that they would win. If they did not, he would have to run. But for the time being, it had worked. Kip was free from the order’s hold over him.

Luca turned from Kip who limped away from the fight but did not leave. Instead, he plopped himself down on the sidelines, so he could watch how it all turned out. Luca rolled his eyes.

Luca glanced over at Jules again. It seemed as though Carson might lose his life at her hands. Luca smiled. Jules was one tough vampire.

Luca's attention was pulled away from Jules by a low growl. He kicked the charging wolf. The impact was enough to throw him backward. He flew into Nick, who was holding his hands over his eyes and crushing a light under his boot. The two of them laughed lightly and helped each other up.

Nick turned to finish off a bleeding Ben, but Luca put a restraining hand on his shoulder. Ben had looked out for him when he'd first joined the pack. Luca looked down at him and saw that he seemed to be silently begging for his life.

"Leave that one alive," he told Nick.

"Pick and choose much," Nick said but smiled, shrugged, and turned away from the wolf lying helplessly at his feet. Ben tipped his head at Luca and flopped onto the sand with a sigh.

Luca's heart lurched when he heard a hiss mixed with a scream. It was Jules crying out. While he'd been distracted, it seemed that the tables had turned. Carson had her face clamped between his hands. The light he held was pressed into one of Jules's cheeks, blood and blisters beginning to form around it.

Another crying hiss erupted from Jules's throat as Carson pulled the light from her burning flesh, grabbed her around the neck, and placed the light directly in the middle of her forehead. Kyle broke away from his tussle, yanking the light from Carson's hand as Gabriel barreled into him, knocking the Alpha to the sand.

Kyle crushed the UVB under his bare foot.

Before Gabriel could go in for the kill, a wolf jammed a large, wooden, stake through his back, but missed his heart.

Gabriel fell, sputtering.

Eileen screamed.

“Well, that’s not very original,” Luca heard Nick say from behind him as he ran with Eileen to help their fallen comrade. From the side of his vision, Luca saw Nick yank the stake free. Gabriel would live.

Jules, however, might not. Luca was almost to her when he was hit from behind. Two wolves landed on top of him, pinning him to the ground. He helplessly watched as werewolves of all sizes and ages gathered around Jules, cutting off her escape.

Hayley was kneeling on the sand, her shoulder bleeding while her brother shielded her from more attacks. Kyle had been seized by some pack members. Nick had a long gash on his face, hands up in surrender as Eileen had a stake pointed to her chest. Gabriel lay at their feet barely moving.

To Luca’s great relief, Kyle broke free. He was almost on Carson when the Alpha spoke to him.

With a cry of pain, Kyle dropped to the sand, twitching as he tried to resist the order not to interfere.

Jules tried again but her escape route was completely blocked. She spun but it wasn’t fast. She seemed severely weakened by the light’s effects. She had no choice but to face Carson alone and not at full strength. A wolf near the inside of the gathering circle lashed out. With sharp claws on a human hand, she dragged her nails across

Jules's back. Out of surprise and pain, Jules lurched forward, losing her footing.

"She's mine!" Carson growled. As she returned to standing, a silver blade sunk deep into her stomach and Luca saw her eyes searching for something. Their eyes locked and she struggled as the blade was twisted inside her. Then, she stumbled as it was pulled from her flesh. Seconds later, Luca saw Carson's arm swing forward and he stabbed her again.

With a great heave, Luca freed himself from his captors. Slipping on the sand, he ran toward them. Someone bit down on his leg while another couple converged on him.

"Jules!" Luca yelled.

He watched as Carson grabbed the disoriented Jules by the hair and threw her on the sand below. Luca lashed out at the attacking wolves as he tried once again to reach her. He had to save her. His future was nothing without her.

Carson looked over at him and sneered as he brought his booted foot down on the side of Jules's head.

JULIANA

Jules clutched her bloody abdomen and took the impact of Carson's boot on the side of the head. She felt her skull crack under the pressure. She shivered but she wasn't cold.

