



The Shadow Zone

Taking Julia

Isabella Jordan

Changeling Press

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Earth 2069.

War, disease, and global warming have caused a significant decline of the human race. The human world has become a Shadow Zone where people mysteriously disappear and infertility among those of age to have children has grown at an alarming rate.

The vampire race monitors the human world whose decline is forcing them to find other ways to obtain the blood they need. They also watch the werewolves who consider the vampires a threat.

The werewolves have sent Julia, a scout, out into the Shadow Zone in search of the key to immortality which both sides believe the humans have unearthed. Rick is a centuries-old vampire sent by the council of elders to intercept her before she can discover these secrets and take them back to her kind.

Rick's been watching the fierce female warrior for a long time. No female has been able to challenge or seduce him in ages. Yet Julia is one luscious little werewolf who definitely makes him feel alive and more than anything, he wants to make her his. No matter how he does it...

Chapter 1

Minneapolis, 2069

“What do you want, deadhead?”

It was bad enough that Julia Lennox had been captured and almost killed on this miserable fucking mission. She was tired and her body ached with each step as she made her way through the ruins on foot. Running into a vampire *now* when she was just about to make it home had the potential to really piss her off.

And he wasn't just any vampire. Oh, no. What fun would that be? It was the vampire known as Rick, rumored to be one of the oldest of his kind, who stood leaning against the ruined metal stalk that had once been a street light. Her pack's leader had pointed him out to her once when they were on a stake out. The legends about him were enough to curl the fur on any werewolf. Julia had heard he'd been a Spanish soldier hundreds of years ago during the time of King Philip II. For such an old guy, she had to admit he was one of the most captivating creatures she'd ever seen.

Still, she'd have to be pretty fucking careful with this one. With the dying rays of the evening sun gleaming off the brown silk of his hair and reflecting in his sinfully dark eyes, it would be so easy to forget the danger he posed. His mouth was sexy beyond words, his skin preternaturally fair. His long, hard body was encased in black leather and the pose he struck gave him the appearance of someone relaxed and enjoying the sunset.

That he could tolerate any level of sunlight spoke volumes about how indestructible he really was.

Did he think to put her at ease with his body language? Just act casual? *Right.*

Fatigue dropped from her like a heavy coat. Her situation had gone from tired and grumpy to *holy shit* in about sixty seconds. Rick posed a greater threat than any she'd faced so far in her life and she knew it.

He stood watching her with an unnatural stillness, his stare unblinking and intense. Facing this particular vampire was like nothing Julia had ever experienced before. On one hand, she felt like a small animal immobilized by its fear of a terrifying predator. On the other hand, she stood staring at him like a drooling idiot, mesmerized by the sheer beauty of him.

Fear had its uses and Rick was definitely someone to be afraid of. For all she knew he could read her thoughts. Many of his kind could read minds.

Julia had to get a grip, control her thoughts and her feelings.

Folding her arms across her chest, she decided to go for bored and impatient instead of *get me the hell out of here* which was how she really felt.

"How are you tonight? Julia, isn't it?" The way he said her name with his Spanish accent brushed her with unexpected warmth. The fact that he even knew her name took her off guard. From his point of view, she was pretty new to the game. She'd been a shadow chaser for three years now, but to someone like him that probably seemed like a matter of minutes.

"I'm trying to get home. Rick, isn't it?"

Grinning at her, he nodded. Damn, he had a nice smile. Perfect teeth. How did they keep their choppers in such good shape for thousands of years?

"Home from where?" Pulling away from what was left of the metal post, he gracefully moved over the jagged pieces of asphalt like he was weightless. He came to a stop in front of her, so tall she was forced to look up to meet his gaze. "What have you been up to, Julia?"

Arrogant asshole. Vampires were so self-important. Just because they were immortal they thought they knew more than anyone else. Well, living hundreds of years didn't mean you knew fucking everything. They also thought they had license to get into everyone else's business.

They were sorely mistaken if they thought they could push the werewolves, her kind, around. Very soon the vampires would find out they weren't alone in their immortality and Julia couldn't wait for that day. That dream was the reason she put her life on the line with each mission that sent her into the Shadow Zone where a mysterious group of humans had unearthed a dark pathway to unending life. The werewolves would obtain that secret one way or another. Then they'd be on even footing with the vampires and be able to truly defend themselves. It was only a matter of time.

"Don't worry about what I've been up to," she told him, trying to keep the tremor out of her voice. "Don't you have bigger things to be concerned about? Like what you guys are going to do for blood when the humans are done destroying themselves?"

"I'm *very* interested in what you've been up to." His fingers brushed her chin, but she yanked her head away from his touch. His gaze moved over her face.

What was up with this? Rick stood there gazing down at her like an attentive lover. Yet beneath that handsome façade, Julia could sense his determination. To do what, she had no idea. It couldn't be good.

"You have too much free time on your hands, don't you?" Julia marched around him, and he let her. She felt his gaze on her the entire time but she didn't look back. Maybe he'd just let her go.

"Take it easy," she threw back at him and kept on walking.

Damn it all anyway that her motorcycle had been destroyed. If she hadn't been on foot, maybe she wouldn't have run into the bloodsucker in the first place.

"Julia."

Shit. She should have known he wouldn't make it easy for her.

She came to a startled stop when she spotted him now sitting on the twisted, blackened metal of what had once been a car several feet ahead of her. Only a damned vampire could vanish and materialize like that. His elbows rested on his knees and he sat there watching her with all the ease of someone innocently waiting on his girlfriend.

Yet there was nothing harmless about him. His underlying power was unmistakable.

Julia came from a strong bloodline among her kind and she was a well-trained killer. She wasn't, however, stupid enough to think she could take this guy in hand-to-hand combat. Most vampires, yes. Not this one. Rick was too strong. If all the stories she'd heard about him were true, he could probably rip her to shreds with his mental powers and not even lay a hand on her.

If she was going to get out of this alive, she had to use her wits. "My business is not your business. I'm asking that you let me go about it."

"Your business *is* my business. I know what you're looking for out there."

The direct approach. She liked that. Only she wasn't naïve enough to play little vampire mind games. *Try to keep your mind clear.* Some of her kind were trained specifically to deal with vampires and could recognize their individual powers easily.

Her area of expertise, however, was humans. She knew only the basics with vampires.

"If you know what I'm doing, then we have nothing else to talk about, right?"

"We have much to talk about, Julia." Rick laced the fingers of his hands before him. "I want to know if you've found what you're looking for."

"What's it to you?"

"I just need to know. It's very important to both of us, isn't it?"

Well, yeah. The vampires had to know that a large number of humans had achieved immortality somehow. Weren't they supposed to know everything? Yet in their superiority, they probably just figured out that her kind knew about the human discovery too. They had to realize that the next step for the werewolves was discovering how to achieve immortality themselves.

With the human population diminishing at an alarming rate, the vampires would have to feed on *something* to sustain their kind. Werewolf blood was living blood and apparently many vampires already considered them a viable substitute. Werewolf, the other red cell. Random murders among her kind increased every day. All of the

victims were suspiciously drained of their blood. Just like predators in the wild, vampires preyed on the most vulnerable -- the elderly, women. It had everyone in her pack on red alert.

The only chance the werewolves had to survive now was to become immortal as the vampires were. Their current numbers were nowhere near what the human population had been twenty years ago. The vampires could deplete the werewolves in a single decade unless they took action and stopped them.

Besides, the humans had discovered a better way to live forever than vampirism and the whole dead deal. A way that simply stopped one from getting ill or growing older. A living solution.

"What do you want?" Julia was blunt. "You want me for a snack? You want me to tell you what I know? Either way I'm fucked, huh?"

The amusement faded from his expression as he sat watching her. "You're not fucked, Julia. You'd never believe me if I told you that I just wanted to help you, now would you?"

"Fuck no." Was he kidding? Help her to what? Find her jugular vein?

"I do want to help you." He was so slick in keeping his voice low and calm. "All I'm asking you to do is tell me if you found what you were looking for."

"And why would I do that?" He'd just have to kill her. She wouldn't betray her mission by telling him anything. Crap, this could be bad.

"So I can help you."

Oh, no. He couldn't just toss that casual smile at her and expect her to bend to his will. No way. Amazing the effect that smile had on her though... "If you know my name, you know what I am."

Rick nodded.

"And if you know what I am, you know there's no way in hell I can tell you what I'm up to. So do what you've got to do." She couldn't stop him after all.

Like a vision from a nightmare, only the guy was hot, he rose from the car and approached slowly, determinedly. Yes, she could have run but she wouldn't have

escaped. Better to show a little courage and face her fate. Werewolves were made of tougher stuff than the vampires gave them credit for.

“I was afraid you wouldn’t cooperate.”

Sucking in her breath at the calm way he said that, Julia steeled herself for whatever was coming.

Rick waved his hand directly in front of her eyes once he reached her and Julia’s world went black.

Chapter 2

Julia dreamed and somewhere in her psyche, she realized that it was actually a memory that filled her mind's eye.

She was back in the restaurant where she'd eaten the first night she'd entered the Shadow Zone on her latest mission. It was all there, the crush of people in their layers of clothing, crowded at small ruined tables eating from large bowls of watery soup. Julia had been barely able to eat it herself. Not only was the soup that terrible, but the stench of cheap cigarettes and body odor invaded her senses in a way that wouldn't permit her to push it to the background. Hard to eat when you felt sick to your stomach.

What had happened to human society was mind boggling to her kind. The wealthy had become richer while the rest, from middle class on, fell into poverty and despair. Around the world they killed each other in great wars over oil and religion. Then disease had spread from continent to continent, leaving millions dead.

Her kind had hidden in the mountains out west and other secluded places, trying to avoid the flu pandemic that hit twenty years ago. Julia had been around ten years old and remembered it quite well. They later learned that werewolves were naturally immune. Go figure.

And after all of that, something else emerged, humanity's greatest tribulation. A nameless menace came into power. A large group of the wealthy elite took over, dismantling the democracy in America and claiming leadership. Those who had the means to oppose the elitists mysteriously disappeared, along with thousands of others from the less fortunate population.

The new core of human leadership, from what the werewolves were able to learn, also commanded authority in most of the other nations around the world and

their ranks were closed. No one knew very much about them and those who tried to find out vanished, never to be seen again.

The Shadow Zone.

Even her kind seemed no match for them. How the vampires fared against them, she had no idea.

A couple of shadow chasers, however, had lived long enough to provide evidence that what the werewolves so desperately wanted, a way to achieve an immortal life as the vampires had, actually existed. Within those dark cities was the answer they sought. It gave them hope and the courage to keep trying, to keep digging.

Julia could kick ass, and it made her a serious candidate for the missions into the Shadow Zone. Or so she thought until tonight.

Then *he* had walked up to her table, joining her without invitation. That was how it all started that night.

Julia pulled the covers more tightly about herself as the dream continued.

She'd never known this human's name. He was probably a member of one of the many rebel tribes who fought against the dark ones in control. In her dream he was faceless, his voice deep and familiar. He had a peculiar way of pronouncing certain words.

Ah, but she knew who he was. She'd encountered him before in her excursions into the dark cities. Hell, he'd saved her ass a couple of times. Somehow he always managed to disappear without a trace just after he helped her. She'd never gotten an opportunity to talk to him or to find out anything about him.

