



From Tonight Until Forever:

# SACRIFICED

By  
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## Chapter One

“How many more of you are there?”

The blonde hunter planted face-first between the damp grass and the knee Julia pressed into the middle of his back, squirmed weakly to get away from her. He murmured something into the ground, his long hair hiding his face as bucked his hips in vain to shake her off.

She wrenched harder on the arm she'd already pulled back and jammed against his spine. His body jerked in response, a grunt of pain breaking past his lips. The movement instinctively brought his head up, exposing the smooth column of his neck. Rivulets of blood snaked down his skin where she'd punctured his flesh with her fangs moments ago.

The heady taste of the hunter's blood still lingered on her tongue, the added strength from the powerful creature humming through her system.

Julia dragged her fangs across his neck, wanted to grin when the coward shuddered. For a hunter, he hadn't put up much of a fight. Not that she was complaining, but hunters usually excelled at neutralizing vampires in most situations. This one hadn't even landed a solid blow before she'd taken him down.

She tried not to be disappointed at the implication of that. If Brody were here, would the rogue hunters have been so stupid as to put such a weak link on security detail?

“How many?” Julia repeated, pushing at the barrier shielding his thoughts from hers, and found her answer.

Four.

A sharp cry of alarm pierced the crisp night air from the opposite side of the compound. Julia rolled her eyes. So much for Brynn playing it stealthy.

She pressed her mouth to the hunter's neck, the earlier rush from his blood making it easy to hold him in place as she drained him further. The blood pumped through her, fusing with the rush of adrenaline pushing thick and hot through her veins.

The weaker she left the hunter, the least likely he'd be able to interfere.

A moment later, Julia released her hold on him and he fell back to the grass, unconscious.

*Another one down.*

Brynn's thoughts echoed through Julia's mind as she stood and surveyed the compound's main building a few meters in front of her. The fence surrounding the compound had been a joke. While it might deter curious humans, it was no more than an inconvenience to Julia and Brynn, and an annoying one at that.

Julia kept to the shadows, her senses attuned for the two remaining hunters. By now they could be outside in search of them, or inside, guarding the vampire they might very well have in their custody.

Part of her wanted to leave Brody Atherton to his fate. It wasn't half the punishment he deserved for deserting her, but she wouldn't be able to have a clear conscience if she willingly let him remain a captive of the hunters. He might have broken her heart when he left, but she wouldn't see him suffer like a caged animal for as long as

his captors needed him alive.

No one deserved that.

A gust of wind pulled at the long dark hair that had come loose from the meager struggle the hunter had put up, and carried on the breeze came the scent of an enemy. Her heightened senses picked up on the light footfalls approaching from her right.

Tucked in the shadows of the building's corner alcove, she waited.

"You don't do this often, do you?" Brynn's voice preceded her appearance around the corner. With one hand propped on her hip, her black hair caught in the wind that gusted, her golden hunter eyes surveyed Julia the way she would a Wall Street businesswoman playing bounty hunter.

Brynn tipped her head towards the south entrance. "This way." She opened the door, and they moved quickly down the long dimly lit corridor.

They passed numerous darkened doorways, but every step deeper into the compound only confirmed Julia's growing certainty.

Brody wasn't here.

Brynn flashed a grim smile over her shoulder. "We won't stop looking until we find him."

She knew it was Brynn's vampire half that allowed her easier access to Julia's thoughts. For a creature, half vampire and half hunter, one who shouldn't even exist at all, her senses were extraordinarily developed. So much so that it took considerably more effort on Julia's part to keep Brynn from picking up on stray thoughts.

Brynn snorted. "Honey, I've been reading you like a book since the day you tried to take me down."

Julia arched a brow. "I seem to recall knocking you off your feet a time or two."

"Except the time--"

"Save it," Julia growled, concentrating hard to keep her mind shut tight.

By the time they searched all three floors, it was apparent Brody wasn't on the premises.

"Did he ever say anything to you?"

Julia didn't need to ask for clarification. Brynn was thinking about Brody's possible connection to the Key.

She shook her head. "It might have come up once." And only to briefly explain the folklore surrounding the vampire equivalent to the Holy Grail.

Julia had been turning both over in her mind, looking for some connection as to why the hunters believed Brody could lead them to it, or why they sought the mythical object believed to point to the origins of the vampire race.

"Maybe it's not a myth."

"Okay, how in the hell are you doing that so damn easily?"

Brynn shrugged. "My curse." She stopped in the middle of the hall. "Hopefully your friend will have something else for us to go on soon."

"His name is Declan."

Brynn snorted.

Julia gave her a sideways glance. "Since Declan is more vamp friendly than the average hunter, what's your issue with him?"

"He's an elder hunter." Brynn's glacier tone made it clear there was no love lost between them.

“You’re a hunter.” Not that Julia needed to point that out. No one but hunters possessed those piercing gold eyes or the ability to hone in on a vampire’s presence.

“No,” Brynn corrected in a flat tone. “I *was* a hunter.”

Julia wanted to press Brynn for more details beyond the same cryptic responses she’d been getting out her every time the subject came up. While their mutual trust had come a considerable ways, Brynn was still very much a closed book.

Brynn backtracked towards the door. “Let’s have a more in-depth chat with one of our friends outside.”

Julia trailed after her, hoping that at the very least one of the hunters would know something useful. They were running out of places to check, and it was impossible to know how long they planned on keeping Brody alive or even in the same country.

\* \* \* \*

“Seventy-nine bottles of blood on the wall, seventy-nine bottles of blood.”

“Shut the fuck up.”

Brody would have smiled if everything didn’t hurt so damn much. Hell, even his teeth throbbed from the last scuffle with the hunter elder on the opposite side of the bars. Singing didn’t feel good either, but it pissed off Chester who wasn’t allowed to leave his presence without being relieved. The elder loathed the nickname Brody had bestowed on him months ago because the hunter reminded him of a scrawny orange cat that had never been good for anything but licking his ass.

“Take one down and pass it around, seventy-eight bottles of blood on the wall.” He grimaced as his ribs burned under the strain. His cracked lips stung, his throat drier than a creek bed during a drought. The rank clothes he wore were stained with both his blood and some from the hunters he’d managed to hurt before they contained him the last time.

Brody wanted to get up from where he sat on the ground in the cell they kept him in, but he was too weak to hold himself up. They might have been slow on the uptake in the beginning, but had finally figured out it was best to keep him as weak as it took to barely keep him alive.

His keeper for the last six months strolled the length of the small hallway, but wisely kept out of reach, should Brody get a burst of energy and reach through the bars for him. In the last six months, they’d come to blows enough to prove to Chester that if Brody wasn’t weak from the limited blood supply, he’d have done more than just leave the hunter with a few new scars.

“Seventy-eight bottles of blood on the wall,” Brody taunted.

The elder stopped, smirked. “I don’t need much of a reason to come in there and finish what we started yesterday.”

Brody cocked his head and gestured towards the door to his cell with a sweep of his arm that made his muscles scream in protest. “By all means, come on in.”

The elder didn’t move.

“No?” Brody shrugged, finding the iron bars infinitely more interesting than the man who’d done everything in his power to keep him trapped here. “Just as well,” he sighed. “I’m fresh out of tea bags anyway.” He nodded towards the rusting sink and commode at the far end of his cell. “Plus the tap water here has a real aftertaste that I just can’t seem to get used to.”

“It’s the best you’re going to get for a very long time.”

Brody picked at the bars with his fingernail. "So you keep telling me."

"Here's something I haven't told you."

"I'm on the edge of my seat," Brody drawled, watching Chester from lowered lids. The elder didn't make a move without him following it. The darkness so much a part of him stirred restlessly inside Brody, watching, waiting for a moment to strike, even in a weakened state.

Probably because of it.

Chester crouched down, studying the concrete floor intently before finally lifting his gaze to Brody's. "Your girlfriend has been looking for you."

Brody didn't so much as blink at the revelation. It took everything inside him not to betray the unexpected swell of emotion that rose up in his throat at the mention of Julia.

"Girlfriend?" Brody smirked. "Would you be referring to the blonde I was ready to screw before you found me six months ago, the redhead in Paris whose husband's bullet came a little too close, or perhaps you mean the first girl whose dress I got under, oh, almost six hundred years ago now."

"Julia Sanchez."

Brody expelled a sigh of sheer boredom. "It's getting old how you keep bringing her up when she meant nothing to me."

"I doubt she'd be trying to track you down if she meant nothing."

"Maybe she's just horny. I was good in bed."

The elder ventured closer, and on a yawn Brody shut his eyes, the only thing that could give him away at this point. He concentrated on keeping his heart rate under control, but the thought of Julia risking her foolish neck for him had already fired his insides.

"Maybe I should pay her a visit."

Brody cracked open an eye. "Just remember to say hi for me."

Chester tipped his head, considering. "Do you honestly expect me to believe you care nothing for the vampire you took as your life-mate?"

"An unfortunate mistake on my part, but then we've had this conversation before."

The elder laughed.

"Seventy-seven bottles of blood on the wall," Brody chanted. "Seventy-seven bottles of blood."

Chester sneered, and on his feet again, ventured closer.

Brody only bobbed his head to the music in his mind. "Take one down and pass it around ..."

Julia's face burned behind his eyes, his system pushing hard to keep up with the news. She was looking for him. *Damn her.*

"Perhaps I should tell her hello for you--"

Brody moved faster than he had in weeks, catching enough of the hunter's shirt in his fist to drag him against the cell. The change in rhythm of the elder's pulse was like a homing beacon.

Turning the wrist he'd yanked through the bars upwards, Brody bit down, his fangs lengthening at the first taste of blood.

Chester cried out, pulled futilely at his arm.

Brody should have been too weak to hold the hunter still enough to drink, but he didn't release the fierce grapple hold he had on the elder. Chester's blood filled his senses, a hundred times more potent than the animal blood they'd been giving him. It was a wonder vampires the world over hadn't made hunters their chosen prey, if only for the rich satisfaction that came from drinking from them. Of course, given that the sole purpose of the hunters was to make sure vampires steered clear of preying on innocent humans, most of his kind tended to avoid the other race wherever possible.

Something pierced his side, and Brody flicked his gaze down to the dart stuck in his thigh.

He didn't let go, needing every drop he could get. Needing it to get out of here so he could tell Julia to leave her search for him the hell alone. This wasn't the first time they'd caught him, and even when he got out of here, he knew they'd keep coming.

His thigh stung yet again as another dart was embedded deep, and he faintly registered the second hunter brave enough to drug him like an animal, instead of taking him down himself.

His vision swam, and he clung to the tenuous grip on his captor's wrist.

The elder was already too dazed to do more than try to shake him off like he was a mosquito instead of the lethal creature that surfaced at the first drop of blood. While hunters might have the edge when it came to diffusing vampire threats at a distance, once a vampire got their fangs into them--literally--the odds changed fairly quickly.

Another dart struck, and his stomach jackknifed. His knees trembled before they gave out, pitching him to the floor. Heart thundering, Brody leaned against the bars, the strength from the hunter's blood slipping through a fuzzy haze that clouded his mind.

His arms hung at his sides, growing heavier until he couldn't keep himself upright anymore. His head struck the hard cement floor and pain radiated down the side of his face. Through one thunderous beat of his heart after another, Brody forced his heavy eyes open, fighting the drug.

If he could stay awake he might find an opportunity to get the hell out of here. The sleepy-time cocktail oozing through his system argued against the odds of that. Through blurred vision, he watched the armed hunter drag the elder clear of the cell before examining the deep puncture wounds that would probably heal faster on the bastard than it took time to stitch him up.

Colors swirled and danced behind Brody's closed lids like a July 4<sup>th</sup> fireworks display set in fast forward. He fought through the thickening veil coming down over his mind to get a read on both hunters, but the drug pulled him under too quickly.

\* \* \* \*

Julia cringed at the crunch of bones breaking, and the hunter at Brynn's feet cried out.

"That was for this, dumbass." Brynn wiped at the blood that trailed down her face from where the hunter had nicked her cheek with his knife. The hunter, having apparently decided he didn't want to be fed on anymore tonight, had been ready when they came at him.

Brynn crouched down in front of him. "I happen to like my face, probably even more than you like your pinky finger, I'm guessing. So don't screw with me and I won't have to hurt you. Clear?"

The hunter bobbed his head in weary agreement, and then he shot a hand out,

catching Brynn's ankle and jerking her off her feet.

Julia didn't even get the chance to make a move. Brynn recovered her footing faster than would have been possible for a human. A hard nudge from her foot rolled the hunter onto his back and she pressed the heel of her boot against his windpipe.

"This would go much faster if you'd just play nice," Brynn snapped.

Crossing her arms, Julia was more than happy to leave the interrogating to the professional. "Anyone ever tell you that you have a natural gift for this stuff?"

The half smile that caught the corner of Brynn's mouth was more resigned than amused. "You just have to let your inner bitch out."

Julia raised a brow. "Inner?"

Brynn rolled her eyes, and Julia moved to stand next to her. The hunter eyed the two of them warily.

"You still hungry, Jules?"

She shrugged. "You can have him if you want."

Brynn snorted, her face actually paling at the thought. "I'd rather leave the red stuff to you."

Julia grinned. "Well, if you insist." She knelt down next to the hunter as though she'd been invited for tea and scones instead of more of the enemy's blood. "One more nibble couldn't hurt."

The hunter's eyes bulged in their sockets. "He's not here."

Brynn readjusted the pressure on the man's throat. "In case you hadn't caught on, we're looking for information that we *don't* know."

"But he was here. They transported him to another location last week."

"Where?" Julia demanded.

"I don't know."

"You really are a bit on the slow side, aren't you?" Brynn taunted with another press of her foot.

The hunter was lucky she wasn't wearing stilettos.

Julia pushed at the man's mind. "Who does know?"

The hunter shook his head. "I'm just a flunky. A go-to guy."

A smile that lacked genuine amusement teased the edges of Brynn's mouth. "I really wouldn't brag about that."

"They don't tell me anything other than what I need to know." The hunter's golden eyes shifted to Julia, then back to Brynn.

"And they didn't think you needed to know where they were taking him?"

The hunter bobbed his head, relieved to have gotten through to them.

Brynn sighed, but didn't move her boot. *I think he's telling the truth.*

Julia still needed more information. "How long was he held here?"

"A couple weeks."

"How long has he been a prisoner?"

"Six months I think this time."

This time? She glanced up at Brynn who shrugged and stepped back. The hunter was wise enough not to move an inch.

Julia stood, piecing together the new information with what she already knew. He'd been taken by hunters before? For the same reason they wanted him this time, because of the Key?

A dull ache flared between her temples.

Damn it, she'd been happy. Mostly. She had her club, her friends, her family. She didn't need any reminders of the past. Didn't need to know that Brody was being held somewhere against his will. Didn't need to feel the shattered whispers in her heart that sought the closure he had denied them both when he walked out the door decades before with no explanation.

"I guess we'll bring him along." Brynn grabbed the hunter and hauled him to his feet. "Maybe Declan can get something more out of him."

"Maybe." But Julia wouldn't get her hopes up. She wasn't even sure she wanted them up to begin with. Keeping Brody tucked in the darkest part of her memory was the only way she'd been able to face a future alone, and she wasn't the least bit comfortable thinking about him now. Over a hundred years later.

Not when she didn't trust the repercussions.

\* \* \* \*

The nudge to his stomach brought him closer to awareness. The faint snatches of a dream slid through his fingers. His heart cried out at the loss. He'd been dreaming of her. Jules. He tried to sink deeper to recapture the images, cling to them.

The persistent motion against his side made that impossible, even if he couldn't work up the strength to do more than inch away from the continual probing at his ribs.

He needed to sleep. To dream.

*No more sleeping.*

The drug was still thick in his system, but he managed to peel open one eye when he was hauled to his feet as though he weighed no more than an infant.

*I thought they were starving you.*

He blinked to clear the fog over his eyes, surprised to see long hair falling across his line of vision.

A woman?

She was already halfway down the hall, holding most of his weight before he realized she'd opened his cell door. They stepped over an unconscious hunter.

*He's not dead.*

The woman seemed to think he cared either way.

*You do.*

Brody would have snorted if his throat didn't feel too raw to do more than let air past down it. He struggled to lift his head, but got nothing more from the woman beyond the dark clothes she wore.

A familiar scent teased his senses. Did he know her?

Footsteps echoed in the hallway at the top of the stairs.

*Up you go.* She propped him against the wall. He dug his fingernails into the stone for purchase, trying in vain to follow her movements at the same time. The shadows cast by the walls opposite him devoured her, masking her identity. He should have been able to see perfectly in the dark, but one of the side effects of the drug left his eyesight impaired for hours.

Brody couldn't see her. Had she left him? He didn't even know what day it was or how long he'd been drugged for. An hour? A day? A week? It wasn't the first time they had used drugs to keep him under control, but never had the effects weighed so heavily on him.

A long shadow stretched across the floor, and then was tackled to the ground by another.

Brody managed to tip his face up, but the motions were too fast. He closed his eyes and leaned his head back. Just for another minute, then he could get out of here before Julia did something stupid.

Like try to save his worthless ass.

*Do you always think so highly of yourself?*

The woman ducked her head, slipping an arm around his waist and leaving him no choice but to cling to her as they continued on. It was either that or let his uncooperative limbs leave him in a tangled mess on the floor.

The cool spring air felt wonderful on his face. It had been four months since last he stood in the night air any longer than it took for him to be transported to and from a vehicle.

He tried to mentally track their progress from the little he knew of the area, but soon gave up. "I need to rest."

*I could always just take you back.*

It was another few minutes before he was pushed into the passenger seat of a car. The leather molded to him, and another time he might have cared if he smeared any blood over the expensive interior. The quick movements of her hauling him along had opened some wounds, the healing process slowed by the drug despite the infusion of hunter's blood to his system.

*It'll wear off soon.*

Once the vehicle was in motion, he couldn't keep his eyes open any longer.

A while later the car was stopped, and she opened the door. Through eyes that had cleared marginally during the short nap, he surveyed the front of a run-down motel with a neon vacancy sign on the corner that blinked off and on.

The woman helped him to the door and guided him inside. He headed for the bed, but she steered him to the bathroom.

She held out a knife. "You'll need this."

He frowned. "Why?"

"To remove the tracker they put inside you. It will be close to the surface of your skin and probably no bigger than a pebble."

Given a few of his escapes off and on over the years they'd held him, he wasn't surprised, but he couldn't remember them doing it.

He stared at the knife she laid on the edge of the sink before she retreated. "Where are you going?" Her face swam in and out of focus, but something struck him as familiar.

*You'll see me again.*

And then he heard the door close, and a few moments later the car she'd driven pulled away. If he trusted himself to take a few steps he would have glanced out the window to get a longer look. As it was, he gently lowered himself to the lid of the commode. From the corner of his eye he saw the knife, realizing she never told him where to find the tracker.

Perfect.

He rubbed at his face and then the tired aching muscles in his neck. A small sting, little more than some minor discomfort raked the back of his neck. There was a small scar at the base of his hairline.

Sneaky bastards.

He had to wait another few painstaking minutes before he trusted himself to pick up the knife she'd left him. When he finished, he crushed the small device, then made sure all the windows were well sealed before collapsing on the bed. Eventually he might have the strength to crawl beneath the covers, but for now the soft mattress would do.

And as he gave into sleep once more, he knew he'd have to make sure before anything else that Julia stayed out of this.

## Chapter Two

“Find the bastard?”

Julia shot Gabe a weary look that bordered on annoying as she sank down on the couch in Will’s living room. She knew he was only looking out for her, but his attitude grated her monstrous headache the wrong way tonight.

He cocked his blonde head, his eyes narrowing, but whatever he was thinking, he chose not to say out loud.

She could feel the others watching, but shut her eyes until she was ready to face more questions. Just as it had been the other times when she’d returned without finding Brody. She could feel Gabe and Will’s concern until the sensation damn near smothered her. They were her family, but even they didn’t understand how she could be so willing to risk her life for a man who’d crushed her.

Until a couple months ago, she’d thought all the loss and heartache he’d caused had been done and buried. For almost a century she hadn’t felt so much as a hint of his presence, only to have the hurt and loneliness come clawing to the surface the second she had felt an echo of him when they had found Lanie. Will’s life-mate had been taken by the same group of rogue hunters Declan’s council was still struggling to track down. When they’d discovered where Lanie was being held, Julia had been stunned to discover not only had Brody been there moments before she arrived and was now a hunter captive, but that he’d been forced to turn Lanie into one of them.

Despite that Lanie hadn’t been given the opportunity to choose to become a vampire, Will was at least more reasonable in not trying to stop Julia from looking for Brody. She suspected Will’s bonding to Lanie had given him a smidge more perspective than Gabriel, but she knew she’d still find traces of disapproval in his eyes if she looked.

Her only allies in her search had been Lanie and Brynn. Though she and Lanie had only been friends for a short time, they’d grown close enough Julia knew she could trust the spunky blonde to have her back anytime. She also suspected Lanie’s decision to support her search for Brody had more to do with the connection between Lanie and the captive vampire than the other woman ever let on.

Julia glanced at Brynn, the same woman she’d once caught interrogating Will and Gabriel with the same wicked-looking knife strapped to the inside of her calf. Their level of trust had been tenuous at best in the beginning, but the fact that Brynn willfully engaged her own race to help Julia find Brody had given them a new respect for each other. As far as Julia could guess, Brynn needed an outlet for the steady stream of aggression simmering inside the troubled woman as much as anything. Even Lanie’s recent attempts to get Brynn to open up had yielded less than satisfying results. More often than not Brynn said little and kept her rigid mental shields closed so tight Julia didn’t know how her head couldn’t be ready to explode.

Between Will and Gabe giving her a hard time, and Brynn’s need to work off her boundless aggressive energy, having Lanie to talk to kept Julia from wanting to bang her head off the closest brick wall.

“Hellooooo beautiful.”

Julia sighed, and cracked open her eyes to watch Gabe turn from smooth operator to complete moron. It happened every time the man came within fifty feet of Brynn. Listening to the other vampire grumble about continually striking out with Brynn was getting old. More than once Julia contemplated locking the two of them in a room

together just so she wouldn't have to listen to him anymore. If she thought Brynn would go willingly, Julia would have done so already. For some reason the other woman continued to keep her distance where Gabriel was concerned.

"Not now," Brynn growled. She flopped down in the chair opposite the couch. With an impatient jerk at the zipper on the killer boots Julia had been admiring for the last week, Brynn kicked them off before tucking her feet under her.

Gabe's hooked his fingers on the upper lip of the doorway leading to the kitchen, his relaxed posture deliberately meant to make him appear harmless. On any other woman, vampire or human, the laid back thing worked like a charm. Julia didn't understand why he bothered. This was Brynn, and time and again she'd proved immune to his relentless efforts. One of these days he'd do them all a favor and accept the fact that Brynn wasn't going to be the next notch on his bed post.

"I give great foot massages." Arms crossed lazily across his chest, Gabe moved deeper into the room.

Brynn glared at him. "Good for you."

"I could use one," Julia grumbled knowing he didn't hear a damn word whenever Brynn popped up on his radar.

His gaze swung her way, and Julia instantly regretted the comment since it brought his attention back to her.

Even though the couch felt comfortable beneath her, Julia pushed to her feet. She didn't want to invite any more criticism of her search for Brody any more than she wanted to sit through another sexually charged sparring session between him and Brynn.

Lanie inclined her head toward the kitchen.

Julia stared at the front door, wondering if there was a chance in hell to bolt. She sighed. And that would only put off the question-and-answer period that was practically a requirement in this place.

She gave in and followed Lanie. As expected, Will fell into step behind her. The two of them had been inseparable during the last few months. But as much as she adored the two of them, there were days when seeing the long looks they shared brought the old heartache roaring back to the surface. She was happy for them, and yet envious that they shared the closeness with another that she'd never feel again. Not even the death of a life-mate erased the hunger for them. A vampire could desire and even love another of their kind or a human, but if they'd already bonded with another vampire, other relationships would never compare, would never satisfy the same.

Which was why most vampires preferred humans when it came to satisfying sexual cravings. Unless they were ready for the kind of commitment that instinctively fell into place after drinking from each other only a handful of times.

"No other leads?" Lanie asked, perching on the edge of a stool at the center of the kitchen island.

Julia shook her head. Her slow measured steps ate up the length of the checkered ceramic tiles before she pivoted on her heel and paced back.

"Declan called earlier. He's in town and wants to help." Will casually draped an arm around Lanie's shoulder.

"If he can." For all Julia knew the rogue hunters had carted Brody across the ocean. Tonight's place was the third property they'd checked in the last two weeks--the fourth one in New York--out of the dozen facilities they'd searched in four states. All

leads had come through Declan and tonight's had been the closest they'd come so far to finding him.

Damn it, she hated this. Hated the guilt that churned in her stomach. She shouldn't feel like this. *He* had been the one who left, yanking her perfect world out from under her when he walked away without so much as a glimpse back. For weeks now she'd been tormented by the memory of his leaving, remembered too clearly coming down the steps that night to find him staring at the front door. He'd been distant for days, refusing to tell her what was bothering him. And with a coldness that iced her heart he'd told her things were over between them. It took a full minute to process what he was telling her, but the more she pushed him for an explanation as to why he no longer loved her as he claimed, the less he said.

And then he left.

If anyone should not feel guilty in all this, it was her.