This wasn't the way she would end. In a surprisingly swift movement, Jules was on her feet. With her fangs extended, she released a terrifying hiss. Carson's eyes

flared with anger, but her anger was just as strong. It was her or him this time. This was the fight she couldn't afford to lose.

From the corner of her eye, Jules saw a wolf from the circle begin to move toward her.

"I said leave her!" Carson shouted at the boy. "She's mine!"

"I belong to no one." She began to circle him like a predator stalking its prey.

"You are mine!" he growled, charging her.

She managed to flip his large body over her back then spun. As he attempted to get to his feet, she kicked out. Her foot connected with his face with a satisfying crunch. Carson collapsed back onto the sand. Jules leaned down to finish him off when he pulled the silver knife out from behind his back and sunk it deep into her chest. The blade slipped between her ribs. If she had needed a beating heart to live, this blow would have killed her. Her vision blurred as she fell to her knees. Carson stood and punched her hard in the face. She fell, her head hitting the sand hard. Before she could move, Carson was straddling her. He pulled the knife from her bloody chest and dropped it on the ground beside them. He leaned over her and sneered down with a maniacal smile. Then he sat up and brought his fist down onto her face. She could see lights behind her eyes. Somewhere between consciousness and unconsciousness, she realized that she was going to die.

"That's right, little menace. Your time is up."

“Jules!” She heard Luca’s desperate call but couldn’t respond. Her long existence was coming to an end.

Chapter

Twenty-Five

R.I.P.

Demetria sat on the edge of Carson's bed. This was not her bed. This was not her room, not her home. This place was a waystation of death to her now. She'd fled here when Micha died and ran straight into the arms of his psychotic ex-best friend. She allowed Carson to possess her in hopes that both her son and she would be protected should the vampire try to murder them too.

Instead of granting that protection, Carson slaughtered her son; sentencing carried out without a trial. Guilt considered proven to only one. Demetria relived the last moment she'd seen Micha alive. He'd kissed her on the hair and told her he'd be back soon with their son. But he'd never returned and her last moments with her son had been clouded under an argument. Carson had taken all that was left of her. Ricky was dead. Micha was dead. And either she or Carson was going to join them.

Demetria stood on determined legs. Her wolf form broke free from inside her human one and as she ran out of the room, down the stairs, and through where the screen door should have been.

Her need for revenge drove her through the edge of town toward the vampire's house. There was no justice strong enough to be served. But revenge, revenge she could have. She knew Carson had gone out to the coast to meet the traitors in battle.

As she neared the beach, she noticed that Carson had stationed wolves, pretending to be cops, or maybe they were cops, at every access road to the area. At least he wasn't taking chances with avoidable human casualties.

Once her paws hit sand, she followed the sounds of growling and cheering. It took only a few moments for Demetria to make her way into the midst of the fighting. In the customary flash of light, Demetria became her human self.

A few wolves turned toward the new arrival, but most remained transfixed on the small, red-haired, vampire pinned as Carson's large fists connected with her face and chest repeatedly. He pulled the large knife out of its sheath and plunged it into the right side of the vampire's chest. She was weak, no longer resisting. He could kill her, but instead, he continued to extend her pain.

Ben noticed Demetria. Silently, he and Kip parted the sea of bystanders so that she had a clear path to her son's killer. They both knew what he had done, although they were likely unable to speak of it.

Carson dropped the bloodied, silver knife onto the sand beside him, lifted his shoulders out of a hunch, pointed his face upward, and howled; a wolf's cry of victory. Others followed their Alpha's lead, a great roar penetrating the sounds of the stormy sea.

Demetria took the moment of his distraction and seized the blade off the sand. Carson's back was to her; he hadn't yet realized his fatal error.

Demetria acted faster than anyone could react. In the space of a small breath, the curved blade plunged into Carson's back, right between his shoulder blades. He roared in agony, attempting to dislodge his attacker but Demetria's grip on the knife was firm. He swayed forward as Kyle leaped from the sidelines, pulling Jules from underneath the Alpha's falling frame.