That he'd sought her out and she *wasn't* in peril was something. Now maybe she could find out what his deal was.

"Hello." She loved the deep timbre of his voice.

Julia tipped her head to him. "What brings you here?" Julia teased him. "I'm perfectly safe for once."

He grinned. She couldn't see his face at all in her mind -- damn, that was strange -- but she knew he was smiling. "I've been looking for you."

He was looking for her? That was interesting. Well, she was anxious to let this play out and find out why. Did he know she was a werewolf? Or did he think she was another like him, a human outlaw looking for answers?

What did he want from her?

"Well, you're pretty good. You found me, didn't you?"

"You're pretty easy to spot with that red hair."

Julia smiled. She'd always considered her bright red locks to be a nuisance in her line of work because she had to avoid things that drew attention to her. Just now, however, she felt pretty good about them.

Remembering the black cap she wore, she ran a hand over the back of her neck. Sure enough one long curl had escaped. *Forget your hair. Talk to him.* "Now why were you looking for me?"

"To tell you to leave."

Julia hadn't seen that one coming. "Excuse me?"

"You heard me. Get out of here now and back to where you came from."

"And you became the boss of me... when?"

She barely heard his deep sigh over the din of the crowd around them. "I never claimed to have authority over you. I'm trying to help you. You have to leave. *Now.*"

Dropping her spoon into the lousy, half-eaten bowl of soup, she leaned forward to stare at him. "Why?"

"They're looking for you." She had a bad feeling "they" meant the ones who ruled the dark cities.

"For me?" He nodded and Julia sensed that he really believed what he told her. Yet there were some things he didn't know about her. "Maybe they are." She kept her voice low and calm. "And I thank you for your concern, but I can handle myself. I'm not leaving this time until I have what I came for."

"You can handle yourself?"

Oh, she didn't miss the amusement in his tone. Yeah, she probably had that coming, considering he'd helped her how many times? "In my defense, the time you

helped me at the bridge, my foot was caught. That's one of those freaky things you don't plan on having happen."

He almost managed to suppress his smirk. "I understand."

She just bet he did. Condescending bastard. "And the time I ran across that damned vampire --"

"You don't like vampires?"

"Do you?"

His laughter was a deep rumble in his chest. "As engaging as this conversation is, Julia, we have to get you out of here now. I'll accompany you until we reach the edge of the city."

He wasn't accompanying her any damned place. "I'm not going anywhere."

"Julia, I don't want to force the issue."

Oh, did he just warn her? "You can't force me to do anything," Julia informed him. "And how the hell do you know my name? It's not like we've been formally introduced."

She watched the muscles in his body bunch and tense. Yet she didn't smell even a hint of fear on him. Stupid man. He should be afraid of her.

Nah, he was gearing up for a fight. And she'd give him that.

"Let's take it outside." His tone was low and warning.

The thrill of busting this arrogant guy's ass nearly had her salivating. "Come on."

Slowly he rose from the table. For a human he was impressive. Why the hell didn't her dream reveal his face? It was like the image of his face was on the edge of her mind, just beyond her grasp. She knew he wasn't unattractive. Otherwise anxious energy wouldn't be surging through her veins like lightning.

It wasn't just the challenge he threw down. Perhaps it was the way he'd always managed to show up when she needed someone and then walked away. He intrigued her. That was it. Had to be.

Curling onto her side, Julia kicked the covers off now. Too hot. The vision in her mind's eye continued.

It was a hell of a lot more than intrigue she felt when she faced him in the dark alleyway outside. Her nerve endings were buzzing as he took a step closer. His back was to the only dim light in the alley and now he was enshrouded by the shadows. His shoulders were wide and the long coat he wore made him seem all the more intimidating. And strangely, she was a little intimidated. Of a human? How the fuck could that be?

"I'm not leaving," Julia started.

"I could just leave you here to face them."

Did he think that scared her? "I think you should."

"You don't know what you're getting into." He took another step toward her and her heart started hammering in her chest. Not in fear, but in excitement. Did she want to fight the dude? Did the threat he might pose excite her on other levels?

Damn, it's been too long since you've been laid.

"I don't know what I'm getting into with them?" Julia laughed, meaning to sound confident. Somehow it didn't come across that way even to her own ears. "I'll take my chances."

"I meant, you don't know what you're getting into with me." When he moved even closer, heat began to build within her as adrenaline pushed through her veins to ready her for a possible battle. Okay, now he'd made his intentions clear.

"So I'm not really in danger from the zone?" She didn't try to mask her sarcasm, but she kept it light.

"You are. But I have to wonder if you're in more danger from them... or me."

Just like that she was crushed up against him, his firm mouth coming down hard over hers. His grip was amazingly strong and his heated kiss instantly tantalized her. He was masterful, dominant.

In the seconds Julia had to retaliate and beat the shit out of him, two things became clear. She didn't want to end that kiss and she wasn't sure she could beat the

shit out of him. The arms wrapped around her felt like bands of iron and the muscled wall of chest she tried half-heartedly to push against felt like a solid brick wall. For a human, he was completely ripped.

The throbbing, steel length of his cock burned into her tummy as she pressed against him. Julia knew what was happening here and only one small corner of her mind seemed willing to stop it.

He was such a good kisser. His lips stroked hers, coaxed them to part for him. When she opened to him, he angled his head and his tongue swept into her mouth with masterful exploration. Julia couldn't breathe, could barely stand up. All she could do was respond as she wrapped her arms around his waist, fighting to get closer to him for support.

Ah, hell, it was just as much the terrible craving that had sprung to life in her body as it was how good the guy could kiss. Lust had her rubbing herself all over him like a bitch in heat.

Without warning, he pushed her back and her heart lurched thinking she'd fall on her ass. If he was just messing with her...

No, she hit something solid and unyielding and she hit hard. The breath was nearly knocked from her lungs when he dove for her again, his mouth closing over hers before she had a chance to gather her wits about her.

She finally managed to pull her mouth free of his intoxicating kiss. It took a moment for her to catch her breath enough to speak. Flashes of pain lit up her back and shoulders. "Why did you do that?" Her fingers verified the hard brick wall at her back.

"Do what?"

"Knock the hell out of me."

For some reason she could make out his dark eyes in the dim night. Not anything else about his face, just his eyes. And they were lit up with desire. "No one can see us from the street now."

Looking around, she found they were in a dark little corner of the alley. "That hurt," she wanted him to know.

“I’m sorry. I’ll be more careful.”

If Julia hadn’t been so far out of her element, she would have questioned why a human would have to be careful with her ass. She was trapped between him and the wall and neither of them had very much give. If he wasn’t frantically tearing at the fastenings of her pants so his hand could slide in, maybe she would have gone back to the ass-kicking idea.

God, but his fingers felt so good sliding through the wet folds of her pussy. So good that she slid her hand between her thighs in the bed where she lay, praying that she didn’t wake up and ruin this part of the dream.

His finger traced the tight hole of her entrance, finding the hot juices already flowing from it.

“You’re so full of warmth, Julia.” His lips burned into her hair by her temple, searing a path down her cheek to the sensitive hollow just below her ear. Oh, he’d found her favorite spot. When his tongue teased the greedy flesh there, she squirmed in his grasp from the sheer pleasure of his touch.

It had been so long since she’d had a lover. Her missions into the human world had been too intriguing, kept her too busy.

Until now. He took her frantic squirming as an invitation to explore her pussy further. First one of his fingers slid inside her, and then slowly another one followed it. Tingles of pure ecstasy ran up her spine as he found a secret place inside her cunt that produced the sharpest pleasure she’d ever experienced. Slowly he stroked and tormented that newly discovered spot until she was grasping at the rough leather of his long coat, the craggy surface of the wall behind her. Desperate, raging hunger, unlike anything she’d every known, clawed at her and had her gasping in her need for relief. Even with the cold night around them, perspiration began to build between her breasts and across her brow.

Julia moved on his hand, lifting herself on tiptoes before lowering herself onto those amazingly long fingers. The walls of her pussy gripped him with each movement, greedily wanting more.

“I want you now.” His voice was harsh. “But I shouldn’t...”

Oh, he wouldn’t stop now. Not when she was in the sorriest state of her entire life. “If you don’t,” Julia panted as heavily as he did, “I really will kick your ass.”

His chuckle was a deep rumble in the night. Julia cried out as his fingers slid from her core and rose to smear her lips with her juices. She tasted her own excitement on his fingers as he bent to quickly shove down her pants and pull them free of her body. How he got them over her boots she had no idea and given the fact that she was a trembling mass of nerves, she really didn’t give a shit.

The cold night air that met her legs and the heated flesh of her cunt brought another wave of powerful sensation as he worked at his own clothing. Julia looked down to his cock, standing out from his body, and even in the dim light around them, she could see that it throbbed in need. The thick head gleamed with moisture in a narrow beam of light from the street and Julia reached down to part the lips of her pussy for him.

His large hands clamped down on her ass before he easily hauled her up against his abdomen, positioning her over his straining cock with her knees sliding beneath his coat. The flesh of his hips was hard and cool against her inner thighs but the mushroom-shaped head that pressed into the wet folds of her cunt was pure heat. He was lodged at the entrance of her weeping pussy and Julia pushed her hips at him, clawing at his shoulders to pull him closer.

Slowly his hips flexed and his cock began to stretch her. Julia let her head fall back, wanting the release this stranger offered. She gasped, nearly incoherent from anxious pleasure as he slowly began to work himself inside her body. She’d thought he was big, but now she realized just how true that was. For a human his size was pretty damned impressive. He overfilled her, retreating and thrusting, stretching her as her breathy cries turned into screams that she muffled against his unyielding shoulder. Each stroke pushed him deeper, pleasure and pain, fueling the incredible craving that gained strength inside her.

She would have called out his name but she didn't know it. "Who are you?" she managed to ask between gasping breaths. "Tell me."

"I'm no one."

Every inch of his heavily veined cock invaded her pussy now. Her fists curled and her ankles locked at the small of his back. Julia tried desperately to increase his speed, the power of his thrusts, but his every movement was pure control.

"Who are you?" There was real pleading in her voice now and it surprised her. She wasn't used to being the submissive one. Usually she had at least some small measure of control.

Not this time. Not with this man.

Her mysterious lover didn't answer, just continued to smash her sanity by retreating again and surging inside of her hard and deep. Every portion of her pussy was filled with him. A heavy sheen of sweat glittered on his brow and dampened the hair at the nape of his neck where her fingers clutched.

"Whoever you are, fuck me. Fuck me hard," she commanded.

His grip on her was tight and his hips began to move with a powerful flex as he began to fuck her, strong strokes that stretched and burned the delicate tissue of her cunt. One of his hands slid up into her hair, creating exciting tingles of sensation as she tightened her arms around his neck and hung on for dear life.

"You want me to fuck you." His voice was deep and rough in her ear. "Do you have any idea what you're really asking for?"

Well, yeah. What the hell kind of question was that? "You think you can take me?"

"Aren't I now?" He thrust into her harder still. The blend of pain and pleasure grew, creating a force that had tension building in her womb, her clit, and her aching pussy. Julia began to wail, the inner walls of her cunt tightening more and more. The friction of his powerful strokes sent a blinding orgasm ripping through her.