And what would he have said had she found him at the compound tonight? Would he have even bothered with a thank you before going on his way? She closed her eyes as if doing so would stop the situation from getting any more complicated.

Will propped his elbows on the island, a few strands of black hair falling across his forehead. "Maybe you should leave finding him to Declan entirely."

Julia didn't bother to respond. Even though the same thing had occurred to her more than once, she knew she couldn't sit back and leave it in the elder's hands. She trusted Declan the way she didn't any other of his kind, except Brynn, but couldn't sit back and do nothing.

Lanie and Will exchanged looks as though they already knew her answer.

A crash came from the living room.

"Damn it," Will snapped. "Why won't he figure out that going one-on-one with her gets him nothing but a few new bruises and a deflated ego?" He walked to the door. "Take it downstairs to Gabe's before you two break something."

"He refuses to take no for an answer," Brynn argued in a tone completely devoid of blame.

Will sighed and took a seat next to Lanie. "I don't know how much more of those two I can take."

Julia grinned. "I'm just grateful they at least don't live in the same city." At this point the smallest silver lining was better than nothing.

"I heard that," Brynn said from the doorway.

On a groan, Julia pulled herself up to sit on the countertop. She really needed to start thinking about getting a place a little farther from her family. She'd been thinking about renovating the warehouse space above the club for the last couple months. Maybe it was time to make a serious effort in that area.

Gabe stepped up directly behind Brynn. "I'm heading out for a snack before dawn. Want to tag along?"

Brynn scrunched up her nose. "I don't do blood."

Looking like he belonged on an underwear billboard instead of being the techno-geek that ran a modest game software empire, Gabriel propped an arm in the doorway blocking Brynn's exit.

Julia snorted. As if the hunter would hesitate to break his arm if he didn't let her pass. Maybe Gabe had some weird pussy-whipped fetish he'd been keeping under wraps.

Before things went from entertaining to downright pathetic, Julia shoved off. “I’m heading to bed.”

She even managed to get halfway up the steps to her apartment before she heard Lanie trailing after her. Julia left the door open, knowing it was too much to hope that things could have been left as they were downstairs.

As close as she and Lanie had become, being around the newly turned vampire proved to be harder than Julia expected some days. Brody was the oldest and strongest vampire Julia had come across, and having been forced to turn Lanie by the rogues months ago, too much of him echoed inside Lanie. The bond the two shared was more than just blood, and though Lanie didn’t consciously share any of Brody’s memories, faint emotions were a different story. Julia had lost track of the number of times in the last couple of months it would almost feel as though Brody was close, only to realize it was just a passing vibe Lanie gave off. She doubted her friend was even aware of how much she could feel the hints of the man she once loved when Lanie left her mind a little too open.

“I can feel it every time you look at me,” Lanie said gently from behind her.

Julia closed her eyes. Unfortunately, having been turned by such a powerful vampire, Lanie was far too perceptive. Even though Brody had turned Julia as well, Lanie routinely drank from Will, giving her senses the added boost that gave her the edge when Julia was feeling worn out. Like tonight. And she’d long ago gotten in the habit of holding a less tight grip on her mental shields when she was home.

It was times like this Julia understood why so many of their kind kept contact with other vampires to a minimum. Few humans possessed any real psychic ability, making it easier not to have to worry about probing minds, twenty-four/seven.

Lanie grinned. “I’ve really gotten used to the shoe being on the other foot, you know.”

Despite herself, Julia laughed, thinking about Lanie’s initial annoyance over Julia’s ability to read her thoughts when she’d still been human. She backtracked and shut the door, flicking the lock to make sure no one else put in an appearance.

“Brody still loves you.”

Julia shook her head. “I can’t hear that right now.” Not tonight. Not any night.

“You keep talking yourself out of it.”

“No, I just refuse to put complete faith in it.” Or any faith really. Some things were better left to dreams that crept in during the nights when being alone hurt so much it was like being deserted all over again. She’d long ago gotten over that night, having chosen to move forward with her life instead of pining for the past.

“I may not know why he left, but in the brief time I was with him, I felt it.”

Julia could have done without the quiet conviction she heard in Lanie’s voice. Made it that much harder to remember the aloofness she remembered in Brody’s expression, the cool indifference in his tone when he’d told her he was leaving.

Julia tipped her head, forcing herself to recall the crushing numbness that had slipped in to place when she realized he wasn’t coming back. “But he didn’t say it, did he?”

“No.”

“Sometimes actions speak louder than words.” A lesson she’d learned the hard way.

“So you plan to leave it to Declan then?”

“I don’t know.” Julia let out the breath that burned under her ribs, wishing Brody had stayed gone.

\* \* \* \*

“He escaped.” The hunter visibly trembled delivering the news, the tight fists he kept locked at his sides, shaking.

And so the hunter should. This wasn’t what he wanted to hear. He clenched his fingers over the arm of the chair until he felt his nails pierce the wood. Only then did he trust himself to respond. Even then, the urge to tear the man’s head from his shoulders held a certain appeal. Maybe he’d save that for afterwards, as an example for what happened to those who failed him. If part of his plans hadn’t required his complete attention, he never would have allowed this to happen.

This was the third time Brody had escaped imprisonment. Stupid of him to have believed the idiots he’d put in charge of watching the vampire could hold onto him this time. An unfortunate mistake that would not be made again. He should never have trusted a group of hunters who had defected from their own council with such an incredible responsibility.

A year ago the vampire’s escape would have been no more than a very minor setback. Now that he was so close to what he sought, this monumental oversight needed to be remedied. Yesterday.

He leaned forward in his chair. “Do you have any leads on his whereabouts?”

“Not yet.”

“And the seer?”

“En route to help us ferret him out.”

He nodded. The gifted hunter had proved invaluable in bringing Brody to his attention in the first place. Without Brody, he knew it would be next to impossible to reach his goal. He refused to accept any other recourse than the revenge he had planned, the war ready to finally be waged.

“And the vampire’s life-mate, Julia Sanchez? Do you at least know where she is?”

The hunter nodded.

Good. He should have taken her before now as leverage. Another oversight he would correct immediately. He’d come too far, been waiting too long to have this slip through his fingers now.

He forced the frustration riding in his throat to settle. “Find her.” His voice betrayed nothing of the anger chained like a rabid animal in the middle of his chest. He narrowed his eyes, took extreme pleasure in watching the hunter looking ready to piss himself. “And do not disappoint me again.”

The man gave a jerky nod and fled the room.

“Wait.”

The man stopped in the doorway, his feet freezing to the floor before he slowly turned around.

He smiled, the hunter’s fear a tangible scent that clung to the air.

Maybe he would make an example of him after all.

\* \* \* \*

The lust for blood brought him awake, his fangs already lengthened like a newly turned vampire incapable of controlling the craving. He didn’t know if it was the

aftereffect of the drug or the hunter's blood that left him with a thirst he hadn't experienced in decades. Not since ...

He deliberately pushed that trailing thought to the deepest place of his mind. If he didn't he might well have a more serious problem on his hands. Like contemplating all the ways he could kill Julia for getting involved and bringing attention to herself. Attention he'd been intentionally trying to divert every time someone remembered her.

Brody opened his eyes, the mattress beneath him much softer than the floor and the 17<sup>th</sup> century style pallet he'd been sleeping on as some kind of a joke. Overall, many of his injuries seemed to be completely healed and for the first time in a couple weeks, he could sit up without every muscle and tendon threatening to tear.

He scrubbed a hand down his face, and then reached for the phone on the bedside table. The scent of the woman still lingered. His rescuer. As before, the familiarity of the scent teased the farthest corners of his mind.

How did he know her? And how had she known he was there? She wasn't a hunter, and too strong for a human. That only left vampire, and one who had to be far older than even his six hundred years.

Someone from his past? Someone ...

He closed his eyes, breathing deep, fighting to pull the pieces together in his mind.

A moment later his eyes shot open, and he faced the door as though any second she would return.

The one who had turned him.

Could that be right? Had they finally crossed paths again after the night that forever changed his life? He'd thought her a sorceress when she'd promised him that his sight would be restored by her gift. But he'd also had nothing to lose by accepting her offer.

Except death.

The one he'd anticipated with a shiver of dread those first few seconds when the points of her fangs had scraped his neck. His panic and instinctive attempt to break free had been fruitless, and lasted only a few brief seconds. When he'd awoken, seeing the world for the first time since a beating as a child took his sight, the woman was gone. Not once since then had they crossed paths.

Until now.

Brody stood motionless for one long minute after another, then remembered the phone in his hand. He quickly punched in the memorized number he'd only had to use a handful of times in the last ten years.

When the person on the other end picked up he said, "I need to have some money wired."

"That's it? Not even a 'hi, how are you' first? Where the hell have you been, Brody?"

"Detained."

The long sigh on the other end carried an edge of relief. "Tell me you've just been holed up with a woman."

"Hardly." It surprised him that Colin would even think that.

"I was hoping you had finally taken my advice."

"Afraid not. Get the plane ready and have it waiting at JFK tomorrow night."

“You’re in New York?”

He studied the motel brochures left on the nightstand. “So it seems.”

“You sure you don’t want to make arrangements to leave tonight?”

Brody hesitated. He should put as much distance between himself and the hunters who were undoubtedly already looking for him. But he couldn’t leave just yet. “They won’t be expecting me to hang around. Besides, there’s something I need to do first.”

\* \* \* \*

Brody stared across the street at the front of Infinity. Music already drifted from the nightclub’s open windows and main door. A few people lingered outside on the sidewalk, passing cigarettes and waiting for friends. It was still early enough that the bouncer Brody caught sight of just inside the door, had to do little more than stand there and look intimidating.

He’d looked up Julia’s home address, but knew this was where he’d find her. Only in a crowd did he have a chance of catching sight of her without being noticed. Right after his conversation with Colin, he’d made arrangements for someone else to stick close to Julia should his *friends* get desperate enough to go after her.

A silver Lexus pulled up to the curb, and he instinctively shrank back into the shadows out of sight. The second the door opened and one slim ankle encased in a strappy black heel hit the pavement, his entire body snapped to attention. He didn’t move as Julia emerged from the car wearing a black curve-hugging dress that came mid-thigh, a slit in the material showing off even more as she straightened. She wore her hair up tonight, a few stray curls escaping to trail down her bare shoulders.

He clenched his fist at his side, remembering the softness as clearly as if she were close enough to run his hand through the silky strands. It had been far too long since he’d laid eyes on her. His throat squeezed, and too many emotions tried clawing through his chest at once.

Her hand tightened on the top of the open door, and she spun around. Her sharp gaze swept the length of the street, searching.

Confident the boost from the hunter’s blood would help mask his presence, he watched her face relax. She took another step in his direction, wary, then turned and headed for the main door.

The bouncer who lounged in the doorway straightened as if his drill sergeant had caught him off guard with a surprise inspection. He bent and spoke close to her ear when she paused next to him. The music made hearing their conversation impossible, and Brody didn’t dare try to read either of their thoughts. To do so would be like setting off a flare in the middle of the street with Julia instinctively more attuned to him than most vampires.

He hadn’t even made up his mind up about revealing himself and already could barely keep up with the race of his heart. And he was only watching her from a far. Only in his dreams did he imagine himself talking to her, touching her, the way he once had.

Across the street, Julia shook her head, her annoyance clear as she pivoted on her heel and started back down the few steps before turning down the corner and disappearing around the side of the building.

Brody straightened, but didn’t move from his spot.

Not yet.

\* \* \* \*

The feeling she was being watched didn't dissipate as she rounded the side of the club and headed for the rear entrance. Almost the moment she emerged from her car she'd felt the heavy stare that seemed to hover on her. If not for the unwavering certainty someone was watching her, she might have brushed the sensation aside as paranoia. She'd likely pissed off more than her share of hunters lately. It wasn't beyond the realm of possibility that they had come looking for her. But unless the hunters were elders, she should have been able to better pinpoint the threat instead of only getting hints of it.

Heading around to the rear of the club held a dual purpose. Given some of her clientele, she preferred having staff members who could keep the peace and still remain on equal footing with the vampire population that occasionally frequented the place. But she'd heard a rumor that one of her new guys was sneaking a little snack at work, which was against her rules.

She also figured if someone were looking to corner her, it was better she set them up for the perfect opportunity, than run headlong into an ambush later.

She turned another corner and the alley narrowed.

Footsteps sounded behind her.

Julia stepped back behind the open door of the building next door, focusing with her mind to get a better fix on who was following her. A moment later she cursed under her breath.

"Whatchya doin'?"

Julia scowled at Gabriel, feeling ridiculous and at the same time reassured. "I thought you were someone else."

His brows drew together as her meaning, or the implication behind it, sank in. His eyes narrowed to dangerous slits that made it clear the predator within him was never too far away. "Do you see now why looking for him on your own is not a good idea?"

She pushed away from the sheltered spot, avoiding his gaze. "I'm familiar with your point of view on the subject."

Gabriel caught her elbow. "How long before these rogue hunters come after you?"

"I'll handle it."

"How? By winding up as another captive of theirs? Or worse?"

Or dead. He didn't even have to say it. The unspoken words echoed in her head.

"That bastard deserted you, walked away from his life-mate and you're risking your life for him."

She gently pulled her arm free. She'd run out of patience where this subject was concerned, but she wasn't about to take Gabe's head off for saying the same things she knew she would if their situations were reversed. "I can't sit back and do nothing." She'd awakened with the certainty of it clinging to her heart, if for no other reason than for closure. Something she'd never have if she didn't do everything in her power to try and find Brody.

"And if it was you the hunters had, can you say that he'd be busting his ass to find you?"

Her silence was telling. She'd like to believe that regardless of Brody leaving years ago, their connection would prompt him to track her down if she were ever imprisoned. But a century's worth of doubts stopped such a fragile hope from breaking past her lips.

“I remember when we found you,” Gabriel added. “He broke you inside, and I don’t want to see you hurt like that again.”

“That won’t happen.” Not again.

“I think it already has.”

She shook her head, but knew the gesture fell miserably short of convincing.

“Some days you’re not nearly as quiet with your thoughts as you think. I know you’ve been wondering if the reason he never came back was because he’d been taken, just as I know that they haven’t had him imprisoned all this time. Because then you might be able to convince yourself he had a good reason for never coming back.”

“I have to go to work.”

Gabriel sidestepped her. “Brody is nothing but a selfish bastard who didn’t realize what a good thing he had in you. You need to let it go.”

“I can’t.” If ignoring the truth of the situation were an option, she would have done so to spare herself the recent trips down memory lane.

“Why? Why still pine for the guy who ripped your heart out?” Frustration skirted his words.

“That’s not what I’m doing.”

“It is from where I’m standing.”

“Then take a second look,” she snapped. “And before you continue to preach at me about letting go, try giving yourself to someone else and then knowing you’ll never feel that kind of connection with anyone else.”

“Sex is overrated.”

Her answering laugh was brittle at best.

“A lot of vampires lose their life-mates and move on to find happiness with others.”

Julia gestured to the club. “I have moved on.”

“Not completely.”

Talking about this with Gabriel was useless. How many times had they been through this? How many more would it take before he realized he needed to get off her back? “I’m done talking about this.”

“And you won’t be happy again until you leave the past alone.”

It was useless to point out that the past didn’t want to leave *her* alone.

Julia shouldered past him, half expecting him to stop her. The bouncer at the back door raised a brow when she stormed past. Julia ignored him and her original intention for coming around this way and made a beeline straight for the stairs leading to her office.

Before slipping inside, she glanced once over her shoulders to make sure Gabriel hadn’t followed her. With no sign of him among the thickening crowd, she walked into her office and leaned against the closed door. The room had been designed to keep the bulk of the music out, but with tinted windows that overlooked the club allowing her to keep an eye on things.

Her gaze slid to her desk. Work. She needed to work. Run numbers, file. Hell anything she could focus on other than the small fear that Gabriel was right.

She straightened and surveyed the interior of her office, then moved to stand in front of the center window that looked down over the dance floor. No. Gabe was wrong. Opening this club seven years ago had been proof of that. Proof of her commitment to

embrace her future, not the past.

For far too long she'd lived in that shadowed place, envious of Gabriel's zest for life. She'd stopped feeling sorry for herself the day he and Will had taken her in, but hadn't taken the steps that counted, steps towards the life within her reach, until the day the doors to Infinity were opened. This place was hers. She'd done it all with no help from anyone, proving she was more than capable of moving forward.

With a sigh, she turned back to her desk and the work that came with running the place.

She had a long night ahead of her and looked forward to every second of it. Anything to take her mind off all the unknowns she couldn't account for. The ones that could threaten what she'd built for herself, and the ones that could prove her heart wasn't nearly as healed as she hoped.

\* \* \* \*

"There you are."

Julia glanced up to find her friend Zoya looking as sultry as ever in the doorway.

"Come dance."

Julia smiled and shook her head. "Not tonight."

Long black hair fell in a smooth wave down the other vampire's backless red dress. She shriveled her nose at the laptop on Julia's desk. "I don't know if you've heard, but one of the perks to being immortal is that we can procrastinate all we want."

"What can I say? I love my job."

Zoya pushed her lips into a deep pout. "Come on Jules, give me half an hour. Consider it your lunch break."

When Julia didn't refuse right away, she added, "Please."

"Okay, fine. Twenty minutes."

A smile broke across Zoya's stunning face. Each of her facial features--from her exotic eyes and perfect nose, to full lips that rivaled Angelina Jolie's--never failed to catch the eye of every man in the place anytime she put in an appearance.

"Modeling much lately?"

"A little. I have to pass on a lot of jobs. Sunlight is a real bitch."

Julia followed her friend out to the catwalk that looked down on the crowded dance floor. As always, the sight of a full house brought a satisfied smile to her lips. She started down the steps behind Zoya, stopping when the sensation of being watched rippled across the back of her neck.

Halfway down the stairs, she swept her gaze over the dozens of people in the club, searching for anyone out of place.

The feeling didn't dissipate as she let herself be led onto the dance floor and into a small gathering of her friends. But instead of dancing, she found herself studying every dark booth and shadowed corner until she was satisfied that no real threat existed. She even managed to relax enough to indulge in the short break from work.

A half hour turned into nearly two as she let herself be talked into joining the group for a drink before finally heading back up to her office. The rest of the night passed uneventfully and she managed to stay focused on work right up until she locked the door behind the last employee to leave for the night. With dawn still a couple hours away, she had enough time to go over some orders before she headed for home.

Her heels clicked over the deserted dance floor, the bar that had been packed

almost shoulder to shoulder, now empty. As much as the business woman inside her rejoiced at the resulting profits from a busy night, she took a quiet enjoyment from being in the place alone in the wee hours of the morning.

At the top of the stairs, she stiffened. Julia jerked around. The certainty of being watched was as clear as if someone had reached out to physically touch her, and the prickly sensation pushed a rush of adrenaline through her bloodstream.

Nothing moved beneath her. She faced her office, her hand tight on the knob. She knew before she pushed it open that she wasn't alone.

He was standing in front of the window when she stepped into the room.

He turned his face towards her, a soft smile on his lips. "Hello Jules."

## Chapter Three

For a fleeting moment, Julia wanted to bolt. The only thing that prevented her retreat was her feet melting into the floor. The adrenaline that hummed through her now had nothing to do with any physical threat. The damage done to her heart at finding him here was an entirely different matter.

His dark blonde hair was shorter now than when she last saw him, but long enough that running his hand through it--as had always been his habit--would leave it falling across his eye. How many times had she turned to find him watching her, his hair just that way, his amber eyes studying her as intently as they did now? The simple button up shirt and jeans he wore tonight did little to keep her from remembering what that solid frame felt like pressed against her, naked.

Brody took a step towards her and her stomach back flipped, her senses bursting with the same bone deep awareness of him. He'd masked himself to her somehow. It was the only way to explain how he'd gotten so close without her picking up on him.

"It was you I felt." Her voice didn't shake, at least not to her own ears. But then it was difficult to focus on hearing anything above the frantic rhythm of her heart.

As much as she was relieved to see him, she almost wished a hunter would have been waiting for her instead of him. A hunter she could handle, could understand what would bring them to her. She couldn't make sense of Brody's sudden appearance, and didn't dare trust herself to think beyond a second at a time.

She forced herself to let go of the door handle and eased a little farther into the room. "I'm glad you're all right."

The smile faded from his lips, and almost as though she were witnessing a system lockdown, she read the distance creeping into his eyes. She cursed inwardly, blaming the sight of one familiar smile for letting her believe he would be any different from the day he walked away.

He faced her, those powerful shoulders squared, his expression mirroring cool indifference, and she knew this was exactly the man who left her. Acknowledging that made it much easier to get a grip on the emotions that shot beyond her reach at his unexpected appearance. She shouldn't have let it come as such a shock. He'd been held in the area, hell she'd been looking for him herself, had expected--hoped--to find him.

But not even in her most dangerous dreams that slipped in when she was too worn out from her search to fight them off, had she played with the scenario of him seeking *her* out. Decades ago her mind had spun such treacherous thoughts, but not since then. And no amount of dreams could have prepared her for being within ten feet of him after almost one hundred and twenty-five years.

He crossed his arms. "Are you really glad? I would have thought you'd be the first to rejoice in knowing the enemy caged me."

"That only proves how little you know me." Saying such was a lie, one she was fully prepared for him to call her on. They might have spent a short time together, but never had she opened herself to another soul the way she had Brody. Never craved for another to know every inch of her, inside and out. The way she knew him.

No, the way she thought she'd known him.

He glanced back out the window at the dark club beyond. "Nice place."

She couldn't be sure, but what might have passed for approval clung to his voice. While a small part of her was pleased by that, the unspoken compliment dug under her

skin. She didn't need or want his approval on anything to do with her life.

Julia matched his militant stance, taking a small measure of comfort in the certainty that Brody didn't know how much finding him here had shaken her. "I'm sure you didn't stop by for a drink."

"Now that you mention it, a drink would be nice." Brody strolled past her as though he dropped by all the time to catch up. He paused in the doorway. "Coming?"

She inclined her head towards the cabinet at the back of her office. "I keep it well stocked for ... guests."

He hovered in the doorway a few heartbeats, long enough to make her wonder if he had another reason for wanting out of the room. With a nod, he took the initiative and headed for the cabinet.

Her limbs were jolted out of limbo, her smooth strides belying the anxiousness eating her up inside. She reached the cabinet first and withdrew two glasses before indicating he should take a seat on couch. This was her place, her life, and she wasn't about to sit back while he made himself comfortable as though he hadn't left.

Understanding dawned on his face, and surprisingly enough, he took a seat. A knowing smile tugged at the corner of his mouth as he waited for her to pour the drinks. She could feel the weight of his gaze on her back as she fixed their drinks, the same way she had all those years ago when they'd met.

"You're just as beautiful tonight as you were then."

Her hand tightened on the glass, the crystal a second from shattering before she mentally plugged the holes in her mind he was creeping through.

"It's rude to enter without knocking." She handed him the glass, refusing to let her mind wander back to the night he had tipped her world off its axis with one long, heated glance.

"I never used to need an invitation."

"That was then." She took a drink before setting it aside, the taste lost against the riot of sensations overwhelming her. The misleading vision he made sitting there, as though this wasn't their first meeting since he walked out of her life. The thump of his pulse that made her want to trail her thumb down the strong line of his throat. The scent of him that made her ache to crawl into his lap and inhale the smooth flesh along his jaw.

"I heard you've been looking for me."

Julia shrugged, her indifference a tribute to how determined she was to be unruffled by the fact that the man she'd once spent hours in bed with until they'd exhausted each other, sat mere inches away. "Had those hunters been acting under their council's orders, I would have left you to rot."

He arched a brow. "My just deserts?"

"I have no interest in discussing the past." At least that much was the truth. A fleeting one in a growing fabrication of what Gabe would have called, being in denial.

"Neither do I."

Despite the promise she'd made to never give him any power to hurt her again, the cool statement still stung. She stood up. "I assume they didn't just let you out?" When he shook his head, she said, "So why did you come?"

"You need to leave town for a while."

She studied him, taking in the rough edges--the ones she could feel more than see--trying to pinpoint how he'd changed, then reminded herself she didn't care.

“Not with me,” he added.

Julia bristled. “Rest assured that thought did not cross my mind.” She moved back to her desk. Anything to stem the raw tension building between them as he continued to follow her every move with eyes capable of seeing right through her.

“I’m very serious.”

She crossed her arms. “Why? Why do I have to leave? And why do you even care?”

He came to his feet with a speed that sent an internal alarm screeching up her spine. In four long strides he reached her.

“They may come after you.”

Perched on the corner of her desk, she had to tip her face back to look him in the face. “Hunters?”

He nodded, his gaze drifting so leisurely to her mouth, she became acutely aware of the meager space between their bodies.

“Why?”

The brief moment where she wondered if he was remembering what it felt like to kiss her faded. “They’ll seek any leverage to get their hands on me.”

“Leverage,” she said carefully. “Me? Doesn’t something have to have meaning to be considered leverage?”

“Tell that to them.”

She flinched, and pushed past him. “I appreciate the warning. I’m sure you have somewhere else you need to be.” Somewhere far away from her and the pathetic shred of a long buried hope that there had been another reason that brought him here.

\* \* \* \*

Brody snared her wrist. “Damn it, I didn’t come here to argue with you.” The warmth of her bare arm seeped into his skin, and he clenched his jaw at the first touch they’d shared in decades.