Demetria could hear Carson wheezing as she pulled the knife from his back and walked around to kneel in front of him.

"Why?" he managed to choke out.

"You know why," she snarled. The hatred she felt was ablaze in her eyes.

"I had to..." he began, fruitlessly defending himself.

"You murdered my child!" she shouted as she thrust the knife back into his body, right over his heart. She was splattered with his blood but did not react as she stood. Carson's body fell to the ground and went limp. Moments later, the beast was gone and only the body of the wolf remained. "You're dance with death is at its end." She said her under her breath. "Any who mourn him are fools," she said as the wolves parted for her. The

murderer was dead. He'd never harm another man, woman, or child again. With a howl, she returned to her natural state; lost forever inside her grief and fur. Running at full speed to finish her journey on this earth with four paws.

LUCA

Luca finally broke away from the wolves who were keeping him from Jules's side.

"Jules, Jules?"

He knelt next to her on the sand. Kyle moved to give him room. He cradled the top half of her body, lifting her off the sand. She laid limply in his arms, her eyes remaining closed. The sand beneath them was drenched with her blood.

"Wake up?" he said, brushing sand off her face. "Please wake up." Tears started to well up in his eyes as he stared down at her unmoving, badly-beaten face.

Gabriel, on his feet again, moved quickly to her other side.

"She needs blood now," Nick said, pushing observers out of his way.

"We don't have any more," Gabriel hissed.

Luca stared at her, panicked. He knew she needed human blood; wolf blood would do nothing. He could do nothing to save her. He pressed his face to hers, willing her to wake regardless.

"I have blood."

Luca looked up, tears obscuring his vision. It was Monica who had spoken. She and Seth had just broken

through the crowd of immortals. When they had arrived on the beach, he couldn't guess.

"She wouldn't want that, Monica," Gabriel told her, staring down at Jules.

"I don't care what she wants," Monica said and ran for the discarded knife lying next to Carson's body.

Seth ran after her, but before he could stop her, she had sliced her arm above the wrist. She cried out in pain, dropped the knife, and held her shaking arm.

Within moments, Gabriel was on his feet restraining Eileen. Kyle and Hayley worked together to keep Nick away from their bleeding human friend.

Luca heard Seth's panicked yell, but all he could see was Monica's courage. Despite the danger, she walked over and knelt in Gabriel's vacated spot on Jules's other side.

Luca threw out his hand, grabbing Monica by the arm. "Are you sure about this?" he asked.

"Not at all," Monica replied as she leaned over Jules and let her blood trickle between Jules's lips.

"Drink Jules," she said quietly.

After a few moments, Luca's heartbeat started to quicken. Jules responded. As a reaction to the much-needed nourishment, she grabbed ahold of Monica, unsheathed her fangs, and sunk them deep into Monica's arm. Monica winced but didn't pull away.

JULIANA

Jules saw a familiar face, but it was different, the perspective was off. The face more angular, the hair

brighter, the iridescent silver eyes alluring. She hadn't seen that face since she'd become a vampire. This was her face, but not her face. This was her vampire face through the eyes of one that loved her. Jules heard Monica's vibrant laugh accompany her own musical one.

The image of Jules faded, and Ethan became the focus of Monica's next memory. "You can't have a crush on my best friend. It's creepy. Get over it!" Monica yelled at the beautiful, blue-eyed boy. Jules could feel the irritation Monica felt but also the love. "I don't have a crush," he whimpered, a red flush betraying him. "And I'm not creepy."

Next Monica's blood led Jules to Seth and then her parents. There was so much love in this human's life. "We have to go back Seth," Monica pleaded.

"We can't. Jules said..." Seth began to protest.

"Jules is wrong!" Monica shouted. "You know we have to go back."

The look on Seth's face betrayed him. "Fine, but we stay out of the way. You can't rush in!"

Monica jumped forward and kissed him on the cheek. "Fine, can we go please!"

Jules continued down this path, consuming the blood and memories of her most precious human friend. She couldn't stop. She didn't want to. She could feel her wounds healing as the opulent blood entered her body, saving her from the brink of death. Somewhere far away, Jules gripped Monica's arm tighter.