Julia screamed, shuddering violently in his arms. Tremors of release echoed through her body as she felt him tense within her. He muttered rough words she

couldn't understand as wild, fiery blasts of his semen began to fill the quivering depths of her pussy.

All the energy drained from her body and she was grateful that he held her up even though she felt much of the tension in his body fading.

"Now tell me --" Julia didn't get a chance to finish her question. A rustling behind them put them both into action, him struggling with his pants and her scrambling in the dark to find hers.

You're a dumbass, Julia! She was out in the street fucking a stranger while someone snuck up on them. Two of them to be exact, springing out of the darkness. Her companion began to battle with them while she pulled her pants from a puddle of water on the ground and yanked them on with shaking hands.

The sounds of combat, grunts and yells, rang out through the street. Clothing back in place now, Julia dashed out into the light ready to help her lover but someone else grabbed her from behind.

She tried to call out, but whoever had her gripped her throat in a way meant to cut off her breath. Her fingers clutched at the powerful black-gloved hand as she fought to breathe. There was a tinge of blood on her hands...

Chapter 3

Rick sat in the dark before the computer screen, watching Julia writhe via the camera he'd hidden in the room where she slept. He knew what she was dreaming about as her back arched and her hands slid over and between her thighs. He could catch fleeting images in her mind even from a distance. He'd dressed Julia in only his dark shirt since her uniform had been tattered and filthy. His garment rode up nicely to reveal the soft, warm flesh he coveted. It was all he could do not to break down the door to that room and fuck her into oblivion.

Now that he'd had a taste of her, being inside her was all he thought about. The thought of how she felt in his arms, how she smelled, and what it was like to be sheathed by her body, consumed him. How long had it been since a woman -- vampire, werewolf, or human -- had been able to conquer his brain like fine wine and hold him enthralled until he could do nothing but crave more?

Aye Dios Mios. What a fucking situation.

She shouldn't even be here in his home driving him insane. She should be on her way back to her own kind. Why hadn't he allowed her to return? What did he care what happened once she reached her pack? Julia wasn't his kind. She was a werewolf.

Julia's fingers worked in the folds of her pussy now and his cock turned to stone beneath the desk as he watched through the eye of the camera. She moaned and that small sound had his fingers gripping the arms of the chair so tightly he thought the wood would give way.

What did he care about her fate? He'd done his job. The elders had sent him out into the city to stop her from learning the secret her kind sought and he'd managed that. Badly, but he'd managed.

The vampires knew what the werewolves were after out there. A group of the humans had unearthed a dark secret that prolonged life and the werewolves mistakenly believed it was immortality. They wanted it thinking they needed it to defend themselves against the vampires.

Wrong. They were in infinitely more danger from the cult that ruled the human world now than they ever were from the vampires.

The cult's particular method of prolonging life was similar to vampirism but in some ways more terrifying. The end result of both was unnaturally prolonged life for the perpetrators and an unending string of victims in the process. Only with his kind, there was one vampire, one victim typically. In the cult's rituals, dozens of cult members could reap the benefits of the victim at one time, prolonging their life as long as they attended the ritual once per full moon.

When vampires took a victim, they could drain them to the point of death, or they could leave them alive. They could even turn them, though the elders discouraged that these days.

The victims of the cult were another matter altogether. They were never killed during the rituals but, in Rick's opinion, they suffered a fate worse than death. They were robbed of their free will. They became drones, permanent slaves to the will of the cult for the rest of their lives. That was the real source of the evil group's power.

The vampires had even taken a couple of these subjects, studied them. It hadn't taken long to discover that there was no hope of restoring them to their former lives. When Rick fed, he often chose them for his victims and they were reasonably easy to identify. The way he saw it, he was doing them a favor.

Rick had mentioned one of his great concerns in all of this to the elders, though he couldn't help but think it had fallen on deaf ears since no one seemed to take it seriously. What happened when the humans decided to actively make victims of the werewolves? And he fully believed they could do it. If the cult took control of the werewolves as they had the human race, it could have devastating effects on the vampires. Many of the werewolves were more than a match for the younger vampires

and specifically trained to combat them. And once the cult figured out the vampires couldn't fall victim to their control -- Rick knew for a fact they'd tried -- their only natural course of action would be to eliminate his kind. Or try.

Julia had been intended as the victim for one of their rituals and they got to her before he could get her out of there. That was his fault, damn it. After they were caught in the alley with their pants literally down, it had taken him days to get her out of there alive, without breaking the elders' mandate that he not reveal himself as a vampire. The elders wanted to stay completely removed from the human conflict as long as they possibly could.

Easy for their asses to say. He'd almost lost her.

The humans had taken Julia, run their experiments. Their next ritual had been coming up quickly so he'd worked fast and freed her. He'd kept her hidden in the dark city for days until her body could somewhat heal from what they'd done. And he'd thought he wiped her mind clean of every memory of her captivity and the time leading up to it. Even making love with him.

That was hard. At this very moment, she dreamed of having sex with him in the dark alley the night the humans captured her. Only she thought it was some human man she'd fucked. Damn it all, he wanted her to know it was him who'd made love to her. He wanted her to know *his* face. Instead, he'd always plied her with a mental trick when he encountered her in the night, deceiving her mind into believing he was just a human with a different appearance. He did it because the elders wanted him to keep his identity as a vampire secret.

Ah, but he knew better. He knew Julia wouldn't have accepted him if she knew what he was. That was the biggest reason for his deception. She'd tempted him with her fiery hair, lush body, and razor sharp tongue. She was brave and intelligent. She was the first damned creature that had intrigued him in centuries. He'd had no choice but to seduce her, experience her just one time.

And he'd gotten what he wanted from her, right? He'd had her. Curiosity satisfied. Challenge met.

Yet as he watched her turning onto her side in the large bed, he realized with startling clarity his fascination with her was far from over. He did care what happened to her and it had been a long time since he'd cared about anything at all. Maybe it was because she amused him with her quick mind. Maybe he admired her bravery. She really was a courageous young beast who was pretty decent in combat.

Letting the humans have her had never been an option. He could have. As long as she never learned the secrets of the cult, and she wouldn't have, the elders would have been happy.

Rick wouldn't have been happy. He knew it wasn't just the fear of the humans dominating the werewolf world that motivated him either. No, there was more to it than that. The world was a better place for him with Julia in it. He couldn't have lived with himself if he'd allowed them to take her. And eternity was a long time to carry guilt.

So now he'd saved her. He'd allowed her some time to heal, tried to erase what she remembered in the hopes of sending her back to her own kind with the knowledge that she'd be safe. Her body was mostly healed. That wasn't a problem.

The fact that her mind was strong and memories were coming back through her dreams despite all of his powers and efforts to block it *was* a problem. Once the werewolves figured out that the humans had held her hostage, had experimented on her, they would likely kill her.

Now he had to decide what exactly to do with her. He couldn't send her back to her kind until he could be certain she was safe. His kind wouldn't take to the idea of her being with him at all. Not that he really gave a fuck what they thought.

And worst of all, she'd hate him the minute she realized he was her mysterious lover *and* a vampire.

It was a fine fucking mess.

Well, he couldn't confront her in the sorry state he was in now. Leaning back in the chair behind his desk, Rick unfastened his jeans and pulled his engorged cock free. His fingers tightened on the hardened flesh and he winced.

Rick gazed down at the ruddy stalk of his flesh, the swollen crest as it swelled and pulsed in his grip. He groaned at the thought of how it had felt to be buried in the tight little channel of Julia's cunt. He wanted to be there again.

And he wanted more. He imagined those full lips wrapped around him, sucking him deep. Just as easily, he could imagine being buried in the tight ring of her ass, making her scream in pleasure for him again and again. The thought of taking her ass had pre-come spilling from his dick and easing the way for his fingers as they stroked over his cock. He would grab a fistful of that gorgeous red hair and pull her head back so he could see her face when he pounded her ass, stroke after stroke.

Rick's jaw locked, his fingers tightening on the swollen head as he watched her on the computer screen. Her fingers were sliding in and out of the passage he wanted to fill with his cock. The lips he wanted to feel closed around him were open as she approached orgasm.

Somehow, despite the fact that the elders would give him shit for keeping her and the fact that she hated vampires, he was going to have her again. He was going to fill her, fuck her until she begged for mercy.

Until she begged for more.

Rick erupted. His moan echoed through the room as he thought of her accepting him, screaming his name in passion. Streams of semen spattered onto his hand and shirt as his body jerked in release.

It was a temporary reprieve only. He just knew that his hunger for her would resurface easily the moment he confronted her next. It had been a long time since a woman had such a hold on him and right or wrong, he would claim her again.

And next time, she would know exactly *who* was claiming her.

Chapter 4

Julia scowled at Rick when he walked into the room. It didn't improve her mood that the bastard looked so damned good with his shirt opened enough to reveal the muscular contours of his chest and his hair hanging in shining waves around the handsome features of his face. His dark eyes glittered when they locked with hers.

"Did you get some rest?" he asked quietly.

"Will my blood taste better if I did?"

He chuckled lightly at that. Yeah, he could laugh. Asshole. He wasn't chained to a fucking chair wearing only a shirt. No, that would be her and she wasn't happy. His equally assholeish deadhead helpers had wakened her from much needed sleep, and fairly dragged her into what appeared to be a very old-fashioned dining room. They'd just left her here like a bloody sacrifice to a barbarian god.

Yeah, well, she wasn't going down easy.

"How do you feel, Julia?"

"Why the fuck do you care?" Furiously she yanked at the arm in the shiny manacle that had been used to chain her to possibly the heaviest chair she'd ever encountered. "Just do what you're going to do and get it over with, will you?"

"I would like to," he continued in that irritatingly calm voice. "But there are some things we need to talk about first."

Julia rolled her eyes at him even though her heart was thundering in her chest at the thought of her imminent fate. It would be oh so easy for him to kill her. "Oh, so you like to talk to your victims first. I see."

"You're not my victim, Julia."

Right. "So why am I here?"

His expression lost every hint of amusement as he took a seat in the chair next to her. "That's why we must talk."

"Talk." Jesus, he wasn't making any sense. And if he *did* intend to kill her, stopping for a conversation beforehand seemed a little on the cruel side. "Sure. We'll talk."

"Julia, first you must understand something." His voice lowered, his Spanish accent thickening. "I'm trying to keep you from harm. It's not my intent to feed on you or kill you."

Julia released the breath she hadn't realized she'd been holding. On some level, she'd probably never been so afraid in her entire life. Training and experience taught her to bury fear so it wouldn't gain control of her.

Still, she could use that fear, and the fact that someone could make her experience it, to piss herself off. Anger was the only thing keeping her going in the face of the beautiful Spanish monster next to her.

Keep talking. Keep it together. "Why would you try to help a werewolf?"

"Because you aren't my enemy."

"Are you being serious? Or is that a shot? Because you're like hundreds of years old and I'm no match for you."

No mocking smile, no amusement. His expression was a study of grim composure. "I'm quite serious, Julia."

"Then you're full of shit if you expect me to believe that. More and more you guys are picking us off now that the humans have all but done themselves in. We've lost a couple from my own pack, Rick. They were just left on the ground sucked dry with two little holes in each of their necks. It was kind of telling."

"Julia, obviously I can't speak for all of my kind. All I can say is that *you* aren't my enemy. And I'm trying to save your life."