Defiant green eyes blazed up at him. She jerked her arm free. “Good. Thanks for dropping by.”

“Don’t be stubborn. I wouldn’t have come here if I wanted to see something bad happen to you.”

“I’ll try to evade them to spare you the guilt.” She headed for the door.

He beat her to it, slapping a palm down to shut it before she could retreat any further. With her back to him, her hand braced on the handle, he watched the rise and fall of her shoulders. A few long curls trailed down the soft curve of her neck, drawing his eyes to the spot he knew once made her tremble.

“Don’t,” she snapped a moment after he thought to push at the mental shields meant to keep him out of her head.

“Just listen to me. Please.”

Julia sighed and turned around. He expected her to demand that he back up and give her some space. Instead she tilted her chin up. The same stunning green eyes he dreamed about when he hungered the most for what he’d given up, studied him with no small amount of skepticism. He knew he deserved no less, but the expression cut deeper than he liked.

“I felt you the second I arrived here tonight. Outside.”

It wasn’t a question, yet he felt compelled to answer with a nod.

“Why didn’t you show yourself right away and say what you had come to say then leave. I assume you plan to momentarily.” The casual dismissal in her tone didn’t match the uncertainty buried in her eyes.

“I hadn’t planned on talking to you myself.”

One smooth dark brow arched. “So once you saw me, you felt guilty about not telling me yourself that I might have rogue hunters after me?”

He didn’t answer. Couldn’t. It was better to say nothing than to admit why he hadn’t shown himself right away. That getting within ten feet of her brought every urge to haul her into his arms thundering to the forefront. That the intensity alone of seeing her face, the familiar smile that always came slowly before exploding across her beautiful face, nearly choked him. He hadn’t trusted himself to get any closer until the worst of those needs passed, and even then hadn’t made a conscious decision to approach her until closing time.

The warmth tunneling through his veins, the long raking fingers that plucked at his nerve endings told him his control was far from leashed. His gaze was drawn to the rapid thump of her pulse just under her jaw. His fangs ached, temptation digging into his gut. He closed his eyes, aware that she never looked away from him.

“I really am glad you’re all right,” she said quietly.

Brody backed up to a respectable distance. He’d rather have her spitting mad than see anything in her gaze that would make him forget his determination to leave the second this conversation was done. At least on that assumption she’d been correct.

“Why do they think you can lead them to the Key?”

His head snapped up. “How do you know about that?”

“Lanie.”

He frowned, recalling the woman he’d been forced to change to appease that bitch, Charlotte. Unlike the hunters, she’d needed something from him and had no qualms about threatening to hurt Julia to gain his cooperation. A threat he’d only taken seriously because of Charlotte’s obsession with Will. Charlotte had turned Will centuries ago and hadn’t taken his subsequent rejection very well. She even went as far as to murder all of Lanie’s ancestors who shared her likeness, determined to make sure Will never again found the woman Charlotte blamed for taking him away from her in the first place. The vampire had been far too shallow, and even at his weakest she never felt him searching her mind. “Is Lanie all right?”

“She doesn’t hate you for turning her, if that’s what you mean.”

“She’s happy?” In all his years as a vampire, Lanie had been the only one other than Julia he’d ever turned. Before Julia, he’d had no interest in spending any great length of time with any others of his kind. The few he’d crossed paths were either blood-lusting drifters or timid young ones newly turned and scared of their own shadows. Ones who knew nothing of their new nature.

Not until Julia had another being so intrigued him. So much so that he’d ached to possess her body and soul. And he had for twenty-five years. Then fate forced him to make the hardest decision of his life. A decision he’d refused to regret. It kept her safe and no amount of longing for what they’d lost would make him risk her life. Which made it all the more important that she disappear for a while.

“She and Will can’t get enough of each other.”

“Life-mates?” Having spent no longer than a few hours with Lanie, he’d often

found his thoughts drifting to her during his imprisonment.

“Seeing as she and Will have definitely drank from each other more than three times, I would say yes.”

The bitterness in her voice wasn’t unexpected, but he hated he was the reason for it.

“Charlotte didn’t hurt her?”

Julia shook her head, another long curl escaping the clip that had worked loose throughout the evening. Watching her dance had been a new form of torture that couldn’t rival the ways the hunters tried to occupy themselves with him. Knowing those curves and the satiny flesh that lay beneath the dress she wore had driven him out of his mind. He had embraced the changes in the world, but wasn’t accustomed to seeing so much of Julia’s tempting skin exposed to anyone who wanted to look their fill. More than a few heads had turned in her direction when she’d joined her friends for a dance.

Brody glanced away, needing to erase the images such thoughts dredged up. He needed to get this over with and out of here before he lost the war waging inside him.

“You didn’t answer my question. Why do they think you can help them find the Key?”

He didn’t clarify that it went much deeper than that, but could answer still honestly. “I have no idea.” He only knew a hunter capable of visions had put him on their radar, though he didn’t know precisely what she’d seen to convince her. Each time he’d tried to question her when she was brought to him to make sure the visions hadn’t changed, his keepers had beat him into silence.

“You’re leaving the country after this I presume?” Nothing in her face hinted at her disappointment, but the unsettling emotion clung to him. Or maybe it was his own he felt twisting deeper in his gut like a rusted corkscrew.

“Yes.”

She nodded slowly. “I’ll be careful.”

He bit down, shoving his hands in his pockets to keep from reaching out to shake her. “You need to do more than that. Leave for a while. Take a trip.”

Her chin came up. “For how long? Is this going to blow over in a week? A month? When?”

“I don’t know.”

Stubbornness wrinkled her brow. “So what, I’m just supposed to go into hiding indefinitely?”

“If that’s what it takes to stay alive.” This was what he’d been trying to avoid ever since the bastards had started coming after him. Damn her for bringing attention to herself.

“So now they’ll kill me?” Challenge flashed in the angry green depths, but he didn’t know if it was directed at the hunters or him.

“I have no idea what they might do to you, which is why you can’t take a chance.”

She shook her head and opened the door. He reached out, but she evaded him this time, already halfway down the stairs with a surprising burst of speed that made him smile despite the present situation. It reminded him far too much of the way she’d tried to avoid him when they first met.

Julia made it across the dance floor before he caught up to her, planting himself

directly in her path. She moved to go around and he countered, stalling her progress.

She folded her arms across her breasts, the gesture a clear warning to stay away from her. "You've delivered your dire warning, isn't it time for you to leave?"

"Yes." But he didn't turn to go. The intoxicating scent of her, the hurt she tried to cover with her anger, pulled at him. He took another step closer.

She backed up.

The hunger in him smiled at the challenge of her retreat. The only thing he wanted more than leaving was for her to give him a reason to stay a bit longer. His reasonable side argued the wariness that flashed briefly in Julia's eyes was not a challenge. The deeper, darker parts that hadn't tasted her in a century disagreed.

Brody closed the distance between them, enjoying the primitive thrill when she stood her ground. She'd never been the type to turn tail and run, not for long. He was relieved his leaving hadn't changed that.

That last thought sobered him. He needed to go, but when he took in the guarded expression on her face, he ached to take away the hurt of what he'd done so long ago. The hurt caused by his coming back. Looking around the club it was clear she'd moved on and he'd expected no less. Her pride in her business, in the life she led, had rolled off her in confident waves all night.

Standing this close, he sensed more than her pride. Her need to get space between them despite her refusal to back down clung to the tension snapping between them.

He brushed his knuckles along the edge of her jaw to test her reaction as much to test his own limits. She inhaled sharply, and then jerked away as though his touch had burned.

And the contact had. In the most feverish way.

She strode past him, leading the way to the door. Staying wasn't an option so he followed, his insides more tangled than ever at leaving her again.

Julia paused at the door. "Should I follow your advice and leave for a while, how will I know when it's safe to come home?" She turned around. "I assume you're not about to tell me where you're going."

"No."

The flat set of her mouth told him she hadn't expected otherwise. She gestured to the door a few feet away. "Goodbye, Brody."

For only a second did the past reach out and kick him in the stomach, but instead of questioning him like she had on the night burned into his memory, she kept her chin up, her eyes sparking anger.

"Guess you're not going to miss me."

"No more than you'll miss me." Her tone dared him to disagree, and then she spun around and walked away, leaving him to show himself out.

He watched her stride back across the dance floor. She was halfway up the stairs when his shoved the door open.

\* \* \* \*

Julia stood in the middle of her office, waiting for it to sink in. Waiting for something inside her to snap at his walking away for a second time.

Instead she felt horribly cold inside. Alone.

Alone, but not broken. She shook her head, unsure of which was worse.

The sound of footsteps treaded carefully on the stairs. She didn't turn around

when she heard him pause in the doorway. Didn't breath when he came closer, stopping directly behind her. Didn't whimper when he gripped her waist and leaned down until she could feel his mouth hover against her neck.

"I may have chosen to live my life without you, but that doesn't mean I stopped craving you."

"Our curse," she whispered, afraid to move--terrified not to.

The tips of his fangs scraped the sensitive flesh below her ear. "I'm sorry you see it that way."

The hands at her waist caressed, and then slid up her side, the silken fabric of her dress rasping against her skin. She squeezed her eyes shut at the stark longing that rose up inside her. "How could it be anything but?"

He brushed away the loose tendrils of hair and moved to the other side of her neck, his lips grazing the skin that trembled in feverish anticipation.

She dug deep and found the strength to turn around, to tell him to leave.

His mouth came down on hers, warm and possessive, silencing the protest that evaporated at the first drugging taste of him. She vaguely processed the soft sound that hummed in the back of her throat, felt his arms tighten around her in response. He anchored one hand at the nape of her neck, the other locked around her waist as he stroked his tongue across her bottom lip. The smooth, wet slide, more tender than dominating, made quick work of drowning out the futile voice warning her to let go. To push him away before things went too far.

But oh how she'd craved this. Craved more of the slow, burning embers being stirred deep in her belly. Each time his fingers dug into the small of her back, pulling her closer, she moved farther from the cool reasoning that warned nothing but a wounded heart lay at the end of this path. If only the coaxing sweep of his mouth hadn't awoken the one craving that refused to be silenced.

Bloodlust.

The rub of his thumb down the side of her neck made for a teasing contrast as he deepened the kiss, taking it from slow and shivery, to savagely fierce. She instinctively rose to her toes as his hand caught her bottom and ground her against him. His erection pressed into her belly--hard and unforgiving--and made the warmth in her bloodstream border on explosive.

Until now she'd done little more than be held as his kiss reminded her of why she'd fallen so hard for him. Every whisper of memory, every demanding glide of his mouth succeeded in making her do the one thing she swore she'd never do again.

She reached for him, sinking her fingers into his shirt and holding on, not caring that coming down from this was going to hurt like hell.

Both of his hands drifted up and down her back before catching the sides of her breasts, and she sucked in a breath.

*You missed this.*

Her spine straightened, and she opened her eyes to find him watching her so intently it was a wonder she hadn't gone up in flames.

"I have too," he added, his voice as dark and seductive as the first time he had coaxed her into his bed.

Again the kiss started out slow before working to a relentless pace that pounded through her. He moved from the corner of her jaw, down to her throat. His teeth

scrapped, his tongue sliding over the raised flesh. The tip of one fang nicked her, but instead of catching the blood that rose to the surface, he imprisoned her face in his strong hands.

The declaration was clear. No backing down.

As if she could. The desire running thick and hot through her middle was impossible to ignore, impossible to silence. Impossible to deny.

Cradled against his erection, he growled softly against her lips, his teeth nipping. His fingers toyed with the hem of her dress, and then slipped beneath. The lazy stroke of his fingers along the curve of her ass caused goose bumps. His thumb caught the elastic of her panties, and she moaned against his mouth. A moment later he traced a path around her thigh to her front, his fingers massaging deeper, working at the invisible threads that pulled taut with every bold stroke.

He ground the heel of his hand against her sex. Julia whimpered, the sound becoming a cry as his teeth found a hold just under the curve of her jaw, and sank deep.

She clawed her way under his shirt, her fingers seeking bare flesh. She reached out with her mind, the need to connect instinctive. She hadn't expected him to open to her, to let her see what he saw, feel his desire for her that he tried desperately to keep under control. More potent than his touch, she drowned in the shared sensations that crackled between them.

The slow pull as he drank from her sent one delicious ripple after another down her backbone, snaking lower to ache between her thighs. How could she have forgotten the feel of him, the need for him?

On a growl she pushed him back, but he didn't let go. He drank deeper, his fingers dipping under the edge of her panties. His murmured approval at finding her wet was barely heard above the bloodlust roaring in her ears.

He thrust a thick finger inside her.

She rocked upwards, clinging to him, and then shoved him back harder.

Brody broke away, but tugged her chin forward until she found the tempting spot just above his collarbone. He cupped her breast in his large palm, his thumb working over her nipple as his other returned to her sex, his fingers sliding up her damp fold to find the slick knot.

She shuddered in his arms, as much from the taste of him as from the way he gently plucked and swirled above and around her clit. Her heart threatened to explode right out of her chest, each sensation piling atop the last until she teemed with delicious overload.

Images from Brody's mind, countless memories of them together, his hard naked body driving deep into hers pushed her to the edge. The strokes between her legs shortened, became harder, ruthless.

Her orgasm reached out to grapple her, pulling her under. She screamed out her staggering release, tucking her face against his neck, clinging to him for a long moment before she realized what had been missing.

Brody had offered only a tenuous mental connection, one that let her catch glimpses of how she made him hunger for her, and only the memories that served to remind her of that. But the part of him she most wanted to connect with had been the one thing he hadn't given her access to.

His heart.

The harsh reminder cut much too deep, and she backed out of his arms. She didn't meet his gaze as she righted her clothing. The potent strength of him burned through her, but felt meaningless knowing he'd still held back.

She parted her lips without knowing what she would say, but he moved faster, cutting her off with his mouth. The lazy, tender rhythm hinted at the ravenous yearning still riding under his skin, but she knew he was saying with his lips what he had no intention of saying aloud.

Goodbye.

He took his time drawing back, a coolness icing over the heated gaze he'd seared her in place with only minutes before.

*Be careful.*

The whispered plea echoed in her mind long after he left the room. Julia glanced helplessly around for anything to focus on. Anything that would take away the crippling disappointment that wanted to take hold.

She shut off the lights, half numb and afraid to think about what had just happened, afraid she stupidly might fall apart. Halfway across the dance floor she changed her mind and headed towards the sprawling bar that took four bartenders to work, sometimes more, on a busy night.

She reached down and hauled up the closest bottle. Vodka. It would do. Uncapping the bottle, she snagged a shot glass and filled it. The alcohol burned, erasing the trace of him she could still taste, still thirsted for.

She poured another shot and another, wanting just this once for something to take the edge off. To dull the pain she'd opened herself to. Too bad vampires weren't able to metabolize alcohol the way humans could. The best she could hope for was eliminating the taste of him until she burned the last of it out of her system.

"Won't help."

For the third time that night, Julia jerked around in surprise. Opposite her a woman appearing no older than thirty watched her curiously. Long auburn hair was twisted into a thick braid that fell down over her shoulder, eyes an eerie shade of ice blue that threatened to cut into Julia should she even think about moving. There was no way the woman should have--could have--gotten so close if she were merely human.

Julia tightened her hand around the neck of the bottle she held.

The woman held her palms up, a smile that might have been reassuring if Julia wasn't confident a small band of hunters was now gunning for her. "Friend," she said.

"Prove it."

The woman cocked her head, her expression softening. "You're still in love with him, aren't you?"

Julia didn't say anything, didn't have to as she felt a whisper of her thoughts being skimmed.

"That's good," the woman continued as though she'd found her answer, "because he's still in love with you."

## Chapter Four

Brody leaned his head back against the seat and squeezed his eyes shut. It didn't help. Behind his closed lids he could still see her face, those eyes that sliced so effortlessly right through the spot where his heart used to be.

The one that had been left in the past along with Julia.

Most days the guilt was something he could live with. He'd even long ago convinced himself that eventually they would have grown bored of each other. Tonight made that farce more transparent than ever.

The lull of the moving cab was a wrenching contrast to the conflicted needs burrowing their way through his chest one layer at a time. It was on the tip of his tongue to tell the driver to turn around, to go back to the club. Back for Julia.

He crushed the idea as soon as it crossed his mind. He shouldn't have gone to see her to begin with. By now he could have been out of the country leading the hunters away from her. With a properly laid trail, one that didn't obviously shout, *I went this way*, he might leave her in a position to be overlooked.

Brody hoped to God she listened to him and made arrangements to hide out somewhere for a while. Once he was off their radar they had no way of knowing if he'd come out of hiding should they bother to track her down. He'd done nothing to let them believe she was important to him. If not for her stupidly trying to track him down she wouldn't have to lay low at all. He'd waited in her office more than ready to wring her neck for getting involved. The moment she stepped through the door his earlier annoyance evaporated, replaced by the same sensation of sunshine warming his face in the early hours of the morning before he'd been turned. And just that fast, it had taken degrees of control he hadn't imagined he possessed to clamp down on the need to reach for her.

With arrangements in place to have her watched over until she did as he asked, Brody relaxed as best as he could. He hoped such lengths weren't necessary, and if his trail was just clear enough, they'd be too busy thinking they could catch up with him to bother with her.

The twisting in his gut disagreed.

He dug the cell phone he'd borrowed from a drug dealer earlier that night out of his pocket. The dealer had been intent on beating up a prostitute when Brody stumbled upon them almost immediately after leaving the motel.

"Is everything in place?" he said into the phone, watching block after block pass in a blur out the window, taking him farther and farther from Jules.

Colin snorted in his ear. "Are you doubting me now?"

"You did think I was with a woman while Chester and I were bonding."

"I don't even want to know who Chester is, do I?"

"Probably not." Bringing him up at all left a bad taste in Brody's mouth.

"Besides, maybe if you listened to me you could enjoy being in hiding."

"Again, your advice astounds me."

He could all but feel Colin roll his eyes right through the phone. "Yes. Everything is in place. I assume you are already on the way to the airport?"

"As we speak."

"Good because I plan on kicking your ass on sight. They shouldn't have gotten a hold of you to begin with." Beneath the gruff hostility, Brody heard the same concern he

had during their first phone call.

“Thank you for being so kind as to point that out.” The night they’d caught up with him in Madrid six months ago was nothing more than a hazy blur. What should have been a simple information trip had quickly turned into an extended invitation to his own private suite, complete with brick walls and iron bars. It was also the first time they’d had any success with their damn drugs, though he’d still managed to take out three of the hunters before he’d been brought to his knees.

“You okay?”

Brody shifted in his seat as though changing positions would ease the pain in his chest. He hadn’t been okay in a hundred and twenty-five years. And tonight was an aching reminder of that. “See you soon.”

He held the phone in his hand after disconnecting, his fingers tracking the numbers for a different call. He snapped the phone closed on a curse. Bringing her with him would get her nothing but marked as a target, which was exactly the fate he’d been trying to spare her from.

The lights on the lampposts bled together as the cab carried him closer to the airport, and out of Julia’s life. Again.

And it was for the best.

\* \* \* \*

“Who are you?” The unmistakable presence of strength and age whispered on the air, the intentional showing of power was no doubt meant to make Julia rethink firing the bottle clenched in her hand at the newcomer.

“Someone who wants to help set things right.”

Julia adjusted her grip, knowing the stupid bottle would be no more effective than tossing pebbles at a giant if the vampire in front of her was even half as old as she felt.

“How do you know Brody?”

“They’ll keep after him.” The woman took another cautious step forward, but not fast enough to worry Julia.

“The hunters?”

She nodded.

“How do you know about them being after him?”

The other woman glanced around the deserted bar. “He didn’t escape on his own.” Those sharp eyes that appeared to miss nothing, not even the fact Julia hadn’t relinquished the hold on her useless weapon, settled on her face.

The second the question of how Brody knew this woman rolled through the back of her mind, the other vampire laughed out loud. Not a soft or amused laugh, but an all out from-the-gut laugh.

Julia stared as she dragged a chair down from the top of a table, turned it around and dropped onto in the way you might as you stared down the ignorant moron you were about to drink under the table.

With her arms folded across the top of the chair, one leg stretched out, she said.

“He can’t do this alone.”

“Do what?” Julia didn’t have to ask to know *who* the woman meant. Whatever her connection to Brody, she knew more than Julia. Any information was better than none, especially when Brody hadn’t been all that keen on sharing.

“Stop them.”

Sensing no real threat, Julia finally let go of the bottle, and tucked her arms across her chest. "I don't understand."

"They'll keep coming until they get what they want."

"And what do they want?"

A smile winked at the corner of the woman's mouth, an indication she already knew Julia wasn't as completely clueless as her questions might lead the other vampire to believe. She cocked her head thoughtfully. "The Key."

"Why?" At least with this one she really was drawing a blank. Even Declan could offer no insight into what the rogues might ultimately be after.

As quickly as she sat, the vampire pushed to her feet and replaced the chair. "I can tell you where he'll go."

But not why they were after him. Did she not have any idea either, or was she purposely choosing not to answer? "Even if I wanted to go after him, and I don't, he's made it clear where we stand."

"He's blinded."

"By?" Julia managed to pack no small amount of skepticism into that one word.

With a frown as though the answer were obvious, she said, "His feelings."

Julia snorted. "I think you need to be more clear on why you're here." And why she thought Brody would want Julia anywhere near him when not once, but twice now, he'd walked out the door without a backwards glance.

"Because he's a stubborn ass, and I think you might be able to help him through this."

Julia closed her eyes and tried to keep up. "Help him through what?"

"He'll need you," the other vampire clarified.

"Why?"

"He trusts you."

Julia gave a sound of disgust. "So much so he didn't want me to know how I could reach him."

The woman pulled a piece of paper from her pocket.

Julia stared at the outstretched hand, then finally reached out and took the paper. Their fingers brushed, and Julia cried out at the contact. Images. Sensations and memories, one after another, steamrolled her with their intensity. All of it pushed into her mind until it felt ready to burst open with the overload.

Only when Julia jerked back, her entire body trembling from the kaleidoscope of bits and pieces, did the deliberate sharing cease.

Julia grabbed the edge of the bar to steady herself, never before having a connection to another of her kind thrown open that way. And she'd sooner jam a screwdriver into a circuit box while standing in ankle deep water than experience such a no-holds-barred transfer again.

As her pulse resumed its normal pace, she glared at the woman for not warning her what was coming. "You're an ancient, aren't you?"

She sucked the side of her cheek between her teeth. "That particular label has never done a thing for me."

But the power that had jumped from a whisper to an approaching train barreling down, was undeniable. She'd guessed the vampire was old, but she'd never before crossed paths with anyone older than Brody. Until now.

“Exactly how old are you?”

The woman played with the end of her braid. “No gray hairs yet.”

Julia knew that was the best answer she was going to get. She glanced at the note in her hand. “Do you realize how pissed he’d be if I just showed up?”

“Would you rather see him pissed off, or dead?”

She set the paper on the table, ignoring it. “He made his choice.”

“Maybe,” the woman said sounding unconvinced, “but have you made yours?”

Without another word, she turned around to leave.

“Wait, what’s your name?”

She stopped, smiled over her shoulder. “Morgan.” Her gaze flicked to the piece of paper. “Go after him and no matter what he says or does, don’t leave.”

\* \* \* \*

A glance at the sky told Julia she had almost an hour before dawn. She left her car where she’d parked it, choosing instead to walk home. She wanted to think, to get things worked out in her head. She wasn’t sure what she’d been more surprised by tonight; finding Brody in her office, what she let happen between them--what she’d wanted to happen--or having an ancient seek her out. One who somehow knew Brody, one she was sure he’d never mentioned before.

The small slip of paper Morgan gave her was still in her hand. She hadn’t been able to bring herself to toss it. Yet. Being alone now gave her time to think about how Morgan was no better than Brody in wanting Julia to do as she said. For all she knew, Morgan might be somehow responsible for why the hunters were after Brody. And like Brody, Morgan expected her to rearrange her life to accommodate her request.

All Julia had were more questions and fewer answers after the last couple of hours. And it was the questions that whispered the softest in the back of her mind that worried her the most. But she’d be damned to put her life--the one Brody had wanted nothing to do with--on hold and vanish off the face of the earth because of him. She should have left it alone, should have listened to Gabe and Will. Maybe if she hadn’t been so determined to find him, she wouldn’t be faced with the rock and a hard place she felt herself being jammed into. As much as she wanted to believe the hunters would leave her alone, she couldn’t count on that and had no way of knowing to what lengths they’d go to get their hands on Brody again.

Unfortunately, Morgan’s presence also made for a more convincing argument--that things were far more complicated, more dangerous than Julia believed.

Julia was halfway home when the presence of a predator snaked down her spine. An unfriendly one. Young. She didn’t break stride or make it obvious she knew he was there as she wondered if he was just doing his job and making sure she didn’t get the urge to snack on an innocent on the way home, or if her shadow had another reason for tailing her?

She got her answer seconds later as the presence of another hunter prickled along the back of her neck. This one to the left. How many were there? Seemed Brody had been right to warn her, but that didn’t stop anger from burning a hole right through the nervousness of being stalked, knowing he’d left her to face them alone.

How many could she hope to evade on her own? Not many. One-on-one was a different story, and there was no telling if an elder was among them. He’d have to be almost close enough to reach out and touch before she might pick up on him. It made

them deadly to her kind. For decades the truce between their races had held, but it was impossible to tell if these hunters were rogues or not.