And then she saw it. The face of the girl reflected in the mirror at her bathroom sink. Her soft brown skin was

blotchy. Her warm brown eyes were red and puffy. She'd been crying, mourning. The loss of what, Jules wasn't sure.

"Jules stop, you're killing her," someone said. Someone Jules wanted to listen too. Her eyes fluttered open, she saw the same face that had been reflected in the mirror only moments ago. The same eyes were no longer rimmed in red but clear, searching the face of the one who was killing her.

"Your eyes are red when you drink blood," she heard Monica comment, but she seemed strained like she was out of breath.

Jules's eyes focused in on the face before her. It was Monica. She loved Monica. If she didn't stop, she would kill her. She had to stop. Jules closed her eyes and focused on removing her fangs from the source of the blood and peeling her fingers off her friend's arm one by one. It should have been harder. Never before had she found the will to stop before the body was drained of every ounce.

With cracked lips, she smiled at her friend. "Yes, they are."

Jules had just consumed a great portion of her blood, nearly killed her, and Monica was simply smiling back, not retreating in fear. She really was the most extraordinary human Jules had ever met.

Monica rocked on her knees, obviously beginning to feel the effects of the vampire venom that had just entered her body. Seth ran to her and caught her in his arms. He looked at Jules with panic in his eyes, but she smiled at him.

"She will be fine Seth. I promise," Jules said with a thankful sigh.

Seth nodded but still looked a bit uncertain.

Jules was about to explain that the effects would wear off soon when Luca touched her lightly on the cheek, pulling her focus to him.

"Hey there," he whispered.

When she looked up at him, she saw his eyes were full of tears.

"Hi," she replied. She smiled as a few of his tears dripped onto her face and he brushed them off.

"What happened?" she asked. He didn't respond but reached down to kiss her, his lips brushing her face with a feather's touch.

"Ouch." She sucked in a deep breath.

"I'm sorry," he retracted his lips from her face.

She saw werewolves all around them, some registering shock, others remorse. She noticed the reason the fighting was at an end. The body of a large wolf lay a little way off. "Carson?" she asked.

Luca nodded.

"How?"

"Demetria," he explained simply.

The battle was over. The people she loved were safe. They were all safe, she noted how very much alive they each were, to her great relief.

Feeling a little steadier, Jules sat. She reached up and kissed Luca. For a moment, the only being in existence was him. All she felt were his warm lips on hers and his strong arms holding her.

“I love you,” he said.

She smiled. No one would try to stop them now. They could be together. No one would ever try to keep them apart again.

“I love you, too.”

Jules felt light in Luca’s arms as he cradled her, lifting her off the sand. She leaned her head against his shoulder but winced when her cheek touched his skin.

“You okay?” he asked, seeming panicky.

“I’ll heal soon,” she assured him. “I’ll be alright.”

LUCA

Luca slowly set Jules on her feet. She swayed a little, so he tucked her protectively under his arm, steadying her.

“Luca,” Ben called as he approached them both. “Carson’s dead.”

Luca cocked his head wondering why that needed to be stated verbally. Everyone could see the proof of it.

“You know what that means, don’t you?” Ben seemed to be fishing for something.

Then reality hit him like a speeding truck. He was never officially removed as this pack’s Beta. Thus, according to werewolf protocol, he was Carson’s successor. “I’m the Alpha.”

As if on cue, Luca felt a great weight press against his shoulders. A sort of heaviness came with this responsibly. He didn’t want it. He’d never wanted to be Alpha to a pack other than his father’s. He’d only taken the Beta spot as a formality.

However, a plan began to formulate in his mind. He nodded to himself, scanned the faces of his new subjects, and then looked down at Jules.

“My first order as the Aboit pack’s Alpha is this; this pack will no longer give in to prejudice and hate. These last weeks have taught me that, like any other species on this earth, all vampires cannot be judged by the actions of a few. Protect Aboit always, but do not condemn the innocent. We will never again cast judgment on an individual without proof of wrongdoing, solely based on who or what they are.”