"Okay," she'd try this again, "why should I believe you?"

Some emotion crossed his features but was gone in an instant. "You have no reason to believe me. I accept that."

The door slowly opened to reveal a small, dark-haired man dressed like a butler from an old black and white movie and carrying an enormous tray of food. Rick motioned the man in.

Julia's stomach rumbled loudly as the man approached the enormous table and placed the tray before her. If she hadn't been starving, she might have made some smartass remark about them choosing all of her favorites. There was a very bloody steak in the center of the tray, surrounded by smaller portions of ham, venison, and pork cuts. There was a small basket of bread and petite bowls of steamed vegetables at the edge of the tray, a generous glass of blood red wine, and ice water to finish it off.

She wasn't about to complain as she snatched up the fork and knife and began carving up the thick steak. She never even noticed the servant make his exit. Such meat portions were hard to get where she came from and impossible in most of the human world. Now that their population was so depleted, along with their resources, their economy tanked.

The heavy chain hanging from her left wrist jangled as she cut. How pathetic was that? At least they hadn't chained her dominant hand.

"Julia, do you remember what I said to you when we met earlier this evening?"

Julia nodded, chewing the juicy meat as fast as she could without choking to assuage her incredible hunger. "You mean when you asked me to tell you if I found what I was looking for in the zone?" Julia snuck in another bite of the steak. "And you telling me you knew what I was looking for?"

Rick nodded.

"I'm still not talking," she informed him.

"I must insist that you do."

The grim tone of his voice had her eating faster. *Might as well die with a full stomach.* "Kill me."

"You're a brave soldier, Julia." Rick leaned just a little closer. The scent of him was as appealing as the food she ate. "I know you'd be willing to give your life for your kind. I'm asking if you're willing to help your kind."

"If I talk to you, it will help all werewolves everywhere? Nice try." Julia took a generous gulp of wine and enjoyed the way it burned her stomach. She'd finished a large portion of the enormous steak in record time.

Rick watched her with unwavering patience. "Julia, we both know the humans have found a way to prolong life. I don't blame your kind for wanting to know how they are doing it."

"So the council of Draculas sent you here to tell me that?"

He smirked at her sarcasm. "They wouldn't approve of my interaction with you."

Julia wasn't sure she liked the subtle emphasis he placed on the word *interaction*. "I'm supposed to trust you because you told me that?"

"I'm trying to establish trust." His dark gaze met and captured hers. The set of his beautiful features was steely determination. "The vampires aren't out to destroy the werewolves, Julia. I'm sure we have a few rogues who have fed on yours, but they act against the will of our elders. And for that matter, we've had a few mysterious deaths in our camp. The mauling of the bodies is -- what did you call it? Telling?"

Julia dropped the cutlery onto the fine plate before her with a noisy clank and dabbed at her mouth with the napkin, though she couldn't say why she should have bothered since they'd chained her like the animal they considered her to be. She pondered what he'd just said. *Don't fall for it. He's trying to trick you. That's all.*

"How will the vampires survive then?" She didn't expect him to answer but that didn't stop her. "You don't want to destroy us. The humans have taken care of themselves in that regard. How do you guys plan on continuing?"

Rick studied her for a long moment. She couldn't help but feel that he was trying to decide how to answer her question. "By cloning living blood."

Well, by God, he *did* just answer.

"You're cloning humans for the blood?"

Rick shook his head. "Just the blood."

"Excuse me? You guys are cloning? After all the issues and moral flap we had about ten years ago?"

"That was the humans and it means little to us," he explained. "How can cloning be a moral issue to us when we've killed millions of times, century after century, for our survival?"

"Point."

"Like you, we just want to be self-sufficient. Surely we agree the human world is no longer stable enough to depend on."

Julia nodded. She couldn't argue that point. "So this doesn't make any sense," Julia pointed out. "You want to save me and my kind. Yet I'm chained to a chair."

"There's a reason for that."

"Get to it. Who are you trying to save me from exactly?"

"The werewolves."

Her own kind? "What?"

"If I allow you to return to your own kind, there's a strong chance they will kill you."

Okay, someone was a couple of pints short of a blood bank. It was a struggle to hide her amusement at that ridiculous notion. "Why would my own kind try to kill me, Rick?"

"Because the humans captured you on your last mission."

The humans had never captured her ass! What the fuck was wrong with him? "I think you've got the wrong wolf."

The intensity in his gaze never wavered. Hell, he didn't even blink. "No, I don't."

"And you're so certain because...?"

"I'm the one who got you out of the zone."

Julia shook her head at him in disbelief. "Only one problem there. I should remember something about that, right?"

"I wish you didn't remember, Julia. It wasn't for lack of trying."

Slowly he reached for her hand and she snatched hers away, really uncomfortable now. "What's that supposed to mean, Rick?"

"It means you have an incredibly strong mind. I tried to clear it of all the things that happened in your captivity but I know things are coming back. I've seen the images in your mind."

Fuck. He *could* read minds.

"Yes, I can," he answered.

Julia glared at him. "Don't do that!"

If she believed what he was saying, he could erase her memories like a computer file or something. She'd heard of vampires with that capability. Still, couldn't he be telling her that to manipulate her? To fool her?

"Julia, you have to listen to me. If you return to the werewolves and they figure out what the humans did to you, that they even captured you, they will kill you."

She knew he was playing a mind game with her now. "Bullshit! That is complete bullshit and you know it."

"Is it?" His dark eyes narrowed on her face. "Think this through, Julia. Immortality is an unnatural state. You can't prolong your life until the end of time without consequences because it goes against what nature intended. What I am? I'm diseased. My disease requires me to feed off the living, to kill. The method of the humans is a disease also. They have victims just like we do. Only all of their victims survive, Julia. They live on as wretched souls without a will of their own, controlled by the cult of the humans."

Julia swallowed hard, backing into her chair as he leaned even closer and continued, "You're like me, a soldier. The soldier rarely knows, nor needs to know, what the general does. Don't you think the werewolves in charge know more about the human rituals than they've told you? Do you think they'd risk letting you back into their ranks if there's even the remotest possibility that the humans control you now?"

Her mind was spinning and her heart slammed with fear. Could there be any truth to his words? Or was he really trying to put a major mind fuck on her?

She remembered the mission. She'd snuck into the zone, had a relatively easy time doing it except for crashing her motorcycle. Then she'd gone to the restaurant to eat and monitor things, get a feel for where to begin.

She sure as hell remembered the guy she hooked up with in the alley. She'd dreamed of it just a little while ago and...

Then she remembered the ones who'd caught them off guard in that alley. Her lover had fought them off. Someone had grabbed her from behind...

Frantically, her mind scrambled for any memory after that. Anything that had taken place before she'd encountered Rick on her way home.

Fear pushed its way to the surface like a cornered animal. There was nothing. No scrap of a memory about what happened between the alley and running into him.

"You don't remember much, do you?" he asked quietly.

Julia stared at him helplessly as a knock at the door announced the dark-haired servant had returned. He spoke to Rick in Spanish and she had no idea what they were saying. In seconds the servant had once again vanished and Rick rose from his chair, his expression quickly becoming guarded.

"We'll have to continue our discussion later," he told her. "I think you have enough to consider for the moment. Please enjoy the rest of your meal."

Julia watched him leave the room, thinking she should feel relieved, but managing to feel anxious about his exit instead. What was that all about?

She wasn't safe with Rick. She had to remember that. His tale was probably all some elaborate manipulation to learn about the plans of her kind.

Well, she wasn't going to fall for it.

Taking a deep, calming breath, she glanced down at the manacle around her wrist and considered how she might free herself from it. At the moment, her best chance of survival was to get the hell out of there.

Chapter 5

“What part of this assignment didn’t you understand, Rick?”

Rick hated Cutting with every fiber of his being. Just having the man standing in his home was enough to evoke his anger.

How the English son of a bitch had made it into the ranks of the elders was beyond him and always would be. He was only two hundred years old, barely reached Rick’s shoulder, and talked like he was chewing his face. He was created when he was past his prime, and he had the look of an old man who was too tired to groom himself. His fingernails were long and yellow, his gray hair a wiry mess that he apparently rarely bothered to wash. Rick didn’t even want to know how often he changed his rumpled, dirty clothing.

Rick hated nothing worse than someone with no pride in themselves.

“I understood the assignment perfectly.” Watching Cutting as he paced the floor before him, Rick decided to talk less and listen more. The bastard was a pompous ass and if he drew him into conversation it would take fucking forever for him to get to the real reason why he was here.

“You did?” Cutting’s bushy brows shot up at that. “If that’s the case, why is the bitch here in your home?”

“Part of the assignment as I see it.”

“As you see it?” Cutting walked straight at him, strutting like he was someone important in Rick’s world. “Which leads me back to the original question. What part of the assignment wasn’t clear to you? Your job was to intercept the wolf scout, keep her from penetrating the Shadow Zone since she’s been within an inch of knowing everything she wants to know for the last six months, and make sure she didn’t learn anything.”

Rick's fist clenched at his side. Just a little longer to listen to the prick... "And that was done, yes?" Rick asked him.

"Oh, yes, it was done." Cutting inched even closer. "You found her, you fucked her, and you let the humans drag her off. Then you got her out of the fucking zone."

Rick didn't feel the need to defend himself. Not to this piece of shit, not to any of the elders. "The assignment was still completed. She knows nothing of the human ritual."

"Then why didn't you send her back to the werewolves where she belongs?"

"Because she was, as you pointed out, captured. After her pack finds out what she knows, they'll kill her."

"One less werewolf to deal with."

"You arrogant prick. You're obviously here just to try and bust my balls. If that weren't the case you'd recognize the stupidity of what you just said." Rick rose from his chair, enjoying the way the smaller, younger vampire eyed him cautiously.

He could sense Cutting's wariness. He was right to feel that way. "If we send Julia back to her own kind, the fact that they'll kill her is incidental. It's the fact that they'll pick her brain before they do that should concern you. The humans held her captive for several days before I was able to get her out and that was because the elders decided that under no circumstance could it be known that I was a vampire. She knows just enough to entice the werewolves into sending more scouts into the zone. Are we going to personally go after every one of them that fucking tries?"

"If we have to." Cutting's voice lost a little of its sarcasm.

"Then your fat ass can go," Rick informed him. "I'm done. I'm done with the clandestine planning of all of this. If we want to stop the werewolves from being sucked in by the same cult as the humans, we should arrange a meeting. We should unite and figure out collectively what we'll do about this growing problem."

"You're not fucking in charge, Rick."

He could have been the head of the council and Cutting knew it. Rick had been offered many opportunities to be part of the body that governed the vampire race. Yet he hadn't wanted it. He'd never wanted any part of it.

"And since you're not in charge, the elders say what happens here."

"The elders have a problem with me?" Rick took a step toward Cutting, satisfied when the other man took a tiny step back. "Is that why you're here? The elders have business with me?"

"They want the girl gone. Send her back, feed on her. Do whatever you have to do, but she goes away." Cutting stuffed his hands in the pockets of his heavy jacket and only met Rick's gaze for a couple of seconds at a time. There was something else.

Rick walked around Cutting in a very slow half circle, folding his arms across his chest. "Did the elders give any particular reason for me giving up my prize?"