She rounded the corner and found one waiting for her. From the corner of her eye she saw the other two emerge from the shadows.

“Nice night for a walk,” the one in front of her said.

Definitely not your friendly, garden-variety hunter.

Sensing his attack coming, she moved faster, jamming her fist up under his jaw. His teeth snapped together, catching his bottom lip and splitting it open.

Her spine went from stiff to the flexible, like a snake coiling before the attack as fierce bloodlust kicked in, sharper than a burst of adrenaline. Hunters were fast, but the hunger that instinctively surfaced at the scent of his blood gave her an edge. One she fully intended to exploit.

The others were closing in.

Julia snagged the hunter in front of her by the throat and yanked him to her. Had it not been for Brody’s blood, she would never have been able to keep a firm hold on him. She twisted around, shielding her body with his, then sank her teeth into his neck. For a split second she knew nothing but the untapped strength pulsing through the young hunter’s veins. The taste was nothing more than a tease to the darkness within that raged for more.

The other hunters, seeing her feeding from their companion launched a simultaneous attack. The short drink from the hunter only momentarily stunned him, and she shoved him into his friends. So much for concern for their fellow hunter slowing their approach.

Julia had no more than an arm’s length of a head start when she broke into a run. It took less time to realize the heels on her feet were very likely going to get her killed, and she knew that even before they snapped mid-sprint, one after the other, nearly tripping her as she burst around the next corner.

Two arms shot out of the dark to brace her as she pitched forward.

The tattoo of a dragon’s tail curled around a muscular forearm never looked so damn good.

“Problems?”

She wanted to close her eyes and sigh in relief. Declan.

He grinned at her, his golden hunters’ eyes glinting against the darkness. The second he caught sight of the others behind her, his expression darkened.

“Rogues I think. Brody got away from them.” She barely got the words out, and Declan was pulling something from the back of his waistband. A gun?

Instead of the eardrum crushing sound of gunfire, only a quick series of hisses followed. She stared, slack-jawed, as one after another, all three hunters wove in place, then collapsed on the ground.

\*\*\*\*

“What the hell happened?”

Julia grimaced. It would be just her luck to run into Gabe coming home, tonight of all nights. “I’m fine.”

He glanced from her broken heels to her wild hair--what hadn’t been pulled loose by Brody having worked free during her brief scuffle with the hunters--then his gaze dropped to her neck. She knew immediately what he was looking at, assuming the bite

marks hadn't already faded.

From the way Gabriel's face shifted from concerned and annoyed to over-the-top pissed off, it was safe to say some scarring was still visible.

"Tell me that is not from him." She felt the accusation in his voice like a poke to the chest.

She headed up the stairs. "It's not from him."

*Jules.*

"You said to tell you it wasn't from him." She wasn't interested in any form of communication other than good old fashioned conversation. Not when her mind was too busy examining the recent events from every possible angle, and something she didn't want known could slip out in any mental exchange. Knowing Gabe had already spotted the most obvious evidence of the thoughts she wanted to keep a lid on, she didn't know why she bothered.

"He left you again, didn't he?"

"Thing are complicated." Instant disgust filled her at offering such a response as any type of explanation. Tonight, it was perfectly fine that she lay a healthy amount of blame at Brody's door. She had every right to. More or less. But listening to anyone else bitch about Brody with tonight's events still so fresh in her mind, wasn't going to work for her.

"Now you're making excuses for him.

Julia continued up the stairs. The door behind Gabe opened, and she glanced down to see Declan trail into their apartment building. She groaned and kept going, already picturing the two of them ganging up on her.

"What brings you this way?" she heard Gabriel ask.

"Just making sure no more rogues come after her."

Julia shot the elder a scathing look over her shoulder, inwardly bracing herself for Gabe's coming anger. As much as she loved Gabriel, there were times when she wished he didn't care so damn much. And this was about to be one of those times.

In her kitchen, she tossed her ruined shoes in the trash, and as expected, heard Gabe storm into her apartment with Declan trailing after him. Her night just kept getting better and better. Their voices were low, but their argument unmistakable. At least it was close to sun up and the coming scene would be brief. Julia deliberately gave Declan enough time to get most of the details out.

She figured it was too much to hope for that Gabe would take his frustrations out solely on the elder. Not that Gabe could win any real confrontation with Declan, at least the odds weren't in his favor anyway. He could no doubt hold his own for a while, but eventually the two hundred years Declan had on both of them would get the job done.

That thought alone brought home how different tonight would have played out if one of the other hunters had been an elder, or if Declan hadn't showed up.

Declan had already insisted on keeping watch over her during the coming day to make sure no one tried to get in without her knowing. After Lanie had been taken, Will and Gabe had scrapped their security system and rebuilt. During the day their brownstone was now locked down tighter than a Swiss vault.

The second Gabe saw her appear in the doorway, he pounced. "Damn it, Jules."

"I'm fine." And eventually, if she said that to herself enough, it might actually sink in.

“Thanks to Declan.” Gabriel followed her into her bedroom, watched her drag a suitcase out of the closet.

Pulling it out--forget unzipping it--went against every decision she thought she'd ever made about Brody, about what she needed. She might have been able to hold onto her anger at Brody--for leaving her, for showing up tonight and reminding her that separation had done little to sever their connection--but the hunter attack changed everything. Forced her to think hard about what needed to be done.

“Where are you going?”

She stared at the empty suitcase with as much enthusiasm as she would a coffin. “They're going to come after me again.”

“We'll keep you safe.”

“And put all of you at risk?” She shook her head. That had been the easiest part of the decision to leave. She loved them all too much to bring any harm to their door if it could be helped.

“Where are you going?” Gabriel's voice was deceptively calm, as if he didn't rein his emotions in now, he'd say something he'd regret. “Is he expecting you to join him?”

Her silence spoke volumes.

“Wonderful,” Gabriel snapped. “It's his fault they're after you and you're going to track him down, aren't you?”

“I brought attention to myself looking for him.” Gabe thankfully didn't comment further on that point. “And until they back off, until I know why they think he's so damn important, they might not leave me alone.”

“If they're still after Brody, then the least safe place to be is with him.”

Julia snorted. She doubted Gabe would appreciate that it reminded her of something Brody would say. Not that Brody's decisions were ever about her, he was too selfish for that.

Gabriel looked primed to grab her suitcase and shove it back in the closet. “Come on, there are a thousand other places to lay low until this blows over.”

“Why don't I just head to a resort and work on my tan while I'm at it?”

“I want you safe.”

“I will be.”

He crossed his arms and a familiar look of intimidation squared his jaw, one that hadn't worked since she learned he wasn't the badass he claimed to be all those years ago. “What about the club?”

Having used the time on the way home to work out a plan for that, she glanced hopefully at him.

He shook his head. “No way, you know that's not my scene.”

She arched a brow. “You have no problem making it your scene when you're trolling for women.”

“That's different.” He sounded remarkably like a teenager being set up to chaperone his little sister at a school dance.

“Come on, Gabe. Raoul pretty much keeps things running smoothly. I would just feel better if someone else was checking up on things for me.”

“I don't like this,” he finally said, a glittering resignation filling his eyes.

“I know.”

“I hope you don't expect to take off without saying something to Will first.”

“He won’t talk me out of it,” she said, reading where he was headed with that train of thought as if he’d drawn her a map. “But no, I need some rest and a few hours to make arrangements.” Oddly enough, she wasn’t remotely tired. She should have been yawning by now, and if not for the added strength from Brody’s blood she would have been.

“I do have one small favor,” she added.

“You can’t use the jet.”

“We both know I’ll find another way.”

Gabriel’s hard expression softened. “At least I’ll be able to track you some of the way.”

She hadn’t thought of that, but taking a commercial flight posed risks she’d just as soon avoid this trip.

On a sigh Gabriel headed towards the door. “No sneaking out without saying goodbye.”

“Far be it from me to deprive you of one last chance to talk me out of leaving.”

A grin played at the corner of his mouth. He backtracked and planted a quick kiss on her forehead. “If anything happens to you, I’ll track him down myself and it won’t be pretty.”

She looped her arms around his neck and let the fierce embrace sooth the heavy doubts resting on her heart.

After Gabriel left, she heard Declan rooting around in her kitchen cupboards. The sun was barely beginning to brighten the edges of the sky but already the change would affect her vision if she stared out the window too long.

“Hungry?”

“Starved.” He closed the last cupboard. “You people need to start stocking more regular food.”

“Will probably has a good selection.” Lanie still insisted on a regular breakfast every morning. Though her taste buds no longer found the same satisfaction in food, she still insisted on the ritual of it.

“That tranquilizer you used tonight,” she prompted.

“Yeah?”

“I assume it works on vampires too?”

Declan leaned a hip into the counter. “Naturally.”

Julia nodded thoughtfully. “I need you to get me some.”

\* \* \* \*

“Looking forward to laying low?”

Right now all Brody was looking forward to, was sleep. “Assuming it’s even a safe house anymore.”

“There’s no way your friends have gotten a lead on this place.” The conviction in Colin’s tone left no room for argument. At twenty-four and human, Colin had ceased to be intimidated by Brody long ago. Too long ago, in fact, and Colin had no qualms about lecturing him about taking more precautions where hunters were concerned.

He’d swear Colin used every spare minute of their return trip to remind him of that, making sure to complain that Brody’s subsequent capture had left him with no one to really talk to for months. And if the past seventy-two hours were any indication, the human planned to make up for that in spades. The only thing that kept him from growling

to let him rest was how much he realized he'd missed Colin. The kid had come a long way from being the skinny and timid little boy he'd found cowering under his mother's bed nearly fifteen years ago.

After having crossed through four continents and dozens of countries trying to lead faulty trails for his captors to follow, Brody ached to fall into bed. Assuming Colin was right and none of his enemies knew of this place, it would still take days to untangle his trail--if they even could--to track him to the chalet in the Swiss Alps that he'd purchased a few years ago. He had, at the very least, some time to figure out his next move.

The SUV stopped in front of the farm style chalet and he climbed out, breathing deep the mountain air. Located in a valley south of Crans-Montana, a hub of European culture with its vast hotels and resorts catering to the skiing crowd in the winter months and golf and hiking fanatics in the summer, the chalet had been a suitable safe haven. Far enough from the tourists and the surrounding villages, but still within reasonable distance for the times the thought of bagged blood just didn't do it for him. Another drawback to keeping a low profile. Technology had made a hunter's job of tracking vampires even easier, and there was no way of knowing when an appearance in public to find suitable prey would make its way to his enemies.

With another sweeping glance at the majestic peaks in the distance that glistened under a huge full moon, he turned towards the chalet. Inside he would make some calls and find out where Julia had gone into hiding. He was both relieved, not to mention mildly surprised, that she hadn't been as stubborn as he feared and listened to him.

Colin unlocked the door and turned back to grab the bag he'd left in the SUV. Brody was halfway across the chalet's great room when he froze.

Julia?

## Chapter Five

Brody closed his eyes, knowing the memories from the other night were playing tricks on his mind. Julia was almost four thousand miles away.

Movement behind him brought his head up, and he whipped around.

“This place wasn’t as hard to find as I expected it to be.”

His stomach contracted, his eyes disbelieving the sight of her. She was here!

The brief moment of surreal pleasure at seeing her again so soon was shattered by the circumstances that brought her here. In zero to point two seconds, he experienced an abrupt shift in thinking and glared at her.

“What the hell were you thinking?” He embraced the anger that burned through his gut, heavy and hot. Damn it, didn’t she realize this was the least safe place to be, the only place that guaranteed trouble would find her? Even he wasn’t naïve enough to think this place would remain off the hunters’ radar forever. Not when it became increasingly clear during his imprisonment that whatever they needed him for, the time was fast approaching. A sense of underlying tension had lingered during his last stint as their captive.

Julia squared her shoulders, her eyes sharper than the frosty icicles that dangled from the chalet’s eaves in winter. “Believe me, this wasn’t my idea.”

“Well, it was damn stupid.”

Julia shrugged, glancing around the room. “Nice set up.”

Brody gaped. The foolish woman had made herself a target by coming here and that’s all she had to say. *Nice set up?*

He started across the room, unsure if he could curb the urge to choke the life out of her in the time it took to reach her.

“Friend or foe?” Colin asked casually from the doorway. He propped a shoulder against the jamb, deceptively casual.

“Ex,” Julia supplied, a chilly smile on her lips as she glanced from him to Brody. Her spine remained locked in the upright position, not dismissing Colin as a potential threat.

“Didn’t know we were expecting guests.”

“She’s not staying,” Brody snapped.

“Yes,” Julia countered with a tip of her chin, “*she is.*”

Colin shot him a sideways glance and the hint of a grin the human barely attempted to contain riled Brody further. “The more the merrier.”

Brody leveled him with a withering stare. “Three’s a crowd.” He watched Julia continue to take in the rustic mountain lodge atmosphere like an eager ski bunny on her first trip to the Alps. “Not to mention this is reckless behavior.”

She didn’t spare him a glance. “I wasn’t looking for your approval.”

“Clearly.”

Colin’s lips split into a wider smile--if that were possible. “I thought I was the only one who got the *reckless behavior* talk.”

Ignoring him, Brody focused on Julia. “How did you find me?” She was the last person he would have ever guessed would find him here. And if she had, how much longer before his enemy connected the same dots Julia had?

She studied a painting done by a local artist of the alpine peaks and dipping green meadows under the brilliant light of midday sun. “So what prompted the purchase of this

place?”

“It was cheap.” Colin dropped his bag at his feet, more interested in Brody’s response to their guest than anything else judging by the unwavering gaze the human pinned him with.

Brody nodded towards the archway. Colin grinned knowingly.

“You two look like you need to talk so I’ll just keep looking around.” Julia ventured closer to the fireplace, her attention to the sandstone finish unconvincing.

“How long have you been here?”

“A couple hours.”

He cocked his head at Colin, who still hadn’t moved. “For a safe house, it’s not all that safe.”

Colin didn’t look the least bit apologetic. “If there are more like her coming, I’m all for scrapping the security system altogether.”

Julia sent him an appreciative smile, one that made it achingly obvious how long it had been since she’d smiled like that at Brody.

Brody gave up trying to hold back the scowl that came so readily to the surface. “Don’t flirt with him.”

She arched an innocent brow. “Jealous?”

“More than I can say,” he said dryly.

Julia inclined her head at Colin. “Just point me in the direction opposite the love nest and I’ll find a place for myself.”

Colin balked. “There are no words to tell you how wrong of an assumption that is.”

“So you two aren’t a couple?” She rocked back on her heels, feigning innocence.

“Stop playing with him, Jules.”

She shrugged. “I have no way of knowing what you’ve been into since we parted ways.”

“We could send Colin out of the room and clear up any confusion you might have.”

She pursed her lips thoughtfully, the gesture at odds with the subtle tremor he felt move through her, but she didn’t push the matter. If he still wasn’t so phenomenally pissed off about her arrival, he might have been disappointed by that.

Once he had a few hours sleep, he’d get her the hell away from here. Far away from him. “You can stay for one night.”

Julia started shaking her head the second he’d opened his mouth.

“One. Night. Then Colin will make arrangements for you.”

Boldly crossing her arms in front of her, she worked on closing the short distance separating them. “I don’t think you understand. I’m not leaving.”

Too tired to even get into it with her now, he didn’t respond to her provocation. She *was* leaving whether she liked it or not. “Colin will show you where you can sleep tonight.”

He started towards the hall off to the right of the great room, then paused as his mind pinpointed the most logical explanation for how she’d found him. “Declan,” he said slowly.

“What?”

“He knew where to find me, didn’t he?” The elder knew far more than he ever let

on. It shouldn't have surprised him that the hunter could have found a way to track him down.

Julia frowned. "How do you know him?"

"We had some run ins over the years."

Her eyes widened. "That's why he came looking for me the other night. Because of you?"

Brody slowly nodded, annoyed with himself for pointing out a connection he was just as happy people remained ignorant of. He studied the worried lines near her eyes. "Tell me," he said, instantly certain there was something she wasn't saying.

When she didn't answer right away he pushed at the barrier in her mind, surprised that she didn't try harder to keep him out. "Hunters?" He swallowed at the furious knot wedged in his throat. He'd been right to suspect they'd go after her. "You weren't hurt?" The brief glimpse she allowed him showed she hadn't been, not physically anyway, but he had to ask.

She shook her head.

"He should have told me about that."

The expression on her face turned down right murderous. "He was reporting to you, too?"

Having indulged in about all the confrontation his exhausted mind and body could handle, Brody let her think what she wanted. This tired, it was getting far too easy to imagine forgetting everything and dragging her to bed with him, losing himself in the scent of her, the taste. It was all he could do not to remember the way she'd clung to him, her inner muscles clenching around the fingers he had buried between her thighs when she came.

He turned back to the hallway. "Good night."

"I'm not leaving," she called out.

"Yes, you are," he shot back over his shoulder.

His head was pounding by the time he reached his room. He stripped off his shirt, heading straight for the bed that suddenly looked much too big for just one person. The rest of his clothes hit the floor and he crawled under the covers craving sleep. Sleep that he prayed would be free of dreams.

Dreams that would make it that much harder to make Julia leave.

But he would. For both their sakes.

\* \* \* \*

"I assume you brought a bag?"

Julia nodded towards a chair tucked near the window.

Colin cocked his head, unruly black hair skimming the collar of his jacket. "How did you get in here anyway?"

The subtle hint of admiration in his voice brought a smile to her face. "I know some people."

While Colin retrieved her bag, she surveyed the great room for the hundredth time. Each time she expected to be less surprised at how much the place suited Brody, would have suited them. Her tastes had long ago shifted to embrace a more modern sense of design, from her clothing and apartment, to her club. Standing here, something about the rural feel of the place, the vast openness of the landscape beyond the chalet, broken by rising hills and mountains in the distance, something made it feel like home.

Colin motioned for her to follow him. “How serious were you about sleeping in the opposite direction?”

“Wherever is fine.” As long as it wasn’t next door to Brody. Her insides still hummed, both from the buzz of annoyance at his anger, and a little too pleasantly from the way he’d challenged her to give him a reason to prove where his desires lay.

Implying that he and Colin were a couple had been nothing short of amusing. She only wished it bugged Brody half as much as it had Colin. Finding Brody in the company of a human was one more surprise in a long line of them. Could have been worse. He could’ve had a woman here, and only about a thousand times had that gut wrenching possibility occurred to Julia on the flight over.

She followed Colin, feeling Brody’s presence as they passed a set of double doors halfway down the hall. Thankfully Colin continued down to the end before stopping. He turned the handle, and then pushed the door the rest of the way open with a nudge of his hip.

Colin left her bag next to a small table with an empty flower vase perfectly positioned in the middle of a crocheted doily. She doubted this room had been updated since Brody bought it. Rough wood floors, high ceilings, overstuffed furniture fit Brody. Doilies didn’t.

“You may want to air the place out a bit before the sun comes up. There’s a small balcony a few feet off the ground.” He nodded towards the far corner of the room, and then backtracked to the door. “Do I need to sleep with a stake under my pillow?”

“Only if you’ve got the garlic and crosses to go with it,” she joked. “He doesn’t talk about vampires much, does he?”

“Not really, but there’s a lot I’ve figured out on my own.”

“You won’t need a stake.”

He grinned, and then paused in the process of closing the door. “There’s a stocked kitchen off the great room if you need something to drink.”

She didn’t bother to point out she had already accustomed herself with the layout of the bottom two floors before they’d shown up. The attic she hadn’t explored just yet, having been more intrigued by the study and well stocked bunker added to basement. “Thanks.”

When he left, Julia sat on the edge of the bed. Brody was still too close. She closed her eyes, her other senses immediately compensating, making his proximity that much more difficult to ignore. But before thoughts she didn’t want to contemplate had her revisiting the other night in her mind, she took a better look around her bedroom. After a quick inspection of the bathroom, she followed Colin’s advice and opened the outside door.

The night air still carried a slight chill, and the feel of the mountains, the endless blanket of glittering stars overhead, the sheer vastness in every direction was staggering. She only wished it was under better circumstances so she could appreciate the view that seemed untouched by the rest of the world.

Julia lost track of time as she stared into space. Over and over on the flight she’d questioned the wisdom of listening to Morgan and coming here. She couldn’t fathom how Brody could possibly need any help from her. Maybe she should have gone somewhere else, somewhere the past could come creeping through to slowly erode the memories she’d buried deep.

With a sigh she headed back inside. She studied the large window and the panoramic view beyond, wishing she could watch the sun rise over the valley before common sense reminded her that what she needed to worry about was something to secure over it.

She had her hand on the door handle to find something when footsteps echoed in the hall. She opened the door to find Colin carrying a strange-looking set of blinds.

“Figured you would need these.”

“Thanks.” She left him to put them up, spotting Brody’s door ajar when she was no more than a few feet up the hall.

Julia paused in front of it, instinct drawing her closer. The room within was dark but her eyesight didn’t make that a problem. She took a small step past the threshold, and a thick arm snared her around the waist and hauled into the room.

The door was shut before Brody crowded her against it.

Even accustomed to vampire speed and reflexes, hers had been slow to keep up with him. His bare chest warmed her through her shirt, his hands strong and firm where they held her wrists at her sides.

“I thought you said you wanted to be far away from--what did you call it, the love nest?”

His proximity took her insides from calm and guarded, to hot and tangled in less time than it took to suck in a breath. She tried in vain to move away from the door, having no better luck at moving Brody than trying to budge the Great Wall. She gave up quickly, all too familiar with the way he enjoyed the times she’d tried to evade him--both in and out of the bedroom--and she was in no mood to entertain him.

“I thought you were sleeping.” Her voice sounded as unaffected by his body hugging her every curve as she hoped.

“You’ve made that impossible.” The accusation was a lazy drawl.

“I’m certainly not about to apologize.”

He laughed, his soft exhale brushing her cheek. “Of course not.”

“I wouldn’t have had to surprise you if you told me where to find you to begin with.”

Instead of being annoyed by the reminder, he scraped his rough jaw across hers. “That was for you own good.”

“Do you think if you keep telling me that, I might start to believe you?”

He tensed.

Julia lifted her gaze to his. “Every decision you’ve made has been about you. Don’t pretend otherwise.”

“Is that so? If I’m so damn selfish, why come here?” The grip on her wrist tightened, but she didn’t flinch from the increasing pressure.

“Because if you’re the reason I’m being hunted then what better place to hide than with someone they clearly want more than me?”

His hand slid up her arm. “You sure there’s not another reason?”

The subtle change in his tone sent a warning skidding up her spine. “Like what?”

“Maybe you want more of what happened the other night.”

She jerked her hand up between them, planted it against his chest. And wished she hadn’t.

His sharp intake of breath unleashed a rampage of butterflies in her stomach.

Brody nudged her chin up with the back of his knuckles when she glanced away. “You’re not sure, are you?”

Julia pushed him back, putting more strength behind the movement this time. “The only thing I’m sure of is that I didn’t come here to entertain you.” He didn’t try to keep her trapped when she elbowed her way free and slipped from the room.

She didn’t stop until she managed to reach the kitchen. Only then did she let out a choked breath caught in a scary place between longing and frustration, and dropped into the closest chair.

“You people and the dark,” Colin muttered a few minutes later when he came in. “The stereotype of brooding in the dark is certainly accurate.”

She paid little attention when he flicked on the light and he pattered around the kitchen, making himself something to eat. Despite being shaken by the encounter with Brody and how much she knew the other vampire was right, she managed to dredge up a grateful smile when Colin warmed her up some blood and served it in a Snoopy cup.

She eyed the plastic glass.

“Everyone loves Snoopy,” Colin said winking.

Like many of her kind, she’d rather get blood straight from the source, preferably while naked and trapped between damp sheets and a hard body--an image impossible to get out of her head with Brody so close--but bagged blood still got the job done.

Julia watched Colin go to work on pouring a bowl of cereal before he frowned and grumbled about no milk. She screwed up her face when he poured warm apple juice on it instead. She was still grimacing on his behalf when he took a seat opposite her at the butcher block island in the middle of the kitchen.

“So you’re the one, huh?”

Intrigued, she tried not to shudder when he stuffed another soggy spoonful into his mouth. “The one?”

“The one he never talks about.”

“Ah,” she said dismissively.

“Things didn’t end well I assume?” He ducked his head. “Sorry. I don’t come across many other vampires, not much of anyone actually, but you guys aren’t big on sharing. Forget I asked.”

“How long have you known?”

Polishing off his cereal in record time, he set the bowl aside. “That Brody is a soulless bloodsucker?”

Julia rolled her eyes.

Colin laughed. “Since I was twelve and that was one scary moment.”

“You’ve been with him since then?” Colin couldn’t be much older than his mid-twenties.

“Since I was nine actually.”

“And you haven’t asked to become like us?”

Something shifted in his dark eyes. “I’ll keep my mortality as is, thanks.” He cringed. “No offence.”

“None taken.” She toyed with her cup, curious since she’d known few mortals who weren’t taken with the idea of being turned once they learned that vampires did in fact exist. “Blood a turn off?”

The playful light faded from his eyes, and she wished she hadn’t asked. “I guess

that's part of it." With a squaring of his shoulders that could only have been learned from Brody, he stood.

Clearly an end to the conversation.

A hot curl of emotion settled across the back of her neck, but she didn't turn around when she felt Brody loom in the doorway.