Luca paused to ensure that the pack members around him were offering compliance and nods of understanding. Only once he was satisfied did he continue, “and as my last act as Alpha, I name my successor, Kyle Cooper. Do you accept the responsibly of this power?” Luca asked his friend.

Kyle looked at Hayley and then Luca and Jules. He nodded.

“With this, I step down.”

All eyes turned to Kyle. The wolves wore a mix of expressions on their faces. It was evident some didn’t care about the change, but others looked downright frightened.

“Oh,” Luca added. “And I name Hayley Reynolds-Cooper as the rightful queen and his Beta.”

Luca heard several audible sighs of relief. He watched as Kyle turned toward his new subordinates, a look of mischief and glee on his face. “Sit,” Kyle commanded the few who were still in wolf form. He chuckled and jumped

up and down when they obeyed. "Lay down." The wolves did as he asked, and he turned to grin widely at Luca. Kyle would be fine.

Hayley rolled her eyes and started to yell. "Kyle Cooper you are an Alpha now, grow up and act like it!"

Luca chuckled. He'd left the pack in good hands.

KYLE

"Kyle, don't you think they've suffered enough?" Hayley asked, smacking him on the bare arm. It stung.

"Yes, jeez!" he said, dramatically rubbing the red mark that appeared. "All right, all right. I've been overruled. Take care of Carson's body, can't have it just lying there forever. Take it up to the burial grounds. He may have been an ass, but he was still a werewolf. Then you are dismissed. See you all at the next full moon."

A few of wolves started to move toward Carson's body.

"You really have to take this seriously. It's a big responsibility and..."

Kyle put a finger to Hayley's lips. "I know, honey, I know. I will," he assured her.

"There's one of yours over there by the rock cliff," Gabriel told Kyle.

"And another down by the water," Nick added with an ashamed grimace.

"You four, with me," he called to Adam and three others. "I'll be right back," Kyle said to Hayley. He placed a hand over hers, resting on her stomach, and kissed her on the hair. "The rest you, go home to your families.

Nurse your wounds and kiss your loved ones. This fight is over." The remaining wolves nodded their compliance and dispersed.

Kyle turned away from his wife, took a deep breath, and walked toward the fallen werewolves. He sighed deeply. He didn't want to know who had lost their lives in this fight, but it was his responsibly now. Luca had trusted him with it; he was not going to let anyone down.

A Few Weeks Later

GABRIEL

"I can't believe you're leaving so soon," Jules said to Gabriel as she taped a box of Gabriel's books closed.

"I know," Gabriel said. "But it's time." He squeezed Jules's shoulder gently.

"I can't believe you stayed in this sleepy town this long. Or this house," Nick said walking out of the kitchen holding yet another glass of the newly acquired blood. "I mean, it's so tiny."

"It's cozy," Eileen chided.

"Don't drink so much!" Jules ordered, walking over and taking the glass from her brother's hand. "The point is to drink enough to keep you from killing someone while making it last as long as possible."

"But I'm so thirsty," he whined, reaching for it but letting it and her disappear back to where he'd come from.

"You're very tiny to be so hugely bossy," he called after her.

Gabriel smiled at him. Nick had some habits that desperately needed breaking, but he was confident that with her twin by her side, Jules would be alright.

“And you’re a blood addict!” she shouted back, her voice somewhere between a tease and a chide.

“You know it!” Nick picked up an empty box and walked into the spare room.

“Oh, now you decide to help,” Eileen called, playfully.

“That’s me,” Nick called back. “Very helpful, never distracted.”

“Uh huh,” Eileen replied, her retort full of much-deserved skepticism.

Jules shook her head fervently and then went into the room after him.

Eileen walked over to where Gabriel was placing the last of his books in a box. She put her arms around him and rested her chin on his shoulder. His hands slid over hers, where they landed on his chest and abdomen.

“You really think I’m ready for this?” she asked. She was nervous about returning to the reservation. But what he’d seen from her since Fort Miles had convinced him that she could handle anything that the human world threw their way.