"Your prize?" The little prick tried for amusement, but didn't quite make it.

"She's mine," Rick said flatly, realizing he meant it. "There's no chance I'll give her up."

"The wolves are looking for her. Somehow, they've discovered she's here. They'll be coming for her. The elders want no confrontations."

So now the truth came out. The elders, who had self-important little jerk-offs like this one working for them, thought they could dictate his every move.

He, who'd fought many battles for them through the centuries, sacrificing so much. He'd kept their secrets, followed them when he didn't always agree. Just as he'd been in life, he was a loyal and faithful servant -- a true soldier.

And this is what his faith had purchased. They thought no more of him than to send *this* to him with their edicts.

Rick had played the game for decades now. He'd gone on assignments, killed, protected, all in the name of the vampire race. He did whatever they asked for the greater good.

Only trouble was, he didn't believe in it anymore. Maybe it was because they'd sent Cutting to smugly tell him what to do. Maybe it was because Julia was the best

fuck he'd had in decades and he wasn't done yet with her that he didn't want to hand her over to the werewolf execution squad.

And just maybe, he was fucking tired of the elders telling him what to do with his miserable, endless existence. How long had it been since he'd wanted anything? He wasn't going to let anyone take Julia from him now. Especially when their reasons were bullshit.

Cutting's eyes bulged in his head when he found himself lifting off the floor until he hung suspended high over Rick's head, unable to move. *Lazy vampire*. Rick used very little energy to hold him. Most fledglings had cultivated their powers enough to have at least squirmed in that simple hold.

"Let them come," Rick told him. "If the council is unwilling to communicate with them, I will. Tell them that."

Rick dropped Cutting unceremoniously to the floor and the man gasped for breath like he'd just run a mile, writhing in a stinking pile. When he finally regained his breath enough to speak, he stared up at Rick with healthy respect. "You defy the council?"

"I do on the issue of that woman. I've served them loyally for centuries and they owe me. They owe me this."

Cutting shook his head at him in disbelief, clumsily pulling himself off of the floor. "They are coming for you. I know you're this almighty vampire, but even you can't defeat the entire lot of them. What will you do? The council won't back you on this."

"Let me worry about that. Leave." He put just enough menace in his words that Cutting straightened up his clothing -- Rick didn't know why he bothered -- and turned to leave.

"Can't wait to hear what happens," Cutting threw back over his shoulder.

Rick didn't give a shit what he heard or thought.

He had to deal with now. If what Cutting said was true, they'd be coming for Julia. Now he not only had to convince her of the truth but also the werewolves who were coming for her.

The werewolves could choose to believe him or not. It was their continuation at stake after all, not his. He could be wrong, but somehow he didn't think the human rituals would have any effect on the vampires because they weren't living beings. The werewolves had some decisions to make. They could try to gain the secret for themselves, try to control it.

They would find out two things. They couldn't control it any more than the humans had and if they weren't extremely cautious, the human cult would take them over. The cult would destroy the werewolves the same as it had the human race.

Rick walked to the window and stared out into the night. The half moon loomed high in the sky and the rest of the night stretched out before him. He had a lot of thinking to do and having the luscious werewolf he wanted under his own roof was the worst sort of distraction. It would be a long night.

Sensing Pedro's presence behind him, he took a deep breath. He could feel some anxiety coming from the servant who he sometimes felt was the only one he could trust.

"Cutting is gone?"

"He is."

"What's wrong?"

"Your guest has left unexpectedly."

Pedro's eyes rounded as Rick spun to face him. "When?"

"I just now found her gone, sir."

Julia. Damn it all to hell. Cutting said the werewolves were coming. If they got to her before he did, she was dead. "We have to find her."

"Of course, sir."

Rick dashed past him on the way out the door, his tension spiraling. When he found her, if he got to her first, so help him God, he wasn't sure what he would do.

Chapter 6

Julia winced as she made her way through the wooded area behind Rick's mansion. She had no shoes and sharp twigs and rocks cut into the pads of her feet as she walked. For that matter she was dressed in only a large black shirt, probably Rick's because it smelled like him, and that did little but make her feel vulnerable. Not good. She needed to survive long enough to get back to her pack's headquarters. If only she could shift into wolf form. But she didn't dare take that risk on vampire lands. They would shoot her or worse on sight. This way she could hopefully pass for just another transient human.

It was hard to keep her head straight as she made her way through the dark, unfamiliar woods. Damn that arrogant ass for filling her head with shit. She'd been captured by the humans but she didn't remember because he'd magically erased her memory? Right.

The vampires would like her to believe that. If she bought that story and let him convince her that they were really on her side, she'd tell them everything. Then her kind really would kill her ass. No, she had to get out of there. End the mind games and get back to headquarters. Then she'd tell them what little she had, which was next to nothing, and lick her wounds. At least she'd made it out alive.

Now she just had to make it back.

Abruptly the rough ground beneath her feet gave way to sharp rocks and then ended altogether. Julia scrambled to a stop, clutching at tree branches to steady herself, before she went over into the water of what appeared to be a small lake. The moon glittered over the black water and the sounds of small animals and birds filled the night around her. Her heart lurched in her chest while her mind scrambled for a plan.

If she could figure out the direction the moon was moving, she could find north. Considering her pack's headquarters was north of most vampire holdings, that might help. Of course, the moon was hanging almost directly overhead. Julia decided to just wing it. It was only a matter of time before Rick came after her. If she wasn't some distance away when that happened, she was screwed.

The snapping of twigs behind her had her jumping. Someone or something was coming, announced by crunching steps. Sniffing the air, she hoped to pick up the scent of a deer or some other wild animal that was coming up behind her. Instinct told her that wasn't the case before she caught the familiar smell. Padding along the edge of the lake, Julia tried to move as quietly and quickly as she could.

Don't let it be Rick. Please, don't let it be him.

She could smell him.

His pace quickened and Julia damned the circumstances that had her running around with no shoes and dressed like an escapee from an old exploitation movie. The ground carved into her feet and she fought the pain as she sped up, fairly running now along the bank. The sound of her pounding heart echoed in her ears. Her breath came fast as she raced along.

Like a vision from a nightmare, he jumped out of the shadows directly before her. Only it wasn't Rick. While her heart threatened to burst in her chest from fear, slowly it registered in her brain -- it was one of her own that she faced. She recognized this man. He was a werewolf. He wasn't from her pack, but she'd seen him before.

"Julia?"

Okay, he knew her too. He moved a little closer and the dim light of the night showed he wasn't much taller than she and stocky. His shoulders were broad, he had no neck and his shaggy hair peeked out from beneath the black cap he wore with a uniform like the one she customarily wore.

"Yes." Cautiously she stepped toward him, comforted by the scent of one of her own just now. She'd been through quite a bit over the last several hours.

Still, there was something about the wolf before her that made her hesitant to trust him blindly. Why didn't this feel like a rescue? That's what it was, right?

No, she sensed something else. Felt something else. *Shit, you're letting that vampire son of a bitch mess with your head. That's all!*

"Are you okay?" he asked.

Julia nodded. "Who are you?"

"Someone sent to bring you back, Julia." The sound of that accented voice behind her sent chills down her spine. *Rick*. Damn it! She knew she'd smelled him. She'd been so wrapped up in her encounter with the werewolf she'd totally missed the vampire's approach. This was so not good.

"Release her," the werewolf demanded. "You've got no right to hold her here."

"Why don't you tell her what will happen to her in *your* custody?" Rick's voice was deceptively calm and the wary look on her supposed savior's face revealed that he knew it as well as she did.

"I've been sent to bring her back to our headquarters. To safety. We have no business with you. Let her go."

"Safety." Rick stepped out of the shadows and Julia turned to find his dark eyes glittering as they locked with hers. "Do you feel safe with him, Julia?"

It's a mind game. Get a grip, girl!

"Come with me," the werewolf scout told her. "I'll get you out of here. Come on."

Julia shrugged off the hand he placed on her arm. "The only thing I need is for you to show me the way out of here. As you can see, I was on my way. I can take care of myself."

"Okay, whatever. Let's go."

Whatever? Did he just talk down to her? *What does it matter? You'll both be lucky to get away from Rick and you know it.*

“Whatever.” She didn’t miss the sarcasm Rick put into that single word. “As in whatever gets you two out of here alive? Whatever gets you back to your headquarters for her interrogation and execution?”

Julia watched her rescuer’s expression, what she could see in the night, become very guarded. Was it guarded? Or was it her imagination?

Maybe he just felt that intimidated by Rick.

Why couldn’t they have sent one of the vampire specialists after her? Shit.

“Julia, come with me now,” the other wolf told her.

“Sure. Deny what he just said and we’re gone.” What the hell made her say that?

“Don’t be stupid. He’s a vampire. You’re going to believe him?”

What Rick told her couldn’t be true. Why wasn’t this guy telling Rick he was full of shit? Why did he look like he had a dirty little secret?

“I’ve had enough of this.” Rick moved himself between Julia and the other wolf, glancing back at her over his shoulder to ask, “Have you had enough?”

Julia watched in amazement while Rick sent the other man sailing over the lake, dropping him right into the center of the water with a loud splash. All without moving a single muscle. The other man thrashed in the water, shouting in anger as Rick grabbed her hand. “Let’s get back, shall we?”

It was Julia’s turn to scream as they rose into the air with a speed she wouldn’t have believed possible and actually flew over the woods and back to the house. She would have thought the night landscape was beautiful, even in her fear and anger, if it hadn’t been such a short flight. To her embarrassment, she realized that she hadn’t made it far.

Rick’s grip on her hand wasn’t painful but unrelenting. She yanked with all of her might as he pulled her behind him up the stairs at the front of the manor and through the enormous double doors. It was hopeless. She couldn’t help feeling her arm would come out of its socket before she could free herself from his hold.

Before she knew it, they were back in the huge dining room where they'd last spoken. The chair with the single manacle she'd managed to pick her way out of was still there as a grim reminder.

"You are so not going to chain me to that dinosaur of a chair again."

Rick chuckled, but didn't immediately release her hand. And damn it all, he still looked immaculate, like he hadn't just been flying through the air with her in tow. She looked up at him, startled when all at once her mind filled with the image of him in the alley that night, pushing her back against the wall in the dark before they made love...

What?

Julia tried to pull her hand free and this time he let her, his dark eyes searching her face and his smile quickly fading. "Are you okay?" he asked her. "Are you hurt?"

Julia shook her head. *Oh, my God.* The man from the Shadow Zone, who she'd always assumed was human, the one she'd taken outside and... Oh, it couldn't be...

His eyes narrowed now. "What is it?"

Looking down at the hand he'd clutched, she wiggled the fingers. Her flesh tingled. When her gaze met again with his, she saw understanding in his expression. Hell, he could read her mind. He knew what she was thinking.

Shoving his hands into his pockets, he walked casually to the window and glanced out into the night.

"That was *you?*" She had to know.

He didn't deny it.

Chapter 7

In his haste to get her out of the woods and away from the werewolf who just might have been her intended assassin, Rick had forgotten to avoid touching her hand. He could touch anything but her hands. That simple touch negated the trick he'd used on her mind and enabled her to see him as he truly was. Now he saw images of himself, his own face, in her mind as he stood at the window. Even though he felt incredibly guilty for his deception, he was getting hard for her all the same with her standing so close wearing only his shirt.