Colin spotted him and grabbed another plastic cup.

"Not the He-Man one," Brody growled.

Colin sighed, and then his eyes brightened hopefully. "Transformers?"

Brody stared him down.

"Fine. Boring old crystal it is."

Julia expected Brody to take his drink and go back to bed—hoped he would.

Instead, he snapped up the remote from the countertop and turned on the TV situated on a shelf in the corner. She found it difficult not to look at him since he hadn't bothered with a shirt and the loose pair of pants he wore rode enticingly low on his hips.

He took a seat next to her, his leg brushing hers—probably intentionally. She instantly tensed at the contact then forced herself to relax. He was testing her reaction to him as he'd been subsequently doing since he showed up in her office, and she wasn't about to let him see how much being so close played Russian Roulette with her nerve endings.

"Too late," he said.

Her eyes snapped to his, and he grinned, motioning to the sports coverage playing on the small screen.

"Just missed the highlights."

She held his gaze a moment longer then finished her drink.

"She didn't have a problem using one of my glasses." Colin took pride in pointing out.

Brody snorted.

"Good night." As she backtracked towards the door, his hand shot out to catch her wrist, his deep brown gaze caressing her face far too intimately. "Things aren't settled."

She tugged her hand loose. "Things haven't been settled in a long time." With a nod over his head she said, "Night Colin."

Alone in her room, Julia opened her suitcase and pulled out a change of clothes before heading to the bathroom. Freshly showered and relieved to see Colin's blinds were more than adequate enough to keep the sunlight out, Julia crawled into bed.

A moment later, she was asleep.

\* \* \* \*

She closed her hands over the rail of the balcony, the wood was cool to the touch. She couldn't sleep, couldn't stop thinking about him. A moment later, almost as if summoned by her thoughts, he was there. He stood behind her and slipped his hands up her bare arms before pushing the silk robe off her shoulders.

The evening breeze puckered her nipples, and he lifted her breasts into his palms, his thumbs lazily teasing the raised peaks.

She closed her eyes and leaned against the strong chest. The warmth in her middle deepened, streaming lower to build into a soft throb deep in her sex. She pressed her thighs together to futilely sooth the growing ache that clenched fiercely when he ground the hard length of his cock against her bottom.

He kissed her neck, his teeth nipping before he smoothed the sensitive flesh with the flat of his tongue. His fingers continued to gently tug and roll one nipple, his other hand sliding down her abdomen. "You can tell me whatever you like, but your body doesn't lie." He parted her damp sex and stroked down to her entrance, slowly sliding back up to circle her clit.

She moaned, her grip on the rail tightening.

He laughed softly against her ear. "Never lies," he whispered, then sank his fangs into her neck.

\* \* \* \*

Julia came awake with a start. In bed. Alone.

On a sigh she collapsed back against the pillows, cursing the dream. It was early afternoon at her best guess and she felt like she'd gotten only a few minutes of rest.

She closed her heavy lids, suppressing the very real aches deep in her body. Aches she knew that could only be satisfied by Brody.

\* \* \* \*

"Where is she?"

Colin shrugged. "Out?"

Brody glowered at the kid from the doorway. "Out where?"

Colin didn't pull his eyes away from the big screen television. "Exploring?"

"If she thinks avoiding me is going to buy her more time here, she's mistaken."

At this point he wouldn't put it past her. She'd taken him by surprise in coming here, and he wasn't about to assume she'd go quietly.

He made it to the door when Colin's voice stopped him. "How come you never talk about her?"

Brody turned around.

"I always figured there was someone, just never expected her to show up."

With a sigh born from a serious lack of sleep, he shoved a hand through his hair. "That makes two of us."

"Are you really going to make her leave?"

Brody nodded, not interested in explaining that the longer she stayed, the longer he'd want her to.

"Your call."

Brody arched a brow at the annoyance in the kid's voice. Colin wasn't a lot younger than him on the outside, but inside, hundreds of years separated them.

Instead of going to look for Julia immediately, Brody headed first for his office. There were some calls that couldn't be put off. He needed to locate the hunter with the visions. She was the only one who might be able to shed any light on the hunters' fascination with him.

Only once he had an understanding of that could he hope to find a way to end their relentless pursuit.

\* \* \* \*

He managed to occupy himself for a whole hour before his curiosity got the better of him. He knew she still wasn't back yet. He shouldn't have let her wander off anywhere. The place had been a safe haven for a long time, but there was no way to guarantee either of them hadn't been tracked here this time.

He passed Colin still playing one of his games in the rec room and left through the

kitchen door. Outside, he opened his mind, unable to get a vibe for her right away, then realized she was doing her damndest to stay out of range.

Brody headed down the south path, every step making his gut clench. The hot spring lay in this direction. A few minutes later the curve in the path led to the grotto he'd spent many nights in and was one of the reasons he'd settled on this place.

The sight of Julia's discarded clothing on the edge of the grassy bank lit up his insides like a backed up volcano.

A moment later she surfaced in the middle of the small hot spring, her face flushed. She was already on her feet, her gorgeous naked breasts glistening from the water, when she spotted him.

## Chapter Six

He stalked from one end of room to the other, anger emanating from his every pore until it nearly consumed him. Only once before had he lost control of his baser emotions and nearly destroyed himself in the process.

No, *they* had nearly destroyed him. He'd been right not to trust them so very long ago, had known even then that they would turn on him, and they had. That he survived at all, both their treachery and the darkness that had sought to rule him permanently, was a testament to his true strength.

Clinging to that as his vision grayed at the edges, he fought to remain in control. He'd come too far, waited too long.

The few brave enough not to flee as the news was passed to him about Ms. Sanchez, watched with wary eyes. Had it not been for feeding an hour before being told they'd lost track of both her and Brody, he would have ripped their throats out. Even now the urge to bathe in their blood roused the darkness far too close to the surface.

"Find me the seer," he growled.

With a curt nod, the shortest of the three vampires before him pivoted and left. His relief at being able to leave was so potent it thickened the air.

He drew in a breath, hating the very air the humans polluted. He knew well what happened when the proper precautions were not exercised, knew the price that was paid for such ignorance.

"There is other news." One of the remaining pair took an uneasy step forward.

The other raised his chin a notch. "We've found Morgan."

"Where?" Maybe it wasn't too late to salvage his plans. His plans had been too long in the making not to make every effort to salvage it.

"Europe."

He narrowed his eyes.

"Southern England," the vampire quickly corrected. "Should we bring her in?"

He couldn't help himself, he burst out laughing. The remaining vampires and the small group of rogue hunters ringing the perimeter of the room took a collective step backwards.

"Should either of you--" he broke off to scan the room, "--if any of you think they can get near an ancient one, then by all means try."

The two vampires exchanged nervous glances.

"Fools," he snarled. "Your necks would be broken before you even knew she was there. *Never* estimate an ancient."

He had once. "Who is watching her?"

"Humans."

"We must proceed cautiously. I won't have her driven back underground." No, he had plans for Morgan. Big, big plans.

He cocked his head. "What of Ms. Sanchez's friends?"

"They're under surveillance."

"Bring me one of them." Maybe she'd been foolish enough to tell them where she was going.

A little interrogation would go a long way to improving his mood.

\* \* \* \*

Julia froze, the awareness of someone nearby permeating her senses. On the heels

of that realization, she turned her head and spotted Brody on the edge of the bank. Hands shoved deep his pockets, the wind pushing through his mussed hair, his handsome face caught in the moonlight, he looked like some kind of Nordic god taking a breather from Valhalla.

A ghost of a smile hugged his mouth, and his gaze slowly roamed down to where the cool breeze stiffened her nipples.

A heat that had nothing to do with the hot spring, simmered in her belly. She hastily crossed her arms over her chest.

“Not too hot for you.”

“I adapted.” Though the hot water had stung plenty until her skin became accustomed to the warm temperature. Then it was pure heaven.

She slowly lowered back into the water, forcing the burst of warmth spinning wicked spirals between her thighs to calm. The dream was still too fresh in her mind. That was all.

Determined to prove his appearance didn't faze her she asked, “Do you come out here often?” When what she really wanted to know was if that explained his presence out here, or if he'd come looking for her specifically.

He took a seat on the grass, and she shrugged as he searched her expression for any signs of discomfort.

Brody nodded to the water. “Still swim much?”

“A few times a week.” Sometimes every day on the weeks she could swing it. The local gym had a decent sized swimming pool that she tended to frequent before heading to work.

“Any faster than you used to be?”

She snorted. “I was always faster than you.”

“That's not how I remember it.”

She smiled sweetly. “Age plays tricks with the memory.”

He arched a brow, and she started to shake her head, not liking the playful gleam that shone in his eyes. He stood up, his hand on his fly of his pants. “Scared?”

She laughed, but inside everything skated to a grinding halt. “Hardly. But this spring isn't more than twenty feet from point to point.”

Julia forced herself not to look away when he pulled his shirt off. She knew he stripped as much to see how she would handle it as to foolishly pretend to challenge her to a race. With the speed they were capable of and only twenty feet to play with, it was as absurd as having an Olympic sprinter run the four meter dash instead of the four hundred.

No, his purpose for joining her had nothing to do with any threat of a race.

His pants came off next, but her eyes never left his face until he was in the water. She was careful to keep plenty of space between them, uninterested in turning this into a game. Certainly not when it was one she had little chance of winning.

Brody settled back against the edge a few feet away and closed his eyes. A deep frown marred his forehead then eased away.

She glanced at her clothes, calculating the odds of her reaching them without him interfering, and how much of a chicken it would make her look like.

“I figured you were still too pissed at me to be nervous.”

“I'm starting to shrivel up.” Could she be anymore transparent?

“I'll see you later then.” His relaxed pose was nothing compared to the edge in his

voice, the one that dared her to make a move for her clothes.

She chose another carved out spot to sit comfortably. She wasn't really interested in leaving. She'd only gotten used to the water before he showed up. But having to share the wonderfully tranquil spot, rolling mountains and snowcapped peaks in the distance and a star-filled sky overhead that looked close enough to touch, killed much of its appeal.

"Did you come to tell me it was time to leave?"

"No."

"Liar."

He rubbed a hand over his face, almost wincing at the temperature she knew he was still growing accustomed to. "Could we just sit here and pretend for a couple minutes that you don't hate me?"

"I don't hate you," she said a moment later, more under her breath, but knew he would have heard her.

His eyes were closed once more, his relaxed face giving away no response to her declaration. Why should that surprise her? He probably didn't care either way.

"I do." He said it without looking at her, and she could feel the subtle press of him trying to get a better fix on her thoughts.

"Don't cheat. If there's something you want to know, ask."

He cocked his head, but instead of responding, he pushed away from the rock edge and disappeared beneath the surface. This game she knew too. She closed her eyes refusing to play into his hands. She was well aware he could stay under there for a good long while and she wasn't about to play the panicked damsel as she had the first time he pulled such a stunt on her.

Julia started to draw her knees up to her chest only to feel his hand wrap around her ankle. She tensed, half prepared for the tug that would pull her under. He broke the surface next to her, droplets of water caught in the moon's silvery light as he slid his hand up to her knee. Her inner thighs began to tingle in heady anticipation of his touch before she pushed his hand away.

He grinned as though he'd expected no less and settled himself directly beside her. Trapped between him and the outcropping of rocks to her left, the never ending stream of crackling tension between them jumped another notch. She could feel him watching her, but didn't trust herself to look at him. Not when the urge to kiss him was slowly burning a hole right through her heart.

She needed to get out. Now.

Something in her body language must have given her away, and Brody turned, locking a solid arm around her waist.

"Don't." The command might have been sufficient for chastising a child, but not a six-hundred-year-old vampire.

He caught her chin.

"Brody," she warned, her voice trembling to match her insides.

"It's your fault." His thumb drifted across her jawline.

She fought the urge to close her eyes at the seductive touch, needing to see what was coming. "What is?"

"This," and then he lowered his mouth. The second his lips touched hers the rest of the world ceased to exist. The spring nightlife was silenced, overtaken by the wild

pound of Brody's pulse as it fell almost in sync with hers. The evening breeze felt stilted and empty compared to each caress of his fingers over her skin. But it was the soft sweep of his tongue as he slid into her mouth to deepen the kiss that made everything but the man holding her obsolete.

Trapped against him, she hovered on the edge of the unexpected, whimpering when he kept the kiss unrushed and lazy. Prepared for the playful domination to emerge, she didn't know how to handle any tenderness from him at this point. The reckless side that challenged her to back down time and time again was predictable. She could handle that. Knew where she stood when it ended.

This ... this thoroughly intimate conquest made her ache. Ache for him, for what they'd had once, for what he'd taken from them.

Julia pulled away, the hand she shoved between them nearly shaking until she clenched it into a tight fist. "I'm not interested in the friends with benefits scenario."

"Then you better leave."

"I was here first." She'd come out here wanting just to ... think, and barely five minutes after happening upon the hot spring, he'd shown up and ruined it. Ruined *her* with one shivery kiss that continued to sizzle through her veins.

He shrugged. "If you think you can pretend you don't want me to touch you then by all means, stay."

"I don't have to pretend," she snapped, knowing if she stayed he'd call her on that and if she left it was because she didn't trust herself.

Neither way was a win/win situation for her. "Why life-mates?" she asked

He stilled, his expression morphing from playful to guarded in less time than it took for the question to leave her lips.

"Why go through with bonding us if you never planned on sticking around?"

More than any other question, it was the one she longed to know the answer to the most. Night after night for months she'd tortured herself with wondering what she might have done to drive him away. It had taken a long time and two overprotective surrogate brothers to make her see she hadn't deserved to be deserted that way.

Brody didn't answer. The longer she stared at him, the more the muscle ticked in his jaw before he finally shook his head. A second passed, then another.

With a feral growl, he caught the nape of her neck in his palm and hauled her forward. His teeth pierced the flesh at her throat, and she cried out at the fiercely possessive hold. She couldn't have jerked away if she wanted to, and with a few slow pulls of his mouth, she forgot to care. His fingers dug into her skin and he sucked harder.

Julia whimpered, and the sound had him drawing back. As quick as the euphoria claimed her at his primal response, the stark loneliness at being released just as quickly, settled in the moment he broke away.

They stared at each other and she knew he waited for something, a sign, her permission, her approval. And she couldn't give it. Not when having him so close, but still so far away, tore at her. Her body hungered for what Brody could give her, but not at the price of him holding back.

"All or nothing," she whispered, knowing as the words left her mouth she could never take them back.

His throat worked as he swallowed, his eyes impossible to read. "Enjoy the rest of your swim." He got out and sparing no more than a second to collect his clothes, he

stalked away.

\* \* \* \*

Brody slammed the phone down to save himself from chewing the elder's head off more than he already had. Declan still hadn't turned up anything on the seer, and on top of that, insisted Julia had found him on her own.

He closed his eyes, crushing the need to seek her out and give her exactly what she wanted. A lifetime ago he would have done anything to make her happy. Now it was about keeping her safe.

"I'll go wherever you want," Julia said quietly from the doorway. The plain white tank top that showed off her midriff and the faded jeans were not the same clothes he'd spotted on the ground at the hot spring and made her look like the proverbial girl next door. Her hair was damp and already drying in soft spirals that trailed past her shoulders. Knowing he was about to make her leave was like anticipating a head-on collision with a Mack truck he couldn't see coming.

"I'm glad you see that it's best."

She squared her shoulders and turned to leave, and he instantly regretted the callous tone.

"How did you find me Jules?"

A wave of emotion struck him before she clamped down on it. She didn't want him to call her that anymore, he realized.

He worked to swallow past the knot shoved into his throat. "How?"

She kept her back turned. "She was wrong. You don't need me. Don't ..." she trailed off and glanced at him, searching his face for something she looked convinced she wouldn't find.

"Who was wrong?"

"Morgan."

He frowned.

"An ancient."

He straightened in his chair. "What did she look like?"

Her brows drew together. "Long auburn hair, blue eyes."

"And she knew how to find me?"

Julia nodded. "How do you know her?"

He sat down trying to rearrange the details in his head. Not only had the ancient helped to free him, she'd pointed Julia in his direction. "Why did she tell you to come here?"

"She said you needed me."

"For what?"

"She was rather cryptic on that part." Julia took a seat opposite him. "How do you know her?"

He scrubbed a hand over his face, wondering if talking it through would help him make the pieces fit that were forever changing their position. "I think she was the one who turned me."

"You're not sure?"

"I was blind then. When I came to the following night, she was gone." While he'd lain there, rocked by the changes he felt taking place in his body after he drank from her, she'd whispered all the things he'd needed to know to survive as a vampire in a soothing

motherly tone. One he could still hear clearly in his head. More certain than ever that the ancient had been the one to turn him, Brody felt another piece of the puzzle slide into place. He only wished he knew what the big picture was supposed to look like.

“She said she helped you escape.”

He nodded.

“And she knows you, really knows you ... or she thinks she does.”

He cocked his head. “What else did she say?”

Julia didn't respond.

“Why would she think I'd need you?” What did the ancient know that he didn't? Not that it mattered since he wouldn't put Julia at further risk.

She shrugged, and pushed to her feet. “I tried to tell her you'd already made your choice.”

“Jules, wait.”

She shook her head. “Whenever Colin has the arrangements made, I'll be ready to go. I'll stay out of your way until then.” She paused in the doorway as though remembering something else she needed to know. “Did you ever look for it? The Key,” she clarified turning back around.

Colin strolled in, catching the tail end of her question. “Yeah, that's a bitch isn't it?”

“Colin,” Brody warned.

Julia stilled, and Colin glanced curiously back and forth between them. “What?”

“What must be a bitch?” Julia asked, then immediately transferred her hostile gaze to Brody. “What haven't you told me?”

“Nothing.”

He felt the push at his mental shields. “I thought you said no cheating?”

“That was before I knew you were keeping things from me.” She stared at him, waiting. “Tell me.”

He sighed, knowing she would just sift through Colin's thoughts if he didn't.

“It has to do with the Key, doesn't it, with why the hunters want it?”

“Me.”

She shook her head, frowning.

He pushed out a tense breath. “Why they want me. The hunters think *I'm* the Key.”

Surprise registered on her face. “Why?”

With a lift of his shoulder, the subject one he wished could easily dismiss, he said, “A seer had visions of me.”

She returned to the chair, and he nearly groaned aloud. “But the key is supposed to unlock the mystery of our origins, or so the myth goes.”

“Well, someone clearly got their tall tales crossed,” Colin put in.

“Regardless of why they think I'm it, they refuse to listen to anyone who says differently, least of all me.”

She cocked her head. “You really have no idea why.”

“You think I would pretend otherwise?” Not that he could blame her for drawing that conclusion. He hadn't been honest about much of this from the beginning. “Believe me, I've had considerable time to try and figure out why I'm so important to them.”

“And?”

“I know nothing more than I did when all this started.” Another frustrating truth.

“And when was that?”

He didn’t answer.

She leaned back in the chair, her eyes narrowing at his lack of response. “Maybe it’s your connection to the ancient.”

That had recently occurred to him, but still didn’t fit right. Not unless he could track Morgan himself to get answers to his growing list of questions. “Did she say anything else? Give you anyway to reach her?” If anyone knew how much truth there was to the Key legend it would be an ancient, and yet he had no way to get a hold of her, no place to even begin to look for her.

Julia shook her head. “What about Declan? If she’s that old surely the hunters’ council has a paper trail on her. Something we can use to find her.”

He shook his head. “No, *we*.”

Her eyes snapped fire. “Damn it, Brody.”

“You’re leaving.”

Without a word, she jerked to her feet and stalked out of the room, slamming the door behind her.

Colin winced. “Well done.”

Brody pointed to the door. “Make the arrangements.”

\* \* \* \*

When Colin hadn’t put in an appearance to let him know where Julia would be heading, Brody went in search of him. What he didn’t expect to hear was the excited hoot of laughter as he approached the rec room.

Colin and Julia were both seated cross-legged on the floor, game controls gripped in their hands, their intense expressions focused on the big screen TV. Colin hooted again in triumph, Julia responded accordingly by punching him in the arm.

“Ouch,” he complained, a wide smile on his face, one that warned the kid could get himself smitten.

“Don’t be a wimp,” she crowed before they both finally glanced to where Brody stood in the doorway.

Just that quick, the captivating smile on her lips disintegrated. Colin grimaced as he caught the action on the screen from the corner of his eye. He hissed out a foul curse, but was unable to fight Julia’s character off before she beheaded him with a broadsword.

“Fuck.”

“Better luck next time, champ,” Julia purred, seemingly content to ignore Brody.

Colin rolled his eyes. “Did you know Julia is friends with one of the guys who created this?”

Brody nodded.

Colin arched a goading brow. “Did you know she plays this game better than you?”

“Is that right?” She didn’t even spare him a glance.

“She’s damn fast too. Sneaks in and is on me before I can see where she’s coming from.”

Brody crossed his arms. “How are the arrangements coming?”

Colin turned back to the game on the television. “I’m on it.”

“I can see that.”

Julia set the control aside and walked out of the room. She didn't need to look at Brody for him to feel the anger bubbling under her skin.

\* \* \* \*

Instead of going back to her room, Julia headed for the top floor, her angry strides devouring the hallway carpet. She'd already taken a good look around when she'd first arrived, but never got to the attic she realized as she paused at the door at the end of the hall.

The knob turned easily in her hand, revealing a small winding staircase. Curious, she followed it up, initially surprised by the wide open loft area. Wide windows lined all four walls casting long silvery shadows on the floor boards. She spotted the painting supplies--brushes, paints, paint thinner and other bottles of stuff she didn't recognize--then noticed the canvases stashed around the room. Everywhere she looked were paintings, one after another, of haunting landscapes, all of them at night.

Brody had been busy. After studying each one in turn, marveling at the talent and discovering another side of him, Julia turned to leave, and stopped.

In the far corner a cluster of covered canvases drew her attention. The drop cloth covering the closest one still situated on an easel was draped in a soft green silk that whispered under her fingers as she tugged it off.

The material slipped from her hand, her arm limp at her side as she stared slack-jawed at the painting. Without a word she reached for the next covered one, and the next, and the next until she was surrounded by portraits painted with an attention to detail that was staggering.

Portraits of her.

## Chapter Seven

Her fingers hovered at the edge of the canvas, her heart pounding faster. The swirling colors, the textures, the likeness. Her throat tightened, determined to lock in the well of emotion rising inside.

Some paintings were just of her face, others long nude poses that echoed with every emotion that his hands had tried to harness. Desire, sadness, joy. Some pensive, others playful. But the painting that she kept coming back to had her seated on a bench, the windows in front of her thrown open, moonlight brightening her face. She was looking back over her shoulder, a secretive smile on her face, her hair long and curling down her naked back.

Julia closed her eyes, remembering that night with such an overwhelming clarity her knees shook. It hadn't been long after he'd turned her and he'd found them--built them--a beautiful home on a lake. Like she'd fallen back through time she could remember how sexy he'd looked lying in bed behind her, the sheet riding low on his hip. His hair had been longer then and fell across one side of his face making him look every bit the dangerous predator he could be. Then he'd smiled, and the one moment of utter happiness had been forever etched on her heart.

And then it was all gone. He'd snatched it away, left without a backwards glance. Or so she'd always believed.

She studied another painting, one that made her look like a water nymph, her wet hair shining as she stood hip deep in the lake. He'd taught her to swim there beneath those long tangled tree limbs that stretched out over the water.

*Damn it, why?*

She jerked the cloth back up to hide the reminder that perhaps he hadn't moved on as much as he let her believe, as much as she'd forced herself to believe.

She heard Colin coming as she covered the last painting.

He paused in the doorway. "Even I don't have enough balls to come in here."

Julia shrugged, trying to erase the images in her mind of what she knew lay beneath the cloth. She fingered the edges of the silk absently. "I guess I missed the keep out sign."

His brows drew together and he glanced at the covered canvasses.

"Got me all booked somewhere?" she asked leaving the paintings behind.

He nodded. "We'll leave tomorrow night."

She nodded, almost numb but for the voice that dared to whisper what her heart didn't want to hear.

*He still loves you.*

She squeezed her eyes shut, wished she could drown out the uncertainties, and wishing she hadn't come up here, hadn't seen any of it. "How long has he been painting?"

"Not sure, but all the ones here have been painted since he bought the place."

A few years. That's what he'd said when she arrived, wasn't it? That he bought it a few years ago? She wanted to turn around and go back to look at them again, as if she'd find answers there she couldn't get from Brody.

"You looked at them, didn't you?"

She knew Colin meant the covered ones, and nodded.

"Were they of you?"

“I wish they weren’t,” she said simply.

He nodded thoughtfully. “I’ve always been able to tell when he was working on one of those ones. He’d come up here looking for ... something, and come down as though he’d left another piece of himself up there.”

At the bottom of the stairs, she came to a decision. “How close can you find fresh meat and produce?”

Colin arched a brow. “Just under an hour away.”

That would be plenty of time. “Let’s take a drive.

\* \* \* \*

Brody cocked his head, the rich scent of cooking spices filling his senses. Couldn’t be Colin. He wouldn’t know Oregano from Origami.

Jules.

He closed his eyes reliving that brief moment of panic when she and Colin had left in the SUV nearly two hours ago. He’d immediately checked her room, and the relief he felt at spotting her suitcase still there had blindsided him. He should have hoped she really had left and spared them having to say goodbye again. If he was smart, he would have left himself for a day or two, but he didn’t trust Julia not to talk Colin into letting her stay. And somehow he knew if he left without saying a word to her, it would ruin what little faith she might still have in him.