He turned to face her, his current packing project discarded.

“I think you are ready for anything.” Gabriel leaned toward her, intending to kiss her when the doorbell rang.

“Whoever that is, I’m gonna kill ‘em.” Eileen rolled her eyes and walked over to the front door.

"Try not to my love," he called after her and then turned back to his box.

"Jules, it's for you," Eileen called.

Jules walked out of the spare room

Gabriel's head shot around. Standing at his front door was Luca, covered from head to toe in mud.

"Did you and Kyle have a good run?" Jules asked but stayed a few feet back from the door frame.

"We did," Luca replied. "I'm headed home but thought I'd stop and see if you wanted to come and give me a kiss?"

"I don't think so." Jules shook her head again. "No."

"You sure?" he asked. "It's just mud." He took a step forward.

Eileen rushed toward him and pointed a finger at his muddy heart. "No way! The new owners already approved our price. Take one more step and I'll bite you."

Luca put his hands up and backed away in mock-surrender.

"She's not kidding," Gabriel said. "She will bite you." He tried to smile at Luca, but it came out a grimace. Still, in any kind of personal change, trying was always the first step to real and lasting growth, and he was trying.

HAYLEY

Hayley closed her eyes tightly. She wasn't quite ready to wake. However, when she rolled over, her nose touched something furry and a bit scratchy. Her eyes blinked open. She shoved the paw away from her face and

looked around. A wolf was sleeping on his back, legs sprawled, taking way more space than it needed and there were muddy paw prints all over her white sheets.

“Kyle!” she shouted, startling the very muddy dog.

He growled, flipped over, and in a flash of light, became his human self. He smiled unashamedly but bolted out of bed before she could smack him.

As he stood there looking at her, she felt an amount of love that she’d never thought possible. He was the father of the baby growing inside her, and he was going to be hers for the rest of her life. But she couldn’t let him know how happy she was at this exact moment.

KYLE

“Look what you’ve done!” Hayley said with exasperation. She motioned around the room, throwing up her hands in frustration like he was driving her crazy. Which, of course, he knew he was. Kyle followed her gesture. He and Luca had gone running early that morning. “Oops,” he said with a sheepish, not so innocent, smile.

“You dumbass!” she shouted, throwing herself back onto their bed and covering her face with her arms.

He slid up beside her and put his nose inches from her. “Hayley...” he called softly. “Hayley... come on honey.” He watched as she shifted her arms from her face. “There’s my pretty, impregnated wife?”

“Don’t ever call me that again.” She glared at him and shoved him away.

"And why not? You are, aren't you?" He playfully pinched her cheek.

She punched him on the arm.

"Ouch." He rubbed it, pouted with his lower lip, and whined audibly.

"I'm not falling for the face," she said and moved to stand.

He grabbed her, fell back, and she fell on top of him.

"Kyle!"

"Good morning," he brushed her hair behind her ear and she let him, "my love," he said and leaned up.

"Yeah, yeah," she said, meeting him in a kiss.

MONICA

Monica sighed, everything felt so normal, like the world didn't realize what they had all been through. Patrons at the Seaside Soda Shop just went about their lives; none-the-wiser to the supernatural fight that had ensued, or the deaths that had changed Aboit forever.

"Monica?" Seth snapped his fingers in her face. "Are you alright?"

"Oh, I think so..." She stopped when Seth took her hand. She stared at their intertwined fingers. "Are we officially back together?" she asked, a smile spreading across her face.

"Oh, I think so," he said in the same tone she had just used. He leaned over the small table and kissed her lips.

Monica giggled and kissed him enthusiastically. "I missed you."

“I missed you too.” he agreed with a wide smile.

Monica smiled back happily. Her life was good. Her future was back on track and she couldn’t wait for the adventures life had in store for her and the boy she loved.

LUCA

After a rejuvenating run with the pack, Luca walked up to Jules’s, now their, front door. Kyle’s first full Moon ceremony had been a complete success, but it was good to be home.