"I saw you many times before that night." Her voice trembled slightly. "You even helped me. Why did you do that?"

Rick slowly turned to face her and the heart he thought long dead squeezed in his chest at the change in her normally confident expression. Her green eyes searched his wildly in her struggle to understand, and her full lower lip quivered slightly. In place of the steadfast warrior he'd come to admire in his journeys to the human world was a beautiful woman who looked overwhelmed by circumstances beyond her control. There were bits of leaves tangled in the deep red locks of her hair, and the old scabs and bruises from her captivity still littered the smooth white flesh of her legs, though they'd faded. Had she noticed them at all?

He had to remember how much she'd been through, much of which she didn't even remember yet. Rick had originally wondered how much she would remember, but something told him that as strong as her mind apparently was, all of it was likely to come back to her in a terrible assault. In a very short window of time.

He wished like hell he could protect her from all of it, that he'd been truly successful in taking all of the horrible memories away. If he'd been able to do that, he could have let go of his selfishness and just sent her back to her own world, assured of

her safety. He would have thought the world a better place for a while simply because she was in it. Still, his desire for her would have lingered.

“I told you I wasn’t your enemy, Julia.”

“Then why? Why did you always help me in the zone?”

Rick didn’t like the way she began to fidget. That wasn’t his red-haired warrior. No, he didn’t want to watch her come apart. The best and only thing he could do now was to be honest. That he might have hurt her by deceiving her was too hard to take, even if he had been ordered to do it. Even if it had been necessary to be with her.

“I admire you,” he answered honestly. “I watched you so many nights, Julia. I watched you succeed, I saw you fail. I took pride in watching you fight as well as any man. I couldn’t resist helping you.”

Her expression softened. “You were there to watch me?”

“No, I was sent by our elders to keep you and your kind from learning the humans’ secret. I was ordered to do so without revealing I’m a vampire.”

“Why not?”

“We’ve existed for centuries beyond the human realm of existence and it’s the wish of the elders for us to remain there. We have no place in the conflict within the human world.” Some of the old fire was creeping into her gorgeous green eyes at that. Good.

“But you were there and messing with our plans. Why?”

“Can’t you guess, Julia? We both have our missions. The mission of the werewolves is to find a way to prolong life because you feel threatened by us and unnecessarily, I might add.”

“Arrogant jackass,” she muttered so quietly he barely heard her.

Rick stifled a chuckle. “Our mission is to stop the human cult in the Shadow Zone before they can do further harm.”

Her chin lifted in challenge. “You want to stop them before they can be of any use to us, right? That would clear the way for you to come after us?”

Blowing out an exhale, he shook his head. "The vampires have no plans to come after the werewolves."

"Oh, that's right. You're cloning." He didn't reply. "Okay, so enlighten me. Why would the vampires want to take out the humans running the zone? Want to corner the market on immortality?"

"No."

"Then why? I find it hard to believe the vampires would want to stop them for the greater good."

The way she stretched out the words "greater good" made him smile. She wasn't lost. Confused and close to the edge, but not lost. "I know you hate vampires, Julia. But yes, it might surprise you that it was a greater good type of thing. There are hundreds of dead people walking around already, right? So we don't need a cult on top of it now do we?"

"No." Her grin had him turning hard as stone. "And how do you know I hate vampires. Read my mind a lot, have you?"

Rick nodded. "A couple of times."

Julia shook her head at that. "So you can make me think you look like someone else by just messing with my head. I mean, that's what you did, right?"

"Interesting way to put it, but yes, I can."

"Do it."

Focusing, Rick plied her with the old trick so she'd see the other face in her mind. He watched her eyes round as they frantically looked him over. "Is that better?" he asked. "Do you prefer me this way?"

Realization crept into her expression as he dropped the trickery so she saw him as he truly was. "I can't believe I actually..."

"Made love to me?"

Color crept into her cheeks. "I wouldn't exactly call it that. It was doing the nasty out in the alley if I remember right."

Now there was a challenge he was more than willing to accept. "I see. So when was the last time you made love, Julia?"

"That's my business."

Rick took a step closer, enjoying the way her breasts rose and fell beneath his shirt with each breath she took. He heard the heavy pounding of her heart and could feel her compelling warmth even though several feet separated them. "It's my business now," he told her. "Whether you saw my face or not, Julia, it was me you made love to. And you want me again."

"Get out of my head," she warned him.

"I wasn't reading your mind." That was the truth, so her words really made him happy. "But I'll take that as a yes."

"You tricked me. If I'd known you were a vampire..."

"It wouldn't have happened?"

His sharp tone gave her a moment's pause but she didn't back down. "Well, it wouldn't have. If I'd known you were a blood sucker, I wouldn't have touched you to screw you."

Rick laughed out loud. "So a vampire couldn't possibly inspire pleasure in you."

"Absolutely not."

The way her eyes moved over his face and down his body suggested otherwise. It had his libido growing fangs. "Care to put that to the test, soldier?" he asked her.

Now she looked wary. She even took a step back. "No."

"Afraid?"

"Hell, no!"

"Done." Rick marched to her and grabbed her wrist on his way out of the room. Julia fought him for only a moment and then seemed to figure out it was pointless. It was.

Rick was going to prove to her that the man she'd gotten so hot for was him. *Him*. And she'd beg for more when he was done.

Chapter 8

Julia was amazed to find herself in his bedroom in record time and chained to the bed by two nice, shiny manacles around her wrists. Angry with herself for challenging him, when she should have known better, she pulled furiously at the chains. What the hell had she been thinking?

The fact that she couldn't pull free and was too open to anything and everything he wanted to do to her pushed her anger higher.

To her shame, it excited her too. Sharp pangs of lust rippled through her pussy as she watched him undress. Damn, he was handsome. His dark hair gleamed in the light of the candles he'd placed by the enormous bed and his powerful upper body was a magnificent display of sinew and scarred flesh.

"Do this a lot, do you?" Julia jingled the chain connected to her left wrist. "You're very well prepared."

"I like to be prepared." Rick's smile was purely carnal. His eyes darkened with lust as they moved over her body. "I wanted to be prepared for *you*. Believe it or not, I don't do a lot of entertaining." The sensual promise in his voice had her breath catching.

"A shame really, when you're so hospitable."

Rick's fingers went to the fastening of his slacks and her pussy heated further as he pulled down the zipper with maddening slowness. Maybe she hadn't realized it was him, but she remembered the cock she'd had that night in the alley and the way it had overfilled her until she hadn't known where she ended and he began. She wanted to see it, wanted that cock buried inside again.

Julia had a feeling she was going to get her wish.

Still, that didn't mean she had to make it easy for him. "Counting on the fact that I might be a little shy, were you?"

“Perhaps I should gag you as well.”

Julia stared at his crotch, waiting for him to reveal the extent of his arousal. And oh, he did as he kicked his feet free of whatever shoes he was wearing. Within seconds, he was wonderfully naked. His cock rose to his belly, hard, engorged and thick. The head flared thicker than the shaft and was throbbing in arousal.

“You want this, Julia?”

Her mouth was dry. She nodded.

“You’ll have to wait,” he told her, climbing onto the bed and spreading her thighs wide with his strong hands.

When he dove for her pussy with his mouth, her hips shot off the bed and her breath sucked in. Julia’s wrists twisted in the velvet-lined manacles as his tongue pushed into her folds, zeroing in on her clit. Rick began to worry the hard little nub with quick flicks of his tongue until she thought she would lose her mind. Her blood rushed like fire through her veins and eye-crossing lust held her captive as he sucked and licked her cunt relentlessly.

When his fingers parted her even wider, his long tongue slid down to her aching entrance and a moan pulled from her throat. Julia loved the way he used his tongue like a cock, the stiff, quick thrusts destroying her senses. Julia fought the chains, pushed her pussy at his mouth as he tongue fucked her. Her thighs trembled around his face and she wondered how long she would survive this with his tongue darting in and out of her passage.

Julia had had lovers go down on her before, but she’d had no idea it could be this wonderfully devastating. Trembling and moaning in the center of the bed with Rick’s face buried in her pussy, now alternating between licking her clit and teasing her opening with his tongue, she fought the orgasm coming on with everything she had. She wanted this to last just a little longer, wanted just a little more.

Rhythmically she pushed her pussy at him now and he hummed, sucking at her labia before his mouth fastened on her clit again. Rick’s tongue was wild on her, flicking against her clit, soothing it with teasing licks. The cold, hard manacles that held her

captive were in sharp contrast to the soft, slick heat of his tongue in her cunt. Julia cried out, throwing her head back into the small pile of pillows beneath her. She was coming, it was going to be something, and the tormenting devil between her thighs wasn't going to ever stop until she did.

Julia screamed when the orgasm took her over, the exquisite pleasure shaking her like the fiercest storm. Her hands grabbed in vain at the manacles as he lapped her, tasting the hot juices that flowed from her pussy. Her blood rushed through her veins like molten lava, taking her sanity and a little of her consciousness with it.

Okay, she really needed him inside her. *Now.*

Moving up her body, Rick lowered his head and pressed his mouth to hers. The hard length of his body lowered onto hers and the weight of him quickly began to make her crazy. The wet heat of her lower body slicked his flesh and she rubbed herself against him, her tongue twining with his as she tasted herself on his lips. She felt his finger sliding into the wet folds at the apex of her thighs and she fought to get closer to him with everything she had.

"I wish I didn't need you so much now, Julia."

"So stop talking and give it to me," she urged him, stroking the length of his cock with her aching flesh.

Rick's chuckle was a deep, rumbling sound. Pulling her thighs apart, he positioned himself between her thighs, the mushroom-shaped head of his heated cock aimed at her weeping entrance. In the soft candlelight she stared in awe at the width and the length of the heavily veined shaft.

Yeah, give me that.

Slowly he pushed just the head of his cock into her aching pussy. "Is this what you want?"

Julia tried like crazy to push herself up to take more of that cock she needed so desperately but Rick wouldn't allow it. His dark eyes glittered at her. "Look at my face, Julia. Do you see me now?" He pushed into her just a little more. Her pussy walls tried to grab him, to hold onto him and to draw him in farther.

Shit, don't do this now.

"Do you?"

"Yes, damn you!" She couldn't believe he wanted her to talk just now.

"Do you want *me*, Julia?"

"Yes!" She gasped at the intense pleasure blooming in her lower body as her insides made room for him, and he rewarded her by sliding in a little farther.

"And I'm a vampire..."

Julia was done talking. "Just fuck me!"

Rick slid further and further into her cunt, moving with incredible slowness that was driving her mad. The sensation of being filled by him, being burned and stretched by his hot, hard flesh, was incredible.

"As you wish," he said softly.

Julia cried out when he pushed to the hilt inside her. The tight sack of his balls met her overly sensitive flesh as he ground against her.

Julia screamed, long and loud, her pussy pulsing around him as he began to fuck her. With strong, controlled strokes, Rick pumped into her. Julia wrapped her legs around his waist, hanging on for all she was worth. She was able to rub her clit against him, stoking the raging fire he'd started in her body, surrendering to everything he demanded.