Brody pushed away from his desk. He hadn’t heard anything from his contacts in locating the seer and worried the hunters had hidden her. Or maybe they weren’t worried he’d try to find her. Either way, he’d made zero headway.

Curious about the tantalizing smells clinging to the air, he headed for the kitchen. Two pans and a pot were on the stove, steam rising from the hissing contents, before Julia stirred them one after another. He didn’t move from the doorway, the aching familiarity struck him hard in the chest. For weeks he’d sat on a stool by the door where she’d worked in a run-down tavern, watching the quiet confidence she exuded translate into meals she enjoyed preparing. Even before she knew what he was, he’d devoured any plate of food she put in front of him, enjoying it because she’d made it for him.

Before Morgan had turned him, so few people in his life had ever done anything for him, more often leaving his life the moment he had hoped for any kind of attachment. Despite that Julia had refused to believe he wanted anything more than to use and discard her then, she’d always taken the time to make his food with something extra, all the while stubbornly refusing to spend any time alone with him for weeks. Each day she’d come to trust him a little more, and he’d fallen a little harder for her.

Julia glanced over her shoulder and spotted him. The slow smile that spread over her lips coaxed him farther into the kitchen.

“What are you doing?”

She arched a brow. “Been that long since you ate actual food?”

“Colin’s specialty is fried peanut butter sandwiches.”

She shuddered. “Enough said.”

Something had changed. He searched her eyes and could find no hint of the animosity that hadn’t wandered far from the haunting green depths since she’d arrived. Intrigued, he took a seat at the island as much to puzzle out the changes in her as to watch her work. There was something inexplicably comforting about watching her move around the kitchen. An illusion of closeness that he was loath to let slip away.

For long minutes he watched as she chopped fresh herbs and vegetables and put pasta on to boil. “You’re skipping the garlic I hope.”

“Naturally.”

She wiped her hand on the dish towel she’d wrapped around her waist, then handed him the remote. “Gets kind of boring, just sitting there.”

He shook his head. He wasn’t interested in watching anything but her. After another moment he got up and moved to take a closer look at the food. He snagged the fork and pierced a piece of chicken.

She stopped to watch him, but the flavor ceased to penetrate his senses as he absorbed how close she was to him. The intensity to reach out for her was curbed only by the knowledge that letting her in would make it impossible to let her go. He’d barely been able to sever those ties the first time.

“Tastes great.”

She beamed, and motioned for him to get out of the way.

He returned to his seat at the island, watching as she set a glass of warmed blood in front of him, thankfully sparing him from the Batman plastic cup he knew she’d been eyeing.

Julia stood next to him for a long moment, and when he lifted his gaze something flickered in her eyes. She turned away, but he snagged her wrist.

“What are you up to?” The question didn’t come out as sharp as he intended.

Instead of answering, she leaned down and slid her mouth over his. Incredibly slow, the soft glide of her lips was intoxicating. He was pretty sure if exposed to her long enough he’d wind up drunk enough to do just about anything. Including beg her to stay.

Julia gave a breathy moan and crawled into his lap, looping her arms around his neck. He held her close, his senses ready to burst with the way she worked so effortlessly under his skin. He brushed her hair back from her face, absently exploring the side of her neck with his fingers. Her nails raked at his shoulders, but she deliberately slowed the kiss that was quickly spiraling out of control.

She smiled. “Can’t let the food burn.”

He kept a hold of her arm. “Where is this coming from?”

“Carpe Diem,” she said simply, but something else skirted her tone that he couldn’t identify. “Once upon a time we got along rather well I thought. No point in spending my last few hours here fighting. I don’t want that. I’ve spent far too long letting the way things ended between us eat away at me. It’s time to let go.”

Brody wanted to be reassured by that, parting ways on better terms than before, but something about her confession nagged at him.

She turned back to the stove and he replayed every moment since he’d entered the kitchen in his mind, trying to isolate what seemed off about her reasons for the turn about.

“I won’t change my mind, Julia.”

“That’s not what this is about.” She glanced back at him, nothing in her face betraying any hurt at the pointed reminder.

He picked up the glass in front of him, sipping slowly, wondering if she wasn’t right about enjoying this short time while they could. If he dared to let himself.

\* \* \* \*

The beginnings of guilt plucked at the inside of her stomach but she suppressed it

before the traitorous emotion could give her away. She set their filled plates on the table, having already given Colin some before she chased him off for the rest of the night. She then refilled Brody's glass and sat across from him.

"How did you come across him anyway?"

"Colin? His mother confused me with prey."

She paused, her fork halfway to her mouth. "His mother was a vampire?"

"She'd been changed after she had him, and high on some synthetic drug that impaired her senses more than it should have, which is why she didn't realize I wasn't human."

Julia knew of such drugs that made the rounds among the vampire population since human street drugs failed to metabolize the same for them.

"I followed her back to her place just as her son was about to become a snack for the creep in her apartment. I don't know if she knew the other vampire or not, didn't care, but the kid in the corner was terrified."

"And you took him in?"

He nodded. "He didn't have anyone else and the thought of social services or foster care ..."

"And you knew what it was like to have no one want you," she quietly put in, her heart aching for the little boy Brody had once been, and for Colin. They were lucky to have found each other.

"He was nine years old and suddenly developed one hell of an attitude when I told him he was coming to live with me."

"Did he know what you were?"

"Not then. It was a few years later before he realized. I almost lost him then."

"That's why he doesn't want to become like us, because of his mother," Julia guessed.

"Probably. She wasn't in great shape when she stumbled across me, and even though Colin never said anything, I knew she likely drank from him a time or two."

Her stomach wrenched. "Is she still alive?"

Brody shook his head.

"I'm glad he had you." And she meant it. Will and Gabe had been lifelines for her when they took her in, and she wondered if Brody knew how much Colin likely appreciated him for being there when no one else had been.

For the rest of the meal they steered clear of any conversation that would tread on fragile territory and she managed to enjoy dinner. She was also careful not to watch him too closely and bring attention to herself. After clearing their plates, she grabbed the whip cream and berries she'd picked up.

"Dessert too?"

She grinned. "I had a craving."

In front of the cupboards, she reached up to grab down two small bowls. Brody stepped up behind her, and gripping her waist, pulled her back to his chest. She closed her eyes a moment, the possessive gesture tearing at her resolve to play things out the way she'd planned.

His fingers grazed her neck as he moved her hair to the side. "Why do I get the feeling there's something else going on here?" He nipped at her skin, his lips instantly soothing the soft sting. "You're not playing games with me, are you Jules?"

“To what end?”

“I haven’t figured it out yet.”

From the corner of her eye she saw the second glass had been emptied.

“But it wouldn’t be wise to try anything.”

She opened her mind enough to let him glimpse her very real desire for him, careful to keep guard over the emotions associated with discovering the paintings.

His hand spanned her belly, slipping under the edge of her shirt. She turned in his arms and pulled him down to meet her mouth before he probed any further. There was only one way to find out the truth of what he felt, and she knew he wasn’t about to willingly share it without help.

Bold and hot, his tongue tangled with hers, long sweeping strokes that burned her from the inside out. She could still feel the way he held back, the way the hunger rose in him in the way it did her, and how he skirted the edges of giving in completely.

And that wouldn’t do at all. She needed him to let go, but feared he’d be stubborn about letting go so easily and had taken the necessary steps. Steps he might not appreciate, but sometimes the outcome was worth the risk.

Brody nudged her back, his hands going to the edge of the counter for more leverage. He drew in a sharp breath, but she didn’t let him think about anything but her. The moment she gripped his erection through his pants, he growled deep in his throat and lifted her in his arms. He rubbed his cock against her sex and he pushed harder, the wildness in his kiss enough to make her cry out.

He set her back on her feet then he lifted her shirt, his lips fastening around her nipple already straining against the fabric of her bra. He reached around and unclasped it, his hot mouth finding her with the material yanked aside.

Julia dropped her head back, long coiled strands of aching nerves twisted in her womb.

His teeth nipped and he flicked his tongue, back and forth, over each peak before returning to her mouth. The kiss teemed with a reckless energy that sizzled up her backbone. With growing impatience he unsnapped the button at her waist and delved down. He cupped her boldly, his fingers exploring slowly through her satin panties already damp with how badly she wanted him.

He pulled back and shook his head as though to clear it.

She caught his jaw and tipped his chin up, nipping at the vein that pulsed there.

“Jules ...”

Caging his face in her hands, she kissed him again, needing him to give in.

His hands trembled as he tugged hers away. “Something isn’t right.”

“Everything is fine.”

He shook his head. “I can’t think.”

“Then don’t.”

He held back only another second until she worked the zipper down on his pants and slipped a hand inside. He grunted when she closed her fist around his rigid length, fire rushing into the gaze he pinned her in place with.

He caught her mouth in another searing kiss. Too late she felt him push at the shields separating their thoughts. He tensed.

She tipped her face up, knowing by the look on his face that he knew. “I saw them, Brody.”

The tightness near the corners of his eyes warned that she was about to lose him. “You shouldn’t have been up there.”

“It doesn’t matter.” She caught his hand and brought it to her breast. “Don’t stop now.”

Her breath slid out as he drew his thumb back and forth across the hard peak. The look of utter rapture on her face battered at his system until he wanted nothing more than to slide her pants off and wrap her legs around his waist.

The image blurred in his mind, as though he couldn’t hold it in place. He blinked, and Julia leaned up, her tongue sweeping across his bottom lip and pushing into his mouth. So many times he’d hungered for this, and now that she was in his arms it didn’t feel quite so ... right.

He could feel it, but couldn’t pinpoint where things were off.

She finished working his pants all the way open, and he hissed in carnal pleasure when she again found his aching cock. The back of his neck tingled, but the sensation paled in comparison to the sure strokes of her closed fist working up and down his shaft.

She knew.

That realization came back to him with a sharp clarity. She saw the paintings. That was why she was doing this, because she believed it meant something. Believed those paintings meant something.

He cursed, needing to pull away from her. His body ignored him, refusing to cooperate. His limbs felt heavy, the rush of desire weighing him down.

Julia eased back long enough to push her shirt all the way off her shoulders. Her pants came next until she stood before him in nothing more than a lacey pair of underwear that he could rip off with a flick of a finger.

The hunger in him surfaced hard and fast, but his movements felt sluggish in comparison.

She backed away, but he was still quick enough to catch her. The world spun for a moment and he pressed her into the wall, fighting to clear the warm fog creeping in.

“Touch me,” she murmured against his throat.

Her thighs were soft as he nudged them wider and pushed past the barrier of her panties. Her slick heat made him groan, and when he slowly pushed a finger inside her, she rocked up on her toes, her teeth piercing his neck.

Groaning, he withdrew to find her clit, stroking the swollen knot until she cried out. Then his teeth found her throat, but she pushed him out of reach before he could taste the blood he could hear pounding thick and hot through her veins.

Julia backed out of the kitchen, and like a man crawling across a dusty scorching desert to reach water, he followed.

She managed to stay a step ahead of him the length of the hall. He should have caught up to her, but things were moving too slow somehow. As he stepped into his room, the world once more tipped on its axis. He slapped an awkward hand against the wall and waited for the spinning to stop.

Behind him Julia closed the door and the quick flash of concern on her face penetrated his mind. He frowned, but could do nothing more as he felt the wall slipping away from him.

She tucked herself against his side and maneuvered him closer to the bed. As he hit the mattress, he tried to lift his arm but couldn’t manage it.

He raised his head that felt thicker and heavy. “What did you do, Jules?”

She kissed him again, and he could neither pull her close nor push her away. She overwhelmed his senses, consumed him. Julia pushed him back on the bed and managed to get him far enough up the mattress with little help. His mind moved from gut wrenching desperation to pull her down and make her ride him to a certainty that ...

He closed his eyes, forced them back open. “What did you do?” he repeated again, his voice more clear in his head.

The tenderness in her kiss made him ache. “What I had to.”

Despite the fuzziness that hovered at the edges of his mind, he could see her clearly reaching for something on the floor next to the bed.

A rope?

His gaze snapped to hers.

“It’s the only way.”

“To what?” He barely budged his arm an inch off the bed to move out of reach when she grabbed for it.

“To know the truth.”

He managed to flex his hips until his erection brushed her center. “You need more truth than this.”

A resigned look warred with sexy determination on her face. “You’re trying to keep me out.”

“Maybe you’re looking for something you won’t find.” Something he didn’t want her to find.

“We’ll see.” She didn’t sound convinced.

“Don’t play games with me, Jules. Not unless you’re sure you can win.” Such a threat would have been considerably more effective if she weren’t about to tie him to the bed.

The secretive smile she offered in response affected Brody far more than he wanted it to. He wanted to be mad, certain that she’d drugged him with something, but couldn’t seem to hold onto the anger.

Julia straddled his chest to reach behind him to knot the ropes at the headboard. Any other time such an attempt to hold him would be useless, but tonight he couldn’t seem to fight her. She leaned down, her naked breasts rubbing his chest as she kissed him again before reaching up to tie the knot. She deliberately brushed her nipple next to his mouth and he could no sooner stop from flicking his tongue to catch the tip than he could ignore the surge of lust that snapped down his spine and curled round to his sac.

Her hands worked at the ropes as he pulled the tight peak between his lips and sucked.

She moaned and wiggled away, but still paid enough attention to tying the knots to make sure he wasn’t going anywhere as long as whatever filtered through his blood kept him weakened.

As she started to lean back, he nipped the side of her neck and indulged in the few quick swallows before she sat up.

“I’m not sorry that it has to be this way.”

He quirked a brow. “Payback’s a bitch, right?”

“You’ll have to let me know.” The curve of her lips was pure rock-your-world sex.

She slid next to him on the bed, trailed her hand down his chest, over the flat of his belly and finally to his pants. With ease, she worked them down over his hips.

“You know you didn’t need to drug me for this.” Already he could feel the fogginess retreating from his mind, or maybe it was the drug that made it impossible to focus on anything clearly, but her.

“This is the only way.”

“Only way to what?”

She pulled her bottom lip between her teeth, the pose an instant reminder of the time ...

He shook his head. “No, Julia.”

“If you won’t tell me what I need to hear, then I’ll make you tell me.”

“You think pushing me to the brink will get you what you want?”

“It did before.”

“That was then.” At a time when sharing every piece of himself with her had been part of the plan.

“Some things never change.”

He tugged at the bonds like a fly caught in a web. “I want you to untie me and stop this.”

She bent and dropped a series of damp kisses down his abdomen. “Afraid?”

“No.” He realized his mistake in answering too quickly. “There’s a time and a place for covering new ground, but this isn’t it.”

She gripped his cock and shuttled her hand up.

He clenched his jaw. “You don’t know my limits.” His cock bumped against her hand, urging her to keep going even while he mind knew how dangerous it was to continue.

“Well, let’s just test them, shall we.” Julia bent and flicked her tongue over the head of his shaft, slowly massaging him from the base up with her hand.

His hips jerked in response, but the limited movement didn’t reassure him.

She grinned and deepened the action, taking him more fully in her mouth. He closed his eyes at the sweet sensation, the hot roll of her tongue down his length the most pleasurable torture imaginable. Up and down, she made love to him with her mouth, the slow sweet suction moving to a fever pitch until she backed off.

He wanted to cage her there and sink back into her gorgeous mouth with one long hard dig, but she eased away. Her hands worked the muscles inside his thighs, brushing his cock until he throbbed anew for her touch, then she fisted him again as her fangs pierced the inside of his thigh. The soft shallow pulls competed with each hard thrust up his shaft.

He wanted to come, but she left him again, returning to his mouth. Her kiss was one of domination, meant to melt away the resolve he’d clung to for a hundred years. Her sex burned him through his chest and he wanted inside her.

“Up here,” he coaxed.

She shook her head. “This isn’t about me.”

“Just for one second.”

She reached up to check the rope, allowing him to tug one pink nipple back into his mouth. She whimpered, but didn’t move away, allowing him to lick each tip before sucking ruthlessly. And then he bit down.

Her fingers sank into his shoulders, but she didn't try to pull free immediately, and when she finally did it was with a look that could have passed for regret.

She again shimmied down his front.

"It will take more than that."

"Getting worried?"

"You should be, because when this stuff wears off ..." he let the threat hang in the air.

Her smile dimmed only momentarily as she processed it, then she gripped him hard and bent to suck him deep between her lips. On a growl, he pumped his hips to meet her mouth, the action slow and raking his every nerve ending.

"Untie me, Jules."

She shook her head, and then stood long enough to pull her panties off.

"Up here," he growled, jerking hard enough at his restraints to make her brows draw together. "They're coming loose anyway." Not exactly, but the worried frown on her brow was damn cute. He was already looking forward to making her pay for going to such lengths.

As expected she inched up to check on them and he kissed the side of her breast.

Her hands slid through his hair.

"Let me taste more, Jules."

"Tell me about the paintings." She straddled him, her warm sex brushing the straining head of his cock.

He clenched his jaw. "There's nothing to tell."

"I don't believe you."

"Tough." He rocked upwards, sliding in only an inch before she moved away.

"You painted me Brody, why?" Again she rubbed her sex the length of him, and he shuddered.

But he wouldn't answer her, wouldn't tell her what she wanted to hear.

Without warning she impaled herself on him. He cried out, yanking at the fucking ropes she used to hold him down. He wanted her to ride hard and fast, to reel in the orgasm he felt building.

Julia had other plans, keeping her next thrust slow and shallow. "You don't get to come until you tell me the truth."

"Damn it, stop this." He pitched his hips hard, sinking deep.

She cried out and rocked back, lengthening each glide only to back off when she knew he hovered on the brink of release. Over and over she played the part of the seductress to perfection, kissing him, touching him, riding him. Taking him to the edge only to hold back, knowing each time he grew more desperate to come.

The hunger for her blood pounded fiercely in his head, but he was still too weak to pull free. Soon though. Very, very soon.

Her teeth found the spot under his jaw and she sank deep as she continued her relentless pace, her inner muscles contracting around him only to slip away when she withdrew time and time again.

He groaned, fighting when he felt her push at his mind.

"Julia--" he murmured, then instantly cut himself off at the sound of weakness, of begging, that he heard creep into his voice. He would not give into her.

"Don't hold back, Brody. Please."

He couldn't, not the way she wanted him to.

She rocked back and took him deep in her sex, riding harder now as though even she couldn't hold back any longer. The torturous stirrings of release worked through him and he strained at his bonds, felt them loosen.

Her eyes met his, and in that same moment they both realized she'd underestimated his tolerance to whatever drug she'd given him.

## Chapter Eight

Julia had little time to process the fact that the effects of Declan's drug were wearing off too quickly, when her orgasm took hold. Sharp and hot, her insides clenched around him and she cried out before instinctively bending to find his throat.

His arms came around her, and her eyes flew open.

He was loose.

The realization slammed through her mind like a freight train with no brakes. She'd miscalculated. She'd been so concerned about making sure he wasn't completely paralyzed like the hunters Declan had taken down, that she hadn't counted on it wearing off this soon. She'd been careful not to let him drink much from her for just that reason, and already her one shot of getting inside his head, his heart, was gone.

"Harder," he hissed. He gripped her hips, his fingers digging deep and he thrust up to meet her.

And then he rolled, hovering over her. The darkness she'd been fighting through to reach him surfaced in his eyes a moment before he sank his fangs in her neck with no mercy. Julia gripped his shoulders, both pulling him close and pushing him away. The arms around her tightened almost brutally, and he wedged a knee between her legs.

The sheer domination, the fierce grip he had on her mind, filling her head with memory after carnal memory of them, was too much. The intensity too overwhelming. She tried to shove him away, needing it to stop.

He broke from her neck, his eyes hot and savage. "You wanted to know." And then he pushed his hard cock deep inside her. Whimpering, she arched against him, trembling now with the certainty she'd pushed him too far. He drove into her over and over, ruthlessly determined to show her that her game had failed. To punish her for wanting to see what he refused to show her.

Brody withdrew long enough to find her breast, his tongue curling around her nipple before tugging a fierce cry from her. Through blurry eyes she met his gaze, afraid it wasn't some kind of sensory overload that affected her vision. Afraid that it was real tears. Real from-the-deepest-part-inside tears.

Julia slammed her eyes shut before he noticed and knew just how much she'd opened her heart back up to him after finding those paintings. He seemed oblivious to the emotional upheaval his touch unleashed as he continued to explore the curve of each breast, then licking and nipping each hard peak. His mouth and tongue teased and sucked with the same intensity he'd driven into her moments ago. And with every deep moan his greedy lips worked from her, her nails raked his back.

He returned to her mouth, his kiss equal parts demanding and dominating as he tried to coax the complete submission she'd sought from him.

"No," she murmured against his mouth.

"Yes." He deepened the kiss, taking it to a devastating level as his fingers slide down to her cleft.

He didn't take any time to tease, but pushed two fingers hard inside her.

Her heels dug into the mattress, her moan drowned out by his mouth. She lifted her hips, nipping his bottom lip when he stroked up to find her clit and circled the slick knot fast and hard. She felt him watching her, and opened her eyes to see the moment he knew she was ready to come again, and then backed off.

Emotionally and physically frustrated, Julia bared her fangs, but he only grinned down at her, a wolfish smile that came right before he took down his prey. And then he pushed her legs over his arms, sinking inside again, his hips pumping slowly, but deep. His eyes blazed, his mind opening only until she was consumed by the hunger and desire he had for her, for her blood, as he rode her harder.

Another climax hit hard and threw her into the abyss. A moment later Brody gave a guttural cry and then collapsed atop her, his long lithe body pressing her into the mattress.

Julia closed her eyes, beaten back by the emotional roller coaster that seducing him into being honest with her had become. She squirmed under him, but he didn't let go. She wanted to believe the way his arms were wrapped so tightly around her meant something, but what if the small shred of hope she'd been listening to wasn't worth it?

He rolled to the side finally, his eyes burning into her. She couldn't bring herself to look at him. Despite the pain he'd caused her in the past, she still felt guilty about drugging him. Trying to use sex to get in his head was one thing, but deliberately weakening him first was an all time low for her.

"Don't ever try that with me again, Jules."

She didn't respond, and he pulled her up so she draped his body. The tenderness in his hands as he brushed back her hair and cupped her jaw was a complete contradiction to the man who'd taken her minutes ago.

And it made everything hurt all the more when he said, "You're looking for something you're not going to find."

She shook her head, suddenly refusing to let go of what had led her to this. "I saw the paintings. I *know* they mean something." She saw the attention to detail, the way he caught every angle, the play of light, the emotion on her own face.

Their eyes remained locked, her next breath lodged in her throat as she waited for him to deny it.

Julia sat up. "You've never held back with me before. Not until recently. You can spin your stories about them not meaning anything, but the truth is, if you weren't trying to hide something, you wouldn't be holding back."

He gave her a harsh look. "You won't find what you're digging for. Not in me."

"You used to be a more convincing liar."

"And you're starting to sound like you did back then, refusing to believe what's right in front of you. I don't love you."

"Or maybe it's just that I know now exactly what I knew then, exactly what I talked myself out of."

He cocked his head, his eyes glittering furiously. "I'm sorry that I can't give you what you want."

"Me too." Julia stood, and walked out the door. Everything inside her shrieked not to give in now, but she ignored it, not the least bit surprised when he didn't call out to stop her.

In her room, she collapsed on the edge of her bed. Tonight, there were no tears to cry like there had been when he left her long ago. Now there was only a cold empty place where his voice used to linger. The only thing worse than believing he didn't love her anymore, was knowing that he did, and that he still pushed her away.

\* \* \* \*

Brody stared at the ceiling. Julia had drugged him. If not for how close she'd brought him to losing control, he could almost be amused by her attempt. He never would have guessed she'd go to such an extreme to get inside his head.

And the paintings. He squeezed his eyes shut. He hadn't thought to lock the door, hadn't given his studio so much as a passing thought since she'd shown up. If she hadn't seen them, he doubted she would have pulled such a stunt. As mad as he could get for her testing him like that, he didn't regret being with her. Only that he hadn't been able to truly let go.

In Julia's arms the rest of the world ceased to exist and for one blinding moment he'd been prepared to embrace the connection between them. Bonded as life-mates, her blood and body satisfied him like nothing else, but withholding so much of that mental connection left him aching. Aching like he hadn't in decades. He'd missed her since the day he walked away. So many nights he'd lain awake when sleep and dreams of her plagued him. His painting had given him an outlet to release the wanting that was slowly eating him up inside.

But nothing prepared him for the pain in his chest at how close he was to the sweetest slice of heaven he could get, only to push it away.

He sat up on the edge of the bed and shoved a hand through his hair. He glanced at the door she'd stormed through a moment ago. He opened his mind to reach for her. The second he felt a hint of her pain, he severed the connection. Damn it, she should never have come here.

And telling himself that over and over did nothing but worsen his rising frustration. What worried him the most was her refusing to accept that things were not going to change. He'd seen the tiniest flicker of hope in her eyes when she'd pushed him to the edge of release only to jerk him back.

The drug still lingered in his system, which would make working for another couple of hours difficult. Still, he dragged on his pants and headed for his office. The blinds were already closed. Colin always checked them before he went to bed himself for a few hours. The kid required less sleep than Brody did.