He glanced over his shoulder at the sky. The sun was just about to rise. The forecast had said it was going to be a bright and sunny day. Inside the house, all was quiet.

He passed the living room where their permanent house guest was snoring lightly. It was alright, Luca had grown to like Nick. He was very different from Jules, but he could see a bond between them that would never die.

Luca walked to the bedroom and saw what he expected to. Jules was sound asleep as well. Both vampires were obviously prepared to be inside with the curtains drawn for the next several hours.

He walked to Jules’s side and slid onto the bed next to her, trying not to wake her. He was unsuccessful. She shifted slightly, her head coming to rest on his chest.

“It went well?” she asked sleepily.

“Very,” he replied, stroking her hair.

“So, what now?” she asked.

“I don’t know,” he said honestly. So much had changed in the last few weeks. It felt like the

supernaturals' world in Aboit could never go back to something resembling normality.

"Well," Jules said, "Nick and I were talking last night, and we started reminiscing about England. Would you consider..."

"You want to leave Aboit?" he asked, cutting her off and propping himself up on his elbows to gaze down at her.

"Only if you do," she told him. He knew she'd be willing to compromise if he wanted to stay.

"But we're safe now. There's no threat. Why leave now?"

She reached up and brushed his lips with her fingers. "I said only if you wanted to. And I don't mean forever. But with everything that's happened," she paused and sighed, "I just feel like maybe I need a change."

He considered this. He could see that she really wanted to go. "Kyle does have the pack now, and Hayley, and the new baby on its way."

"Gabriel and Eileen are gone and Seth's graduating. So, he and Monica will be leaving for college soon. And if I'm being honest, Nick's getting restless. I don't know how long he'll be willing to hang around here." There was desperation in her expression. She didn't want to lose her twin, not yet anyway.

Silence stretched between them for a few moments as they studied each other.

Luca smiled, his decision made. With every end, there is also a beginning. His life with the Aboit pack might be

coming to a close, but his life with Jules, the love of it, was just beginning.

Luca watched Jules laying there, looking up at him with a gaze full of love. His eyes drifted to her mouth and he leaned in. She lifted her head ever so slightly to meet him in a kiss.

It was always as if time stopped. Nothing in the world mattered but her... him... them. They were two bodies with one heartbeat. Hers would never beat again, his beat fast enough for them both. They were completely and inescapably in love.

Epilogue

EIGHT MONTHS AFTER THAT

There was a meek knock on the ornate wooden door, but it pounded in his ears. Who dared disturb him without an invitation? He rose, pulled a velvet robe over his sleek body, and sat in one of his ridged armchairs. “Yes,” he said, giving the person on the other side permission to enter but not necessarily permission to leave.

“My Lord,” said a loyal werewolf slave named Jameson as he opened the door tentatively. Werewolves generally didn’t enter his place of rest, unless it was to clean his fireplace or make his bed.

“My Lord, she is back...”

“Who?” He could almost feel his dead heart beating in his chest once more

“The one you instructed us to watch for,” Jameson confirmed that it was what he desired.

“Are you sure?” he asked, rising to stand threateningly over the man before him.

“Yes, My Lord. I saw Lady Juliana myself,” he said trembling.

“Thank you, Jameson.” He placed his hands on either side of the wolf’s neck. “Does anyone else know this?”

“No... no, My Lord.” Jameson shook slightly.

“Good.” He kissed the man’s forehead and then twisted harshly. The body slumped to the ground, his neck broken.

“Damn,” he said aloud to himself as he walked over to his desk and slid open a drawer. He’d forgotten to ask Jameson if he had acquired the whiskey that he’d been sent out for. “Oh well,” he said, pulling out the gun he kept stashed there for moments like these. Aiming at the back of Jameson’s head, he squeezed the trigger. The wound smoked where the silver bullet penetrated his brain.

“Juliana Bristow. Come back home, have you?” He turned the image of the girl who got away over in his mind. Her soft Auburn hair and delicate frame had eluded him long enough. “You *will* be mine once more,” Hector declared.

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