His first strokes were short and grinding, his hips never really leaving her body. He made her cry out in frustration before he began to deliberately lengthen his strokes, withdrawing almost completely before spearing back into her hard. Her fists clenched and she pulled viciously at the restraints, wanting to touch him, to bite him. The realization that he could do whatever he wanted with her made her crazy and pushed her pleasure level up to incredible, unbelievable heights.

Rick took her mouth with a searing kiss, his tongue thrusting into her mouth with a rhythm that matched his plunging cock. His hand slid between them, his fingers searching for her clit and finding it, teasing it mercilessly while his thrusts grew in strength and speed.

"I can't take this," she pleaded into his mouth. It was too much sensation, more than anything she'd ever experienced. Her clit was pounding, orgasm poised to claim her again.

Rick pulled back to gaze down into her face. "You can, Julia. You will."

She came again, hard, her pussy convulsing with a powerful force that wrung the life from her as she screamed long and loud. Rick drove on above her, relentless and unstoppable.

Her entire body trembled beneath him when his body went taut and he shouted his release with a cry that blistered her ears. He exploded within her, over and over, and Julia struggled to move with him, her energy fading. Thrust after thrust, she managed to match him until he finally collapsed on top of her.

"You do realize I'm a vampire." He pressed a kiss into her hair.

"Smart ass." Julia loved his weight pressing her down into the bed, the sensation of his cock still inside her body.

"You knew I couldn't let it go." She could sense he was smugly grinning above her even though she couldn't see his face at the moment considering her position under him in the bed.

"Can you at least get me out of these things --" she rattled the chains over her head, "-- because I might have a few demands of my own to make."

"There's an offer I can't refuse."

And she knew he was telling the truth because he was already growing hard again inside her.

Chapter 9

Dark dreams pulled Julia from sleep, had her shooting up in the bed next to Rick with her heart racing in her chest and an all too real fear clouding her mind. Dreams of being trapped in a glass cell still lingered in her brain.

Faceless people had trapped her there, entering her cell when they pleased to take blood from her veins, samples of her hair. Julia had been as angry as she had been afraid and had fought her captors. Their visits to her cell had been traumatic experiences with big men holding her down while medical personnel did as they pleased.

Frantically she threw off the covers to closely inspect her bare body. Her heart jumped in her chest when she saw the old, yellowing bruises around the veins at the inside of her elbows. Her fear escalated when she inspected the flesh of her tummy around her right hip bone.

Oh shit. The fine line she found there brought her nightmare into screaming reality. In her dream, they'd taken her to a sterile room to perform some sort of surgery on her. She'd still been awake when they'd started and had been able to feel the scalpel sinking into the flesh of her belly.

Rick had told her the truth? The humans really had captured her? *Oh, God.* What had they done to her?

"They ran experiments on you." Rick's voice was scratchy from sleep. His dark eyes locked with hers. "They're trying to determine if they can gain control of the werewolves as they have with other humans."

Julia swallowed hard. "You mean what you were telling me about their victims losing their free will following their rituals."

“Yes.” Rick’s handsome face was locked in a grim expression. “The followers of this cult must attend the ritual once a month to prolong their life indefinitely. Each ritual must offer a fresh victim and at the end that victim is robbed of their will. They are under the control of the cult, giving them absolute power.”

“I don’t understand something, Rick. If they have all of these victims who are theirs to control and they *don’t* die after the ritual, why is their population dwindling?”

“All of the participants of the cult’s ritual, victims and members alike, are left barren. Unable to have children. When the cult really began to gain in popularity about seventy years ago, they didn’t know that. The cult members were mostly academics who were more focused on their research than having children. The victims? Even if they had been able to have children, with no free will or emotion, why would they care? That’s what happened to the humans not killed by the war or the flu.”

As she glanced back down in panic at the cut on her belly, Julia’s mind raced. “What did they do to me?”

“They stole some of your ova more than likely. I got you out of there that day, but you were still under sedation.” Rick slowly sat up, gently tracing the line she’d found with his fingers. “What concerns me, Julia, are their intentions. If they mean to use them to create werewolves and then figure out they can make drones of them...”

“It would spell doom for us,” Julia finished for him.

Rick nodded.

“Why couldn’t you get me out of there before they could do this?” She regretted asking the question the moment it left her lips. He had saved her when he didn’t have to. Didn’t she sound like an ungrateful ass?

Pain crossed his expression, making her feel worse. “I’m just over five hundred years old, Julia. One of the oldest vampires that we’re aware of. It’s true that vampires gain in strength across the ages and I’m no exception. But even I’m not all-powerful. We were in the human world and had they managed to capture me also, they could have done far worse to you.”

“And you couldn’t let them know... that you’re a...”

Rick pulled her into his arms, his hold on her trembling body tight. "I didn't give a shit about what was ordered of me, Julia." His voice was thick with emotion. "I'd have given my life to get you out of there unharmed."

Julia's heart squeezed in her chest as he held her close. While he couldn't take away the terrible experience she'd had, Rick had been her savior. He'd watched over her for months in the zone, he'd gotten her away from the humans. If they'd held her long enough to be the victim of one of their rituals, she'd have lost everything.

Maybe she understood a little of the vampires' motives as well, though she was still reluctant to put too much faith in them.

The moment was disrupted by a furious pounding on the bedroom door. Rick hauled the sheet up from the bed to cover her before calling, "Enter."

The dark-haired servant fairly ran into the room, speaking rapidly to Rick in Spanish. While she had no clue what they were saying, the anxiety she read in the man's face was very telling.

The man made a hasty retreat as Rick rose from the bed and gathered his discarded clothing. He pulled his slacks on with amazing speed as she began to search for the shirt she'd been wearing. "They've come for me, haven't they?"

Rick nodded.

"Where are they?"

They were outside Rick's manor, a great throng of werewolf warriors complete with high-powered flashlights, all terrain vehicles, and automatic weapons. He'd told her to stay put as he marched out of the bedroom, but she had no intention of cowering there and leaving him to face this alone.

They didn't understand. Shit, she wasn't sure she understood it all. What she did understand quite clearly was Rick had saved her. She also got that the vampires had a very different view of the Shadow Zone than the werewolves, but just maybe they were right. Hadn't the humans kidnapped her, experimented on her? What Rick explained of their motives made terrible sense.

Julia hated going out in just a shirt, but she had to go to them. She could go back to her pack and explain everything. With the new information they had to present, they could maybe protect the other scouts who had been sent out into the zone. Pull them out before it was too late for them.

"I told you to stay put," Rick told her without turning around. The lines of his body were taut as he stood at the top of the stairs just outside the doors of his home. "I'll deal with this."

"You can't tell her what to do, bloodsucker!" the same wolf Rick had dumped into the lake yelled. At least he'd dried out now.

"They are mine to deal with, Rick." She walked through the doorway, pulling the hem of the shirt that almost reached her knees down as far as she could. "Let me go talk to them."

He did glance at her then and a myriad of emotions clashed in his dark eyes. "No."

"Lennox! Get down here now," a wolf she recognized as the leader of a neighboring pack yelled at her.

Why the hell was *he* yelling at her?

"Where's Taylor?" she responded, using her best soldier voice. "Where's my pack leader?"

"He probably can't bear to watch your execution," Rick threw in.

Instead of pissing her off, the comment surprisingly raised her suspicions. They looked like an old-fashioned lynch mob, complete with the wolf she'd met in the woods glaring at her. Granted, she would be pissed too if someone had dumped her ass in the lake. Yet why wasn't his hostility directed at Rick?

And it hadn't felt like a rescue, she remembered. Yeah, whoever he was had given her a bad vibe. The lynch mob before her wasn't making her feel any better.

"Don't go with them, Julia." Rick's voice was low.

"Would you let me if I wanted to?" she whispered.

He didn't answer.

"I want Taylor to come here," she told the assembly. "I have some information but I'll only speak with him. He's my pack leader."

"I'll give you five seconds to get your ass down here," the leader told her. "Or we'll come and get you."

Rick moved to stand just behind her shoulder. "I don't think so." His tone was dead serious. "Don't try it."

"You don't scare us, deadhead. We can take you."

"But can you take us also," a new male voice called from the shadows.

Julia watched in fascination as half a dozen other vampires walked out of the shadows behind the group of werewolves. The leader was a tall blond man with carved, handsome features and a lean muscular body that made him appear indestructible.

"Maddox." Rick nodded to him. "Good to see you."

"Cutting was by the council house today pissing and moaning. Sounded like you could use a little backup."

Julia didn't know who Cutting was, but the arrival of Rick's friends changed the climate drastically. There were maybe twenty werewolves there to take her back to headquarters. They stood a great chance against Rick alone, even with his powers and age. Against seven vampires? No way.

"The choice is yours, Julia," Rick told her.

Julia wasn't going anywhere with this group of wolves. She wanted to talk to Taylor, only he wasn't here. And that was odd. He'd been like a father to her the last ten years or so. Why the hell wasn't he here?

And what if Rick was telling her the truth? What if they did mean to kill her because the humans had caught her?

"I'm staying." Turning her back to the werewolf gathering, she lowered her voice. "I need to talk to my pack leader. I need to hear what's going on from him."

Rick's expression was closed. "It's your choice," he said again.

Julia nodded, uneasy about that reaction as she turned back to the wolf leader. "I'm staying," she announced. "Tell Taylor I'd like to talk to him. Tonight."

The leader and his minions glared at her. She caught the eye of the vampire Rick had called Maddox. He tipped his head to her.

All the while, she felt Rick's gaze on her.

She'd go back inside and wait for Taylor. It wasn't like she was going to get a lot of sleep anyway. She had a lot to think about.

Curiously, even with all that she'd learned about the humans in the zones, the intentions of the vampires, and the vibes that she'd gotten from werewolf kind, she only had one thing on her mind.

What to do about Rick.

Chapter 10

It had always been Rick's habit to sleep through most of the day and awaken just before the sunset. He loved to watch the sun setting in the sky, even now during the last cold days of winter. It was normally his favorite part of the day.

He hadn't been able to sleep and neither had Julia. He knew she waited for her pack leader just as he knew that werewolf would never show up. He knew the moment she'd found something to wear and left his home.

Deep down he'd known all along she would return to her own kind. Maybe she was right in that and belonged there. Yet her departure left an emptiness swelling in Rick he hadn't felt since the early days after he was made. Only now, at the end, did he realize that during the months he'd watched her, drawn closer to her, she'd been a light for him in an eternity of darkness. She'd given him a reason to look forward to another day.

The thought of going on now seemed unbearable.

Pink and orange blended to light up the evening sky like fire and Rick felt so cold. The light wind brushed by him as he stood out on the balcony of his bedroom and he just felt like going back to bed. For years.

He'd just turned around to go back inside when the loud clank startled him out of his gloomy mood.

A metal claw had been thrown up to his balcony and was securely anchored. The rope it was attached to was pulled taut and began moving, telling Rick that someone was on their way up. He rolled his eyes at the thought that the werewolves would still be trying to pry Julia from his grasp. They had to have known that she'd return to them.

Unless...

The thought that it could be Julia herself entered his mind only a second before her pretty face emerged between the stone columns underneath the metal claw.

Graceful as a cat, she climbed over the railing and onto his balcony, dressed head to toe in a black uniform like she always wore, a snug cap covering her hair. Her smile had him staring at her like a nervous fool.

"I'm back." Pulling a bulky bag from her back, she dropped it unceremoniously at her feet. "I had a bitch of a time getting in and out of there to get my stuff back."