He sat at the desk, nothing breaking through the thoughts that continued to drift to Julia. The ones that demanded he find her and bring her back to bed with him. To do nothing but sleep and know she was tucked safe in his arms.

He cursed under his breath, grateful when his cell phone rang a second later. Only a few people knew the number and it had better be good news.

He flipped it open.

"Not in bed yet?"

The female voice played with his memory. The ancient.

"Not yet," he answered carefully wondering how she'd gotten this number.

"You need to go to Rome."

Brody frowned, already guessing it was going to be hard to anticipate the reasons the ancient had chosen to get in touch with him again so soon. "Why?"

"Do you want answers?"

"To?"

She sighed. "To why they think you're the Key?"

"Am I?"

"Does it matter? The hunters believe you are and they won't let it end until they

get what they want.”

“And what’s that?”

She didn’t answer his question. “Make arrangements to leave as soon as possible. When you arrive in Rome you need to find a solicitor by the name of Francesco Moretti.”

“If you have all the answers why not meet me yourself?”

“I’m being followed and I’m not about to bring along any party crashers if I can help it.” Impatience laced her voice.

Brody didn’t care. He wasn’t about to put his neck on the line without a damn good reason. “What help will the solicitor be?”

“He’ll give you something you need to see.”

“What?” he asked again, already doubting she would clarify any further.

“And bring Julia with you.” It was little more than a demand.

His protective instincts roared to the surface. “Why did you send her here?”

“You need her.”

His fingers clenched tight around the phone. “For what?”

“Bring her,” the ancient insisted. “The solicitor will be expecting to see both of you. If he doesn’t, he won’t help you.”

Brody clenched his jaw, hating to be pushed into this. “How do you know I won’t go alone and force him to give whatever it is to me anyway?”

“The man would sooner die at your hands than face me for disobeying my orders.”

“You sound like a real peach to deal with.”

Her laughter sounded surprisingly genuine. “Perhaps he and your human ward could compare notes?”

Brody stiffened. “Do not threaten Colin.”

The ancient laughed again. “The hunters have made you a tad possessive I see. It was probably best that you left Julia years ago. You might have wound up smothering her in your attempts to protect her.”

“By leaving her I *was* protecting her.” A century later, and though it was the truth, it didn’t make it any easier to accept. He’d lived with that decision a long time, but still found the price of letting go too high.

“Nevertheless, she will accompany you or the deal is off.”

“And if I don’t agree with the terms?”

“Then this will never end.” She hung up before he got out any more of the thousand questions he had. Like why him? Why had she changed him all those years ago? Had it just been pity? A strong immortal wanting to help a blind man? Having met dozens of others of his kind over the years, few would ever change a human for such reasons, which begged the question if she’d had some ulterior motive. And how had she known where to find him, how to reach him? Why had she cared enough to bother?

He set the phone back on his desk and went to find Colin. If he was lucky the night owl would still be up. Probably surfing the net.

As expected, he found Colin in front of his computer. “We’re heading for Rome.”

He didn’t even look up from the screen. “I’ll take care of it. You want to leave at sundown?”

“Yeah.”

He headed for the door, but Colin’s voice stopped him. “How was diner?”

“Fine.”

“That’s it?” A shove of his feet sent the chair rolling back away from the computer. Colin laced his hands behind his head. “Cause if a woman like that was cooking for me, I’d hope to hell it was more than ‘fine’.”

Brody didn’t say anything. Talking about it--not that he would with Colin to begin with--would mean replaying before, during and *after* dinner in his head. And he wasn’t going there right now. If he was smart, he wouldn’t for a good long while.

Colin sighed. “What about Julia?”

“She’s coming too.”

Colin cocked his head. “I guess dinner really was better than fine.”

“It’s not my idea to bring her along.” For a lot of reasons it felt important to mention that. He didn’t want Colin to get used to her hanging around. He saw the way the kid had warmed up to her. “Make the plans and then get some sleep.”

\* \* \* \*

It was an hour after sunset and he’d gotten tired of waiting for her to appear.

Brody didn’t knock--as much to piss her off as because this was *his* house--but opened the door slowly. An annoyed Julia he could deal with. One still hurting from yet another of his rejections last night was a different matter altogether.

Inside the bed was made and the lamp on, but she wasn’t there or in the bathroom. He glanced at the door, and then joined her out on the balcony.

She stood with her back to him, the evening breeze already tugging at the strands of hair she’d pulled back in a loose braid. “I’m all packed,” she said quietly.

“Jules,” he began unsure of what to say to ease some of the pain radiating off her. Unlike last night it wasn’t so raw and crushing to him, more compartmentalized and resigned.

She shook her head. “What’s done is done.”

Part of him wanted to argue, wanted to explain himself. Instead, he stood there remembering that she had been the one to drug him. “We’re leaving soon.”

She glanced at him then, the green pools lacking the spark and fire he’d glimpsed last night. “And what part of the world am I being exiled to until this is over?”

He frowned, and the tightening in his gut since Morgan’s phone call worsened. “Rome.”

She arched one smooth dark brow. “I half expected to be tucked away in some Tibetan monastery.”

“I think they have some rules against female monks.”

Julia shrugged and glanced back out at the long stretch of jagged mountain landscape in the distance.

“And we’re all going to Rome.”

She cocked her head. “Why?”

“The ancient called.”

“What did she say?”

“There is something I need there,” he answered carefully, wondering how letting her get further involved was going to come back to haunt him.

“And so all of a sudden it’s safe for me to be around you?”

“No,” he snapped.

Julia didn’t seem fazed by the harsh growl.

“It wasn’t my decision.”

“I see.” She looked away from him as though he’d just offered to take her to an ant farm exhibit. “And if I don’t come along?”

“You showed up here because you wanted to know what was going on, and now I’m offering you that, and you want to what ... pass?”

“What did she say would happen if I didn’t go? I assume you told her that wasn’t acceptable.”

Brody ground his teeth, the situation seeming to go from bad to worse. He could only assume that it was because of last night that she no longer wanted to be involved in anything to do with him. “If you’re not there, then the man we are supposed to meet won’t turn over some mystery gift.”

“I can see your predicament.” Her tone was less than impressed.

“Somehow I doubt that.”

Julia faced him, her shoulder lifting in a gesture that was anything but casual. “You want answers. Obviously bad enough to risk taking me along.” He heard the quiet accusation in her voice, one that dared him to disagree with her. “I do love a man who values the needs of others above his own,” she quipped coolly, heading back inside.

He snared her wrist and jerked her back around. “Do not think that I would *ever* risk your life if there was another way to stop this.”

The small flash of satisfaction in her eyes alarmed him. “I didn’t believe it to be any other way.”

He released her, wary now. The woman in front of him had become smoothly unpredictable and was guarding her thoughts, at least the ones she didn’t want him to glimpse like a prize.

“You need me so I’ll go.” Instead of turning away she took another step closer. “But don’t think that I’m going to give you anything else until you stop playing games with me.”

The message in her eyes was clear, and despite it he felt ridiculously compelled to test her claim. If he could trust himself to stop once he made a move to call her bluff, he would have done just that. Given how close he’d come only hours ago to giving in, he chose to let her walk back inside. Alone.

\* \* \* \*

Julia was thankful Colin had come with them. At least someone was able to make the tension in the air less choking. She watched Brody from the corner of her eye, his face set in an unreadable mask. She ached for the time when his feelings weren’t so closed off to her. When he made it a point to let his expression show every glimmer of desire, longing and once upon a time, love.

His eyes cut to her, the weight of his gaze making her shift in her seat to get more comfortable.

“Are either of you going to talk at all? It’s getting kind of boring listening to just the sound of my own voice.”

Colin’s comment succeeded in taking Brody’s attention off her, but instead of responding to the only one in the car interested in conversation, he studied the passing scenery.

“Suit yourselves.” Colin fiddled with the radio until the faint strains of Beethoven’s Fifth hummed in the air.

Colin met her eyes in the rearview mirror. He tipped his head in Brody's direction. "He played a lot of classical stuff when I was younger."

At one time she might not have found it so difficult to imagine Brody caring for a child. The silent distant man in the passenger seat was altogether different. She couldn't help but wonder if she wasn't along if he would be more relaxed, smiling even. Or had the hunters' relentless pursuit of him soured that once playful easy going nature she'd fallen in love with.

She took her cue from Brody and studied the passing scenery, but processed nothing as a pang of homesickness struck hard. She hadn't talked to Gabe or Will since she left and already she missed hearing their voices. Normally when the other two ran off around the world, they were but a phone call away. But she couldn't risk calling them and giving the hunters any way to trace Brody.

"You can call them from the plane," Brody said quietly.

Her head snapped up and she found him studying her intently.

"I wasn't in your head."

"Then how did you know?"

He shrugged. "You looked sad." He turned back around, leaving her to wonder how he knew her sadness was because of missing them.

*Because when it's me that makes you sad, it feels different.* Brody's voice echoed in her mind.

*I thought you weren't in my head?*

*I wasn't ... at first.*

Paying better attention to the emotions that distracted her, she sealed her thoughts to him as tightly as she could.

Brody's laughter filled her mind as though he realized, as she did, what an ultimate waste of time it was. If he wanted in badly enough, he was stronger than she was and their bond gave him much easier access. Since he'd turned up in her bar, he'd only touched on her surface thoughts when he probed inside her mind. He'd never been one to invade her thoughts beyond the more inconsequential ones, and she took some relief in knowing that hadn't changed.

Julia leaned back in the seat and closed her eyes, craving the sleep that had eluded her after she'd left Brody's bed. She hadn't realized she'd actually dozed off, until she opened her eyes to find Colin pulling into a private hanger at the small airport she'd come through a couple of days ago.

She waited as Colin and Brody got situated then followed Colin onto the small plane. Behind her, Brody hesitated at the bottom of the stairs. She paused, opening her senses to reach for whatever caught Brody's attention.

"It's nothing," he said a moment later. "Go get comfortable."

She hovered in the doorway, finally stepping onboard when she was satisfied they were both just operating on permanent paranoid mode.

The small plane wasn't much different from Gabriel's. A few years older maybe. She dropped into one of the plush leather seats, listening to Colin hum the theme song to the Spiderman cartoon series as he went through his preflight routine.

A sharp crackle of awareness snapped up her spine. Julia shoved to her feet, hearing the sounds of a struggle outside the plane.

Hunters. She bolted for the front of the plane. Three of them, she realized. She

gripped the door to the cockpit. “Don’t open this for anyone.” She slammed it shut, cutting off Colin’s protest, and then sprinted for the door.

How had they found them?

*Shut the door!*

Julia ignored the mental command and started down the stairs. They started vibrating under her as the plane was started up. Her feet hit the pavement, and she took in the scene in front of her, wanting to rip apart the two hunters attacking Brody.

She hesitated. Where was the third? She’d felt three of them on the plane.

A blur of movement crossed her peripheral vision, and she was tackled to the ground. Her head struck the cement, and her vision blurred at the edges. Palms flat to the ground, she pushed up instinctively to regain her footing. The hunter made another grab for her but she managed to dodge awkwardly out of reach.

He came at her again, his fist catching her jaw. The impact snapped her teeth together. Grunting, she swung her leg around, knocking him off his feet. He went down hard and she nailed him in the face with a solid punch Brynn would have approved of.

She wheeled around on the others, her throbbing jaw clenching tighter at the sight of Brody’s face. Blood trailed from his split lip and already the right side of his face was working towards a sickening shade of purple from the force of the hunters’ fists.

Lining up the closest one, Julia launched herself at him, taking him down and rolling to pin him beneath her as they landed. He bucked to knock her off, but her fangs already found the fleshy spot at his throat. The frantic pulse of the hunter’s heart echoed in her ears.

Something hard and cold was jammed under her rib cage. Julia cried out, her hand going to her waist as she was thrown off the other hunter. Tearing pain screamed up her side as she hit the ground, blood soaking her shirt until she felt the sticky wetness coat the hand she pressed to the wound.

The first hunter she’d knocked aside loomed over her, the knife he had stabbed her with dripping her blood on the pavement. His golden eyes glinted dangerously, and she used her booted heels to propel herself backwards.

A thunderous roar boomed in her mind, and she narrowly missed the next swing of the blade. It glanced off the pavement, her shoulder escaping the blow by millimeters.

Julia used the precious few seconds to drive her foot into the hunter’s leg, hearing the satisfying crunch as she nailed him in the kneecap. Nausea greased her stomach as she staggered to her feet, the blistering pain stretching up her side until it throbbed in time with every thump of her heart. Wounded, her chances of evading the armed hunter dropped precariously.

She followed the hunter’s piercing gaze, watching for the moment he’d come at her again. A body hit the ground behind him, but she didn’t take her eyes off the enemy, knowing instinctively the injured form wasn’t Brody.

The hunter stalked her, those eerie golden eyes assessing his prey with every step as they circled each other. He came at her fast, too fast. Jerking to the right she escaped the first swing, but his clenched fist caught her injured side.

Her knees buckled and bile rose in her throat. She clawed at the ground, needing to get up before he buried his blade in her heart. Colors ran together and she blinked to clear her vision, sensing movement to her immediate right. Air rushed past her ear, and she lifted her head to find her enemy motionless on the ground behind her.

Strong arms scooped her up. She stiffened at the unexpected motion, hissing out a breath at the fresh wave of pain triggered by it. Brody held her tight, his long, sharp strides returning them to the plane. He stepped into the doorway and she heard him inhale sharply. She caught sight of the red feathered tip of a dart just below the arm she'd looped over his shoulder.

He kept going and made it onto the plane, and somehow managed to get the door shut without letting go of her.

"Get us out of here," Brody yelled.

Julia tucked her face under his chin, curling her fingers into his shirt as each jostling motion felt like the knife had been left in her side. She opened her eyes a moment later, but didn't let go when he lowered her to a bed in a small cabin.

"I need to look at it."

Her muscles locked as he gently peeled back her drenched shirt. "It's deep," she said, but whether it was to reassure him or herself, she didn't know. Deep, but not fatal. She just needed to lie still and let the regenerative process kick in.

Brody yanked his shirt off and pressed it to the wound. "It hasn't stopped bleeding yet." A cold thread of panic lined his words.

"It will." She gritted her teeth at the heat that seared her side as he applied pressure.

He moved overtop her, settling on the other side of the bed, bracing her as the plane started down the run way.

"How safe is this?" She turned her face to look at him.

"Safer than you coming out of the plane when I told you to stay put."

Julia shook her head. "They couldn't take you again."

"And this is why I didn't want you with me. Now do you understand? What if they killed you?" The hand gripping hers tightened almost painfully.

The fury in his voice made her smile. "Keep it up and I won't need to get in your head to know the truth."

He sighed and inched her closer, tucking her face against his throat. "Drink," he ordered.

She frowned at the odd lilt to his voice. "The dart?"

"It was only one, but it's making me a little groggy." He nudged closer and she gave over to the urge and pressed her mouth to his neck.

\* \* \* \*

The pain was moderately bearable when she awoke a short while later. Once she had a full day's sleep she'd be completely healed. Smoothing her hair back, she realized she was alone in the room. Her bag had been tucked on a shelf near the door, and she spotted another door next to it. As she hoped, this one led to a small bathroom, and she finished wiping away the dried blood and changed her clothes.

Relief eased the lines on Brody's face when he spotted her in the aisle, but the small show of emotion retreated quickly.

"Are we going straight to the solicitor's when we land?" She knew it was nearly three in the morning.

He studied the papers in his lap. "I called and left a message. You're going straight to the hotel."

She eased into the chair across from him. "I thought you said if I wasn't there, he

wouldn't give it to you."

"I'll work it out."

"I'm going."

Brody glared at her. "It's not your decision. You need to rest."

"I slept almost the whole flight. I'm rested." As much as she could be for the time being.

"But not healed." He resumed reading over his papers, dismissing the subject.

"Don't be so damn stubborn," she snapped. She was beyond tired of him telling her what to do.

The corner of his mouth tipped sardonically. "Just taking a page out of your book."

Deciding there was no point in continuing the argument before they landed, she settled on ignoring him for the duration of the flight, which thankfully didn't turn out to be too long. The landing itself proved to be more uncomfortable than her healing injury. The price of such sharp senses also made them more susceptible to the change in altitude, and by the time the plane touched down, the pressure in her ears was still throbbing viciously.

Brody took her hand as they exited the plane, and the slight comforting touch and the very small opening he allowed between their minds helped take the edge off the lingering pain they both felt. He stopped at the bottom of the stairs.

*I'm glad you're all right.* He brushed the back of his knuckles down her cheek, and took a step closer to her. Her pulse picked up, and she was already thinking about the sweet pressure of his mouth.

"Nobody waiting to grab you out here I hope." Colin started down the steps, then paused as he realized he might be interrupting something.

But the moment was already gone, and Brody gave her hand a reassuring squeeze before heading toward the terminal.

By the time they were in the car Colin had arranged for them, the solicitor had returned Brody's call. He'd already made reservations for them at a different hotel and would meet them there promptly with Morgan's mystery object.

Julia shifted to get more comfortable, the pain in her side now only a dull throb. The outside of her injury was nearly healed, but inside she could still feel her cells working to repair the damage. She was relieved when Colin had no trouble following the directions. The longer Brody could tell she was in pain, the more he would insist on trying to shelter her.

She'd been to Rome a number of times, but tonight she was too distracted to pay any attention to her surroundings. Brody retained his grip on her hand as he led them into the 18<sup>th</sup> century hotel she knew had once been home to a Dominican monastery. The inside offered the same 18<sup>th</sup> century feel with the rich woods and old fashioned wingback chairs, settees and dark velvets and Persian rugs to compliment the décor.

They hadn't been settled in their suite for more than twenty minutes when a small, frail looking man dressed all in black arrived. With a slightly hunched back and countenance that could rival the most severe monarch, he gestured to the desk. He silently opened the case he carried and without any explanations, handed Brody a cloth covered rectangle and a slip of paper.

Brody frowned. "An address?"

The man nodded solemnly. “You’re expected there tomorrow evening.” He closed his case, nodded, and left without further comment or even a message of any kind from Morgan.

All three were still staring at the closed door when Colin finally spoke up. “What is it?”

Brody unfolded the cloth, his brows drawing together. “A book.”

## Chapter Nine

Brody stared at the ancient volume on the table, but couldn't focus on it. Another piece of the puzzle sat inches away, and all he could think about was Julia. As if sensing his attention had wandered to her, she turned from the window. Her eyes were alight with questions, questions he didn't know that he could ever answer. At first glance she moved easily enough around the room, but when she thought he wasn't looking, he'd catch the slight grimace she couldn't conceal fast enough when she moved too quickly.

His insides had yet to unlock from the tension that gripped his chest when she'd appeared in the plane's open doorway. He'd known the second the hunter closest to her had switched targets, and had been helpless to stop it. Brody could still hear her cry of pain in his head, that split second the knife was buried in her side branded on his memory with searing clarity.

Had it not been for her injury, he would have taken the hunter who'd stabbed her apart with his bare hands. Few injuries could bleed vampires out before the healing process kicked in, but those precious few minutes after he'd tugged aside her soaked shirt to check the wound had been nothing short of terrifying. Everything he'd tried so hard to prevent had fallen into place as though he set it motion himself.

Damn her for not listening to him. And damn the ancient for sending her to him.

Brody jerked to his feet, the anger in his gut churning from a hard simmer to a roiling boil. If not for Morgan, Jules would be home or at the very least half way across the world. Safe. If he hadn't gotten the other hunters off him, or had taken a minute longer to get to her ...

His insides turned to ice, his furious strides around the room doing little to slow the images replaying in his mind. He'd come too close to losing her.

Colin glanced up at him from the chair opposite the couch that Brody stalked around. "Something eating at you?"

Brody shot him a withering glance. He felt Julia watching, but didn't risk meeting her gaze, not when his emotions were running on overdrive. He needed to get out of here. From the corner of his eye he spotted the book Morgan had wanted him to see, knew it was important to understanding what the hell was going on, and at the moment it was nothing more than an instrument that could have taken Julia from him.

Julia ventured closer. "Colin, why don't you go find something to eat?"

He shrugged. "The sun will be up soon." Colin nodded towards the large window. "If you two are going to fight, you should have it out in one of the bedrooms."

"Who said we're going to fight?" Brody snapped, his annoyance bouncing up another notch at the *who-are-you-kidding* look Julia shot him.

"I'll see you two later." Colin gestured to the slim volume on the table. "Let me know if you find anything interesting in there." He exchanged wary glances with Julia before letting himself out of the room.

Brody sighed, rubbing at the rigid muscles in the back of his neck. "You'd think I was about to take a strip off you from the look on his face."

"Aren't you?" Julia perched on the arm of the couch, one hand at her hip. The gesture might have been defiant if he didn't know she had probably been testing her injury.

"No."

She tipped her chin up. "We both know you're itching to rake me over the coals."

I'm surprised it's taken you this long. I half expected you to do it on the plane."

He cursed the dawn he could feel beginning to stretch over the city, wishing she'd left along with Colin.

"That would have made it easy on you, and I'm pretty damn tired of that."

His head came up, his eyes narrowing as he realized she'd read his thoughts. This time he could feel the subtle probe and slammed his mental shields tight.

The corner of her mouth twitched. "Someone's letting their emotions run a little high."

Brody took a menacing step towards her. The only thing worse than knowing she'd refused to listen to him on the plane, was that she purposely provoked him now.

Julia's smile widened. "By all means, get more pissed off." She crossed her arms, looking smug. "It'll make it easier for me."

"Don't," he growled. He would not have her trying to poke around his thoughts. Not now.

"No, *you* don't." She pushed to herself to her feet, successfully managing to conceal the pain from the quick movement, but Brody felt it echo within anyway. "I'm sick and tired of you telling me what to do. You ceased having any say in what I do a century ago."

"The hell I did."

She didn't even try to conceal her frustration. "You seem to think because my body craves your blood above anyone's that it gives you power over me."

It was his turn to smile, though it was little more than a brittle slash of his lips. "Is this where you again try to pretend you don't want me?" He gripped her hips and pulled her forward.

Julia didn't seem the least bit concerned by his half-hearted attempt to test her. "Even as self-absorbed as you clearly are, I wouldn't waste my breath. But don't confuse want with need. My body may need yours, but what it wants, what *I* want, you can't give me. Isn't that what you said?"

His arms fell back to his sides, her words digging straight under the edges of his heart. He turned away.

"Big deal."

He looked over his shoulder at her. "What?"

"Big deal. So I didn't listen, and the hunter stabbed me. I'm fine. Get over it already."

"I'd be careful of pushing my buttons right now, Jules."

"Or what?" Acid laced her tone.

Brody stalked towards her only to change his mind just short of reaching out to throttle her, and headed for the bedroom. He waited, listening, hoping he would hear her bedroom door slam. A minute later he heard Julia behind him, but didn't turn around, didn't have to.

She came to him, stopping directly in front of him. He glanced at her too late to anticipate the rise of her hand until her palm connected with his cheek.

His jaw stinging from the sharp blow, he snared her wrist, the darkness within him snapping to life. "What the hell was that for?"

"For leaving me all those years ago. For walking out on me the night at the bar, for doing everything you could to drive me out of your life."

He stared at her in bewilderment. “*Now* you’re getting mad?”

“I’ve been mad,” she snapped, her green eyes boiling over. “I’ve been so furious with you at times, all I wanted to do was hunt you down and make you hurt the same way you hurt me.”

“You can’t.” He might have walked away from her, but every day since they had parted he had to live with knowing what he’d done to them, what he’d done to her.

“Oh, that’s right,” Julia mocked. “You don’t feel anything for me any more.” She shoved him in the chest. “Good thing I’m not dead inside like you are. I can get mad as hell for the both of us.” She shoved him again, and this time he caught her arms, holding her against his chest.

“What game are you playing now, Julia?”

“I’m tired.” Her voice lowered, but anger still hummed in the tone. “Tired of you acting like you don’t fucking care.” She pulled hard on her arms, and he released her. “Tired of you pretending that you didn’t walk away before so the hunters wouldn’t come after me, tired of you ignoring what’s right in front of you.”

“What’s that?” He barely got that much out before his throat closed up.

“Me.”

Brody shook his head, the spark of vulnerability in her eyes eating at him more than his own anger.

“Maybe if they’d killed me, maybe then, right before I died, I might have seen some sign on your face that you used to love me once.” Julia turned to leave, and he almost let her go.

He snatched her up and tossed her on the poster bed, coming down on top of her before she could squirm away from him.

“Horny are you,” she hissed.

“Mad as hell actually.” And he bent to take full possession of her mouth. He expected her to fight him, to prove that she could resist him anytime she wanted. Nothing surprised him more than when the hands he held above her head tightened, her fingers lacing his.

Brody growled against her mouth, almost wanting her to fight him, to hate him. Wondering if she did, if it would ever make it easier to let her go? But what he needed from her right now had nothing to do with wanting to protect her. He wanted what only she could give him.

He rocked his aching length against her, shifting so that he could rub against her sex. Even between layers of clothes, his skin hummed at the electrifying contact. He broke from her mouth and slid down, nipping her throat, jerking her shirt up to scrape the curve of her breast until he finally reached her nipple. He bit down enough to make her cry out, and then sucked it greedily into his mouth.

Her hips lifted, the friction making him clench his jaw. Brody worked a hand down between their bodies and pressed his palm between her thighs. Heat blazed in Julia’s eyes, and he impatiently unbuttoned the buttons on her pants and yanked them down.