He couldn't care less about that. She was obviously unharmed and she was back with him. With *him*. "Are you certain about this, Julia?"

She nodded, pulling the cap from her head so that her glorious hair spilled over her shoulder like a red river of silk. "I couldn't go back there now. What happened in the zone, well, it kind of ruined things for me. Besides, if they thought about doing me in once..."

She was making light of this. He could understand why, all things considered, and why she was a little nervous underneath it all. Rick, however, was dead serious. "Just because you can't or choose not to return to them doesn't mean you must stay with me. You know this. So I'll ask you again. Are you sure?"

"Why? Are you trying to talk me out of it?"

Rick grinned. "Hardly."

"I have a lot of questions, don't get me wrong. I won't live forever and you will and it's going to suck getting old and watching you take on a trophy bitch. And then there's the 'you're dead, I'm alive' thing and --"

"Julia, if you want to share eternity with me, there *is* a way."

That stopped her cold. "How? I didn't think werewolves could be made into vampires."

"It can be done," he explained, his mind spinning with thoughts of the future already. Thoughts of sharing it with her, thoughts of keeping her in his bed most of it. "Or if you don't want that, I'll gladly end my life when yours ends."

Fire lit up her lovely green eyes at that. She took a small step in his direction, the heat of her body drawing him to her like a moth to the flame. "Why would you do that?"

Rick walked to her until he could look down into her beautiful face. No fear in her eyes, no loathing in her expression. Did she truly accept him, then? Could it be?

"Just before you climbed the side of my house, I was standing here assuming you'd left me. I felt great emptiness, Julia. And in my position that's not a good thing."

"Why would you think that, Rick? Why wouldn't I come back? You've been the only one involved in all of this who actually cared about what happened to me. Now that I remember everything, I realize that you've always looked after me even though it pisses me off to admit it."

"Because I'm a vampire?"

"No, because I don't like to eat crow." Julia's expression sobered. "It's not just that. I like being with you. I like how you make me feel."

Rick nodded. That's all he could ever hope to hear.

"I guess I'm wondering what will happen when my friends come looking for me again. Somehow I don't think they're ready to sit down with you guys and talk shop."

"No, you're probably right about that. We'll leave tonight, Julia. I have several other places where we can stay." He had many other homes all over the world. When one had been around as long as he had, one had to have places to escape to.

Again she smiled, a softer more seductive smile. "I should point out that I'm no picnic. I snore, I shed, and I like nothing better than a good fight."

Rick pulled her soft body into his arms, savoring the way she felt there. Loving the way her body yielded to the hard planes of his. "Then you should probably know that I'm not a morning person, I steal covers, and dislike confrontation intensely."

"You're boring."

Rick laughed at that before claiming her mouth in a kiss that had her heart hammering fiercely against his chest. Julia kissed him back with a passion like nothing

he'd ever experienced in his long life. The way her lips stroked over his sent pulses of desire burning through his veins like fire.

Rick crushed her against his chest and she let him. He wanted to yell to the entire world that she was his when she moved toward him like a magnet, her hips grinding against the aching flesh of his cock with a slow, maddening rhythm. Julia pressed her hands to the wall of his chest, and his eyes nearly crossed at the sheer joy of having her hands on him. On *him*. The need to take her right now had him fighting for control as he slid his tongue into her welcoming mouth.

The kiss grew heated, intoxicating him like fine wine. Her breath shuddered into his mouth as their tongues began to duel. The satin locks of her hair filled his hand and he cupped the back of her head, holding her in place for the kiss he never wanted to end.

Rick walked backward through the open door to his bedroom, taking her with him. He wasn't happy until he'd pressed her into his bed and lowered himself onto her, his hips grinding against hers now. Julia's moan was low and enticing, her long limbs wound around him as she sank into the soft mattress under his weight.

Rick took his time undressing her. They had all the time in the world now. His fingers leisurely worked at the clasps of her uniform top, the opening of her skintight pants. Julia panted as his hands pushed back the top of her uniform to reveal the full, white globes of her breasts. He kept his touch light, wanting to explore her this time. To experience every inch of her.

Rick growled low in his throat at the velvety texture of her skin. He'd never grow tired of her. How could he? She was all fire and strength mixed with an intoxicating dose of beauty and grace.

"You're so beautiful, Julia," he whispered.

She grabbed at his head, pulling him down for a kiss. Her lips were sweet, swelling from his kisses. She parted her thighs to the insistent nudging of his hips, rubbing the softness of her pussy against the hard length of his throbbing cock. She wrapped her legs around him, moving with him. The rough fabric of her uniform was

already wet with her hot juices, but he'd save that exquisite treasure for later. The smooth white flesh of her breasts beckoned to him just now and he lowered his mouth over one tight little peak.

Rick pressed a kiss against her nipple and she nearly bucked him off in her excitement. His fiery little devil wouldn't hurry him though. Gently he gathered her to him, burying his face between the full mounds of her breasts to inhale deeply. The smell of her warm flesh ensnared all of his senses, pushing the edges of his control.

Julia writhed and offered her breasts to him wantonly while he plumped and squeezed them with his hands. He loved the way her slender fingers speared into his hair while he sucked one of her nipples into his mouth, pushing the lust consuming him as he toyed with her, using his tongue and teeth. He pulled as much of her into his mouth as he could, gratified when she began grinding her cunt against him in an increasing rhythm. Rick suckled her with greedy abandon. When he moved to the other breast to give it the same treatment, he thought she'd come completely off the bed.

Her lust matched his. He had to have her. *Now.*

Rick looked up from the breast he suckled to meet her gaze. Julia was pushing her lower body up at him, wanting him to take her, to bring her release. Oh, he wouldn't make it so easy for her. He loved having her as a lustful slave to his will. He wanted to stretch her pleasure out until she begged him, until she thought her sanity would be lost.

Rick smiled down at her as he slid down her body. With deliberate slowness, he finished ridding her of the pants of her uniform, sliding them down her legs with great care. Julia scrambled to pull off the uniform top and then lay before him totally nude. The desire lighting up her eyes took his breath away.

Rick lowered his head and brushed a light kiss against the soft swell of her belly. He could hear the wild racing of her heart in her chest as he did it again, his mouth moving lower. He pressed her thighs apart with his hands, deeply inhaling her intimate scent. Her green eyes were wide and dark with her desire.

“I love the taste of you, the scent of you.” Just the view of her sex, open to anything he wanted, sent pulses of fresh excitement humming through his body, making the throbbing of his cock increasingly hard to ignore.

“What if you get tired of me in a couple hundred years?” she asked between gasping breaths.

Rick chuckled at that. “Impossible.”

When she said nothing else, he took it as permission to proceed. Parting her with the pads of his fingers, he slowly leaned in to lick her. The slick, soft petals of her flesh were heaven to him as he let his tongue roam from her opening up to her clit. He lingered there and began to flick against her.

Julia dazzled him with the wild abandon of her passion as he licked her over and over. He suckled at her labia and her clit, learning with each ministrations what she really liked and what drove her insane with desire. With his lips, teeth and tongue he sought to push everything out of her mind, body and soul but him. And he succeeded.

Julia writhed and tossed her head while he teased and tormented her. Her hips pumped wildly against him, but he easily held her in place against his greedy mouth. When he began to thrust his tongue in and out of her opening like a cock, she began to scream. Again and again he thrust, quick movements meant to make her crazy. He paid attention to her clit with his fingers too, stroking the hard little jewel until her hips shot off the bed.

He knew the instant orgasm claimed her. Her high cries echoed through the room as her hips undulated, as her fingers nearly ripped the hair from his scalp.

Heat colored her white skin from her face to her cunt and while the spasms shook her, he continued to lap at her, soothing the sweet flesh between her thighs with soft licks and kisses.

When the tremors seemed to have eased, Rick rose up on his knees and pulled his dark sweater over his head. He left the bed only long enough to pull off his slacks and sandals. Julia recovered herself just enough to watch him disrobe. “You have a lot of scars,” she pointed out.

“All from the time when I lived.” Rick loved the appreciation in her eyes as they swept over his body. “Pretty miraculous I lived long enough to be made a vampire, yes?”

His cock was poised and waiting as he climbed back onto the bed. A thrill of excitement ran through him while her sultry eyes moved over the length of him.

Moving between her thighs and up her body, Rick claimed her sweet lips again. A possessive kiss, filled with passion and longing, to let her know she was his now. Their hands and mouths were wild on each other, everywhere. Julia’s hands roamed down the length of his back, grabbing his ass as if she could pull him into her, announcing that she wanted his cock and she wanted it right now.

Rick thrust her legs wide, hooking her knees over his hands. He positioned the mushroomed head of his cock against her wet flesh and Julia’s breath sucked in as he began to sink into her.

The hard column of his flesh pushed into her. The heat of her was incredible. Her body worked to make room for him and it took the longest time for him to push himself fully inside her. All the while, she pumped her hips with his, trying to speed it up. She moaned, clutching at the quilt beneath her.

Her pussy walls clenched around him and she undulated against him until he thought his control would snap. She wrapped her legs around his waist and kept up with him admirably while he began to slide in and out of her. Her hands slid on the slick flesh of his back. Drops of his blood-tinged perspiration began to dot his face and chest.

Beads of moisture dotted her forehead and chest from their efforts, the scent of lust hanging in the air all around them. They trembled and writhed on the bed, Julia crying out against the base of his neck when he hit a rhythm that had her thrashing beneath him. When she bit into his flesh lightly as the ferocity of his thrusts increased, he growled in the grips of the most intense pleasure he’d ever known in all his existence.

Julia bucked beneath him violently when she came again. Rick thrust harder and faster, making her ride out wave after wave of the orgasm. The set of her lovely, flushed face told him it was far from a hardship. Her nails raked his skin and she screamed, grabbing for him, pulling him to her heart. "Rick!"

The sound of his name pushed him right over the edge, body and heart. Her cunt squeezed him, milking him. He threw back his head and yelled as he pumped into her furiously as his own climax consumed him.

Rick collapsed on the bed by her side, pulling her against him. The sound of her harsh breathing blended nicely with the quiet sounds of the coming night drifting in through the door to the balcony. He loved the gentle sound just as he loved everything about her.

Rick loved her.

He'd wait and tell her he'd fallen in love with her later. If he told her this early on, she'd never let him hear the end of it. He smiled as he pressed a kiss into her hair. Oh, but he would tell her. And the promise was there that she might even love him one day.

"Do you like rare steak?" Julia's voice was a sleepy mumble.

Rick had to laugh at that. "Sure. The meat doesn't do a lot for me but I do enjoy it."

"Okay, so we have something in common."

"Is that a requirement?" he asked.

Julia giggled. "Guess not. But I really like rare steak." She snuggled on his chest, her breath slowing into the cadence of sleep. "I guess I really like you too," she muttered and then he lost her to sleep.

He'd stay ready in case anything came back in her dreams. Everything from the last few weeks, however, was out, he thought.

All that was left was holding her and it gave him great joy to do just that.

Isabella Jordan

Isabella Jordan is a lucky lady who spends her days with her family, doing volunteer work and writing. She loves creating new stories of all kinds and chatting with readers and friends.

Isabella would love to hear from readers! Visit her on the web at <http://isbellajordan.com>.