He thrust a finger into her wet sex, the hot walls clamping down on him. Julia arched her back, her legs squeezing around his hand as he withdrew and quickly pumped his fingers in again.

Brody closed his eyes, his cock throbbing to be buried deep in her. Catching her

around the waist, he flipped her over, stripped off her pants and underwear, and pushed her to her knees. He didn't even get his pants all the way down before he gripped her hips and slammed into her from behind.

She pitched forward at the rocking motion, and he moved them farther up the mattress. Placing her hands on the wood slats of the headboard, he growled, "Hold on," and sank his cock into her again.

His fingers dug into her hip, pulling her back to meet him, grunting when her slick inner walls compressed around him, sucking him deeper each time he withdrew to drive into her again.

Julia arched her back, and the sexy curve of her neck teased him, taunting the darkness. He ignored it, knowing he couldn't drink from her when she'd been weakened.

He closed his eyes, the heat in his gut cooling rapidly. *Jules?*

She pushed back, nestling her ass against his groin. *I'm fine.*

Her sex rippled around him, making it impossible to stop his next thrust or his next. Conscious of her side, he eased his grip, but couldn't stop from sheathing himself in her sweet wetness. Over and over.

Rocking hard and fast against her, knowing he couldn't get any deeper, Brody struggled to keep everything together. She wasn't holding back from him, inviting him into her thoughts, daring him to let down his guard and do the same.

He slipped a hand around the curve of her hip and slid his fingers down her damp folds. She whimpered when he caressed the slick knot, slow at first then with increasing pressure as she arched and pitched back to impale herself on his cock.

When she came, her muscles spasmed and locked around him. Grunting, he thrust harder, faster, then let himself be carried over the edge with her. Breaths coming fast, he didn't move for a long moment, his face tucked against the back of her neck.

"Brody," she whispered a long moment later.

He immediately pulled back, realizing how rough he'd been with her.

Julia stretched out on her side, and he could feel her seeking what he'd still been unable to give her. Even knowing she didn't hate him, that she would let herself love him if she knew for sure he still loved her, Brody couldn't bring himself to let her in. Once he did, there would be no going back, no leaving her like the last time.

He sensed more than felt her retreat, the hand she'd lifted to reach for him, falling back to the mattress. She sat next to him on the bed after a minute. "It only gets worse."

Against his better judgment he asked, "What does?"

She gave him a weak smile. "Trying to ignore it."

He sat motionless as she righted her clothes. Although the bulk of his anger was gone, the need to make the hunters pay for what they'd done to him, for what they'd almost done to Julia was a bitter knot in his throat.

She left the room, only to return a couple minutes later with the book in her hand. She curled up on the couch that sat on the small wall opposite the bed, and tucked her feet under her. "I think its time we see what Morgan thought was so damn important, don't you?"

He scrubbed his hand over his face, amazed again by this woman. He righted his clothing and sat next to her. She handed him the book.

Brody shook his head. "You open it."

The tentative smile that caught her mouth was worth the small gesture. "Okay."

She carefully opened the front cover. “This is so old I’m afraid touching it will make it fall apart.” Another reason he wanted her to be the one touching it. The fists at his side still trembled from all the things he wanted to say--wanted to *feel*--still lodged in his chest.

“Morgan wouldn’t have given it to us if she was concerned about that.”

Julia nodded absently, her brows drawing together as she gently flipped another page. He hadn’t noticed he was watching her and not the book until her lips parted. “This doesn’t make any sense.” She held the book away, her finger tracing the leather binding.

“What?”

“It’s not written in Latin.”

“You expected it to be?”

“Given the antique state I sort of figured it would be, or at least some other dead language.”

“What language is it written in?” Brody scanned the pages.

“English.”

“Old English you mean?” His head pounded at the thought. He’d almost have preferred the Latin.

“No. Our English.”

He studied the words, frowning at the first words in the text. *Today their training begins.*

“Maybe someone already translated it.”

Julia looked skeptical. “Look at the pages, these words weren’t written recently, they’re too faded. This is old, really old and written in quill and ink or maybe something even more primitive than that. How was this even so well preserved?”

She moved the book closer so they could both read, and it didn’t take him long to understand what she meant. The way the words of the apparent journal entry flowed on the page, it wasn’t the way anyone beyond the last hundred years would have talked or likely composed their thoughts.

He continued to skim as she flipped through a few more pages, more familiar words creeping out at him. Vampire, hunter, council.

“I think,” Julia said carefully, “this was written by one of the first hunters.”

Which made it even more perplexing when as far as Brody knew hunters dated back as far as vampires. If the book was as old as it appeared, how could it have been written in such modern English?

Brody continued reading passages about the training process, more mentions of vampires that were slaughtering innocents needlessly and the need for order and control. They were little more than halfway through the journal when his eyes decided they needed to rest for a few minutes. Promising himself it would only be for a moment he closed his eyes, more comforted by the warm pressure of Julia tucked against his side than he had been in years.

\* \* \* \*

Julia came awake slowly to the solid warmth of Brody’s arm snug around her waist. They were still on the couch, she realized. She angled her face, wondering how his long frame could possibly be comfortable with his feet hanging over the end, and her snuggled up against him, her thigh thrown awkwardly over his.

She stretched and then snuggled closer, her senses riding the high only

experienced in Brody's arms.

"Morning," he mumbled against her ear.

"Don't you mean evening?" She smiled, easing back enough to see his face.

He absently brushed at a few unruly curls. "Same thing."

Seeing that he hadn't closed himself off and seemingly content to stay right where he was, Julia tipped her mouth up and kissed him. With no goal in mind to seduce him or to push him with anger, she merely let her lips drift lazily over his.

The arm at her waist tightened, but she wasn't interested in taking the kiss anywhere. Wanted merely to enjoy the moment she hadn't somehow provoked out of him for what it was. A taste of the past and what her heart seemed determined to believe could be the promise of something more. Something so intangible she didn't dare pin her hopes to it, but found impossible to ignore.

"So what did you guys find--"

Julia lifted her head, watching Colin skid to a stop.

"You guys should really have the door shut if you don't want to be interrupted."

"Thanks for the tip," Brody said, his voice still thick from sleep.

Colin backtracked towards the door.

"Stay," Julia ordered, sitting up though she was loath to leave her place next to Brody. He didn't let her move any farther than the edge of the couch, his arm possessively draped across her thighs, before he pulled until her back came against his chest.

Brody's eyes were open now. "How's your side?"

"I think we've already exhausted that topic."

His answering grunt said the opposite, but he let the subject drop.

"So what was the big mystery?" Colin nodded to the book she or Brody had set on the side table at some point.

"It's about the first hunters, or written by one of the first."

Colin shook his head. "How does an ancient vampire possibly think that can help? Or did she forget who is after him? Did it at least mention the Key anywhere?"

Julia shook her head. "Not that we came across so far." But then they hadn't gotten more than halfway through the journal. She handed it to Colin, who eyed it warily. "Is it going to fall apart?"

"Treat it like some of your comic books and you should be fine," Brody said.

Julia grinned. "Comic books?"

Colin scowled at Brody. "I have a few *Collector's Items*," he clarified, then carefully opened the book. His confused frown mirrored Julia's initial reaction. "I thought this book was old?"

"It is."

Colin didn't look convinced. "You sure the ancient isn't just screwing with you? 'Cause I'm pretty sure a book this old should have funny looking words in it or something."

Brody yawned. "Funny looking words, huh."

Colin ignored him, skimming the pages. "Weird." After a moment he set it aside. "You two should get a move on. We're expected at that guy's place soon, and I'm guessing you two need some live food tonight."

Julia wrinkled her nose. "You make it sound like we're cannibals."

Colin gave her a *your point would be?* look.

Julia stood and stretched her arms over her head, thinking Colin had been bang on with his suggestion, and started thinking the best places to find Rome's more unsavory crowd.

\* \* \* \*

"Is anyone else worried that this has setup written all over it?" Colin stared at the front of the isolated villa, his hand slipping under his jacket to adjust the gun Julia had discovered he was often in the habit of wearing. While a gun might not kill a hunter or vampire looking to corner him, it could sure as hell slow them down, Colin had reminded her.

"Morgan wouldn't have gone through all this trouble just to hand Brody over to the rogues." For the most part Julia felt comfortable with that assumption.

"Unless she thinks his being the key can somehow give her something she wants."

That possibility had briefly crossed Julia's mind too, but it wouldn't make sense to give them the book about the hunters if she planned to give Brody to the very people she'd risked herself to help him escape. If not for the apparent authentic age of the journal and the content of the entries themselves, she'd be worried that it had been concocted just to lure Brody from hiding.

An old man with thick black hair graying at the temples and dressed in a white shirt and beige pants, opened the villa's main door. After introducing himself as *Ciro*, he bade them to enter. Julia eyed the portly man skeptically, realizing a moment later as he ushered them out onto a sweeping terrace that overlooked immaculately kept grounds, that he wasn't who they'd been invited to meet.

She crossed to the railing and breathed deep. The earthy floral scent of the lush vegetation filled her senses. Brody stood close to her, his attention fixed on the glow of Rome's lights dotting the distant horizon. Colin preferred keeping his eye on the door behind them, his stance casual as he leaned against a section of the railing that bordered the terrace, but his gaze was primed and alert.

They didn't wait long before a man--a vampire--who didn't appear much older than either of them paused in the doorway. Julia was the first one to notice him, and frowned as he stepped out onto the terrace. But it wasn't the same surreal charge of strength as Morgan's that hovered on the air and drew her complete attention, it was his face.

She took a curious step forward. She felt Brody follow her gaze, but knew the planter probably obstructed most of his view.

"Morgan neglected to mention my guests would be so attractive."

That comment brought Brody back to her side at the same moment Julia swung her gaze from the stranger, to Brody and then back.

"This is weirding me out," Colin murmured and Julia knew he saw exactly what she did. How much Brody looked like the stranger!

She waited, watched as Brody's possessive frown grew more confused, and likewise the stranger hesitated.

"What the hell?" he muttered, his feet locking to the floor as he surveyed Brody.

Julia, having still ventured closer to the stranger to better see the resemblance, was nearly taken to her knees by the unexpected wave of emotion the ancient unleashed. She staggered under the raw sharing of images, much like she had when Morgan had

touched her, but the sensation passed as quickly as it had began. Her stomach pitched as though she'd stepped off a tilt-a-whirl before the world stopped spinning.

The stranger shook his head in disbelief. Brody didn't move.

Colin came to stand next to Julia, slipping an arm under her elbow as though he realized she needed it. "I'd say this might have something to do with why the hunters think Brody is the Key."

Colin's comment jarred the stranger. "What did you say?"

Though she felt Colin tense at the commanding tone, he didn't back down. He jerked his head to indicate Brody. "The hunters after him think he's the Key."

The stranger flicked his gaze to Brody. The two men could pass for brothers no doubt, and yet ...

*He has his mother's eyes.*

Julia shot a glance at the stranger. "His mother's eyes?" She shook her head, disbelieving she'd heard the ancient's voice so clear in her head.

Brody tensed. "What?"

The stranger pinned her with a hard gaze, then said, "I thought she couldn't have children."

"Who?" Brody asked, though Julia was certain he knew exactly who the stranger was referring to.

"Your mother."

Julia moved closer to Brody. "We need to back up here a second. Who are you exactly?"

"Galen."

"And you're an ancient?"

He shook his head. His dark blonde hair, though longer than Brody's, was the same shade. "No, the correct term for me would be true-blood."

Julia frowned at the unfamiliar term. "And how do you know Morgan?"

"We go back a very long time." He glanced at Brody, his expression unreadable. "The hunters think you're the Key?"

Brody, who'd been understandably quiet, nodded. "Do you know why?"

Galen pushed his hands deep into his pockets. "Until your human friend pointed out a possible connection, I would have said no. The theory of the Key has always amused me."

"Why?" Julia asked.

Galen flicked his gaze briefly in her direction before glancing back at Brody, still clearly stunned by his presence. "Until now I thought the idea of something tangible pointing the way to the origins of vampires was ridiculous."

"Because no one knows our origins," she pointed out.

"I didn't say that."

"Exactly what are you saying?" Brody demanded.

Something in the stranger's expression appeared to approve of Brody's direct tone. "That I just didn't think the Key would be ... my son."

Even though her brain accepted such an impossible theory based on the evidence in front of her, she shook her head. "You're a vampire. You can't get women pregnant." Then Julia thought of Brynn and knew her friend was the perfect example that there was a loop hole in that widely accepted rule.

“True-bloods can,” Galen said.

Brody crossed his arms. “I never heard that term before.”

“And you wouldn’t have reason to.” Galen took a seat on one of the deep wooden benches and draped an arm across the back.

Julia wondered if his sitting had more to do with never expecting to come face to face with Brody than trying to appear comfortable, while the rest of them clearly were not.

“Hunters,” Julia said, “they really are hybrids, aren’t they?”

“Hunters evolved over two millennia ago from the offspring of true-bloods and humans.”

Colin still hadn’t relaxed his stance, regardless of the obvious connection between Galen and Brody. “And what about true-bloods, how did they evolve?”

Galen smiled. “*How* isn’t nearly as important as *when*.”

## Chapter Ten

Julia watched Brody clench and unclench his fingers around the terrace railing. He hadn't said a word since Galen had quickly excused himself for a moment. The other man's confusion and surprising anger had surfaced quickly when Morgan's name had come up. If Julia had to guess, she would say Galen was itching for a confrontation with the other ancient for dropping this in his lap without warning him.

Unlike his apparent father, something Julia still had trouble wrapping her mind around, Brody said very little about what was going through his mind. For centuries he would have assumed his father was dead, only to find him alive, a vampire no less and a true-blood--whatever that meant.

It would have been far easier for the connection to feel more reasonable if Galen had been older looking. In actuality he looked nothing more than a slightly older brother.

"She knew."

"Who?" Julia asked, too initially surprised that he'd finally commented on the situation to read between the lines.

"Morgan. She would have known when she came across me centuries ago who I was."

Which led to a whole boatload of new questions. If the offspring of a true-blood and a human made the equivalent of a hunter, how did Brody not remember being a hunter before being turned?

"I was blind," he said reading her turbulent thoughts easily. "I always thought my senses were so acute because I lost my sight so young."

Something else that didn't add up. "Then how come you were blinded at all? Even hunters have strong regenerative capabilities. Shouldn't your vision have healed itself?"

"Not if the nerves were severed," Galen said quietly from the doorway. "Unlike vampires, a hunter's ability to heal works in a much more limited sense and often doesn't kick in completely until they reach maturity."

"So when Morgan turned him--"

Galen straightened away from the door. He rapidly closed the distance between them. Julia could tell by the fierce look of concentration--not unlike Brody's whenever he was probing into her mind--that Galen was skimming Brody's thoughts.

"Damn her," Galen cursed, his fist tightening at his side. "She never told me."

"My mother or Morgan?"

"Morgan." Galen shook his head. "No wonder she didn't accompany you here. She knew I would have--"

"I want shot glasses," Colin announced stepping out onto the terrace, realizing belatedly he was walking into another significant conversation. He'd left her and Brody alone after Galen had disappeared, deciding to explore the villa a bit. Had Brody not been so distracted, Julia wondered if he would have let his ward so freely wander the home of such a powerful vampire, apparent relation or not.

Galen glanced at Colin.

"Hey," Colin said, his brows drawn together. "I don't even let Brody probe my thoughts so steer clear."

The corner of Galen's mouth quirked up, more amused than concerned at Colin's

threat. "Just curious which one you liked best."

Colin eyed him warily, his mouth turning up at the edges as he switched his attention to Brody. "The Spiderman ones."

Despite the unexpected developments, Julia found herself grinning. She suspected Colin was as interested in breaking some of the rising tension as he was Galen's *Collectors Items*.

"Wonderful," Brody growled, then spotting Colin's widening smile, asked, "What's so funny?"

"That now you're in my place."

"How's that?"

"Having your father look almost the same age as you."

Brody rolled his eyes.

Galen noticed then the journal Julia had clasped under her arm. "Where did that come from? No wait ... Morgan?"

Julia nodded.

He rubbed his forehead. "Something else she forgot to mention."

"So you've seen this before?" Julia offered him the journal.

"I should think so. It's mine."

Julia and Brody exchanged curious glances. "How old is it? And why is it written in English?"

Galen gently flipped through the first few pages. "Because it has always been my native language."

Julia doubted anything would soothe the ache that thumped between her temples at trying to keep up.

"Maybe you should start at the beginning," Brody suggested.

Galen nodded, his gaze still intent on the hastily scribbled entries. "Let's go inside." He took a seat in the chair. "True-bloods are what we started calling ourselves after we discovered humans could be turned. We were still stronger, faster and could heal quicker. Our genetics were still pure if you will."

Julia frowned. "We? How many are there like you?"

Galen tipped his head considering. "You mean how many were there?"

"The talking in riddles is getting a little old." Brody stopped next to the chair Julia had taken across from Galen.

He set the journal aside. "Let me start with the scientists, genetic engineers to be more specific. They were the ones who created the true-bloods."

Julia's mind whirled. "Created? The study of human genetics hasn't even been around that long relatively speaking, let alone genetic experimentation. How is that even possible?"

"It was, or will be in 2216."

Colin balked. "You're telling me that you were created in the future?"

"Clearly you don't appreciate the irony of your skepticism when you're a human in the same room with three vampires."

"So you can time-travel?" Colin asked with no small amount of skepticism.

Galen looked amused. "Can you?"

"No, but as you pointed out, I'm in a room with vampires so anything is possible."

“We were created to serve as soldiers to fight a war for the humans. We were given the same abilities as the enemy. To see perfectly at night, to be strong, fast and capable of enhanced psychic ability.”

“They *wanted* you to drink blood?” Colin cut in, sounding disgusted.

“There are some things even precise genetic tampering can’t account for. Like bloodlust and our extreme sensitivity to the sun. There were likely hundreds of us before the humans started losing the war. Despite that we proved to be superior in every way to the enemy, we were too greatly outnumbered to do little more than keep them from gaining further ground.”

“Who was the enemy?”

Galen shrugged as though that were ultimately unimportant in the grand scheme of things. “When it became clear not even a genetically engineered army couldn’t save them, the humans turned on us. They were afraid that once the remaining human cities were overrun, we would eventually turn against our makers, so they started to exterminate us.”

The ancient shifted in his seat, a mix of hatred and regret flashing in his crisp blue eyes. “There was a small group of us who hadn’t been assigned to a field unit and were still training, honing our abilities. The scientist overseeing our progress was a good man and knew what his superiors were planning. He didn’t share the common fear that we would destroy the humans, and explained to us what was happening. We knew then he risked much sharing that kind of information, let alone making plans to help us escape.”

“But something went wrong,” Julia guessed at the somber tone she detected in Galen’s voice.

He nodded. “Another colleague of the professor’s claimed to be very close to perfecting the ability to artificially generate a wormhole, making it possible to travel from one point in space and time to another.”

“But you thought he was a crackpot,” Colin said, hearing the same doubt Julia heard in Galen’s retelling.

“Skeptical at best, but the professor was risking his life in helping us, so I was willing to take a little on faith.”

Galen had cared a great deal for the man, Julia realized.

“Unfortunately,” he continued, “one of our own thought the best way to save his own neck was to betray the professor’s intentions to his superiors. We were within minutes of escape when a team of human soldiers attempted to subdue us.”

Brody perched on the edge of Julia’s chair. “I’m guessing it didn’t end well for the humans.”

Colin’s snorted at the derision attached to his *humans* comment, and Brody shot him an apologetic look that might have made Julia smile under better circumstances.

“And the professor was killed in the crossfire,” Julia said, eager to hear the rest of the extraordinary story.

Galen nodded. “In my arms. He hung on long enough to get us to his colleague, but was gone before we were motioned into some kind of chamber.”

“He still chose to help you escape.”

“I suspect it was more to test his theories than to aide us. One moment we stood jammed shoulder to shoulder, and the next all I knew was pain. Sharp, excruciating pain that felt like every bone in my body was simultaneously being riddled with needles.” He

closed his eyes. "And when we came to ..." He trailed off with a wave of his hand as if to say the rest was history.

Julia leaned forward in her seat. "Do you think he meant to send you to the past?"

"I doubt it."

Colin shoved his hands in his pockets and moved to pace in a semi-circle around the three of them. "So let me just get this straight, because this is sounding more like some science fiction thing."

Galen cocked his head. "Would you prefer believing vampires started out according to Bram Stoker?"

"His version is almost easier to believe."

With one smooth arch of a brow, Galen instantly reminded Julia of Brody. "And if you passed another human on the street and told them vampires were real?"

Colin shook his head. "They wouldn't believe it."

"But it wouldn't change the fact that you were raised by one. Sometimes the simplest truths are the hardest to accept." Galen flicked his gaze briefly to Brody.

Brody crossed his arms, his expression as unreadable as ever. "So a group of true-bloods somehow ended up in the past. When?"

"About 1000 B.C."

Having stopped pacing, Colin quipped. "That must have been a change from 2216 A.D."

"You have no idea," Galen answered dryly.

"How many were there of you?" Julia managed to remain sitting but watching Colin pace had left her restless to work off the anxious energy that had been humming under her skin since Galen appeared.

"Eight."

"And you all survived?"

Galen stood up without answering. He turned towards the door. "There are some things I need to take care of," he said, then walked out of the room without another word.

Colin blew out a breath, his gaze trained on the door Galen had exited through. "Am I the only one feeling like I've been dropped into the Twilight Zone?" He headed across the room. "Do you think there is anything to drink around here?"

Julia assumed he was talking about alcohol. "Thirsty?"

"Believe me, if either of you could feel any real effects of it, you'd be asking me to bring you back the bottle."

His mention of alcohol steered her thoughts back to the numerous shots she'd poured down her throat after Brody had left her in the club. Though it was only days ago, it felt closer to a lifetime.

Colin nodded towards the door across the room. "I'm going to track down Ciro and see what they have around this place in the way of alcohol. We're in Italy. Wine at the very least should not be a problem to get a hold of."

"Be careful," Brody warned, but sounded distracted.

Colin lifted his jacket and showed off the Smith and Wesson .45 tucked at the back of his waist. "I don't expect it to slow an ancient down obviously, or a true-blood. Whatever. It may just let you know that I'm about to get my ass kicked though."

None of them commented on what a true-blood could do in a very short space of time should Galen turn out to be untrustworthy.

Left alone with Brody, Julia found herself wanting to be patient, but could tell by the aloofness in his gaze that he was trying to distance himself from the situation. She opened her mouth to call him on it, when Ciro entered the room. "Should you like to rest, I can show you to your rooms."

Brody shook his head. "I'm going to take a walk."

She watched him vanish out onto the terrace, her heart aching. Last night she knew how close he came to letting his guard down, letting her in. Worse though, she could feel Brody hovering on the edge of pulling back completely, and knew she wouldn't be able to stop it.

\* \* \* \*

Brody stuck close to the house as he circled the grounds. He had no reason to believe Galen would hurt Colin or Julia, but kept his mind attuned to what was going on in the house nonetheless.

He stopped and stared up at the second floor, a shadow passing in front of the open window. Jules. She leaned against the frame, her attention fixed on the dark sky overhead. If she knew he watched her, she didn't search him out below.

"Why did you leave her?"

Brody didn't whip around and betray the fact that the true-blood had taken him by surprise.

"Her thoughts run far too close to the surface at times," Galen said quietly.

"I know." He couldn't fault the ancient for probing Julia's thoughts when he was guilty enough of the same thing. Brody wondered if Julia realized the longer she spent with him, the more she lowered those mental shields she'd been so determined to use to keep him out.

Galen waited, and they both knew Brody could tell him, or he would fish for the answers himself. Oddly enough the true-blood's unspoken intention didn't feel like the threat it could have been. Maybe because he stood there patiently, watching Brody with far too much wisdom reflected in his eyes for someone who looked barely thirty.

Brody glanced back at the window as Julia retreated back inside, the room going dark a moment later. "We were together barely twenty-five years before they started coming after me."

"The rogue hunters I've heard about?"

He nodded, the pressure building in his lungs bordering on painful until he tried to distance himself from the memories. "When I realized they'd tracked us to a new place for the second time, I caught up with one of them. He confessed I was important to them, that I was the Key." Brody tightened his fist at his side. "Like many vampires I didn't put a lot of stock in the Key myth, but when they came a third time and managed to get a hold of me, I knew they were serious."

"How long did they have you?"

Brody thought he detected a hint of anger in the true-blood's voice. He rocked back on his heels. "The first time it was only a couple days. But I knew by then they would keep after me, and I couldn't risk them hurting her."

Galen nodded slowly. "So you left your life-mate."

"What choice did I have?" He meant it as a rhetorical statement, but the other vampire responded anyway.

"And yet she's here with you now."

Brody crossed his arms. "We have Morgan to thank for that."

Following an annoyed sigh, Galen grunted. "Pain in the ass." He gestured for them to head back to the villa.

"Do you have a life-mate?" It was already clear Brody's mother had been a hunter, and he felt a curious stirring to better understand the man who had fathered him. Whether or not that knowledge would help him identify how the rogue hunters thought to use him, Brody couldn't say.

Galen kept his attention fixed on the stone pathway. "We didn't know then, as most vampires do now, that once you develop a taste for another, the craving never goes away."

"She's not with you now."

"Imagine unknowingly bonding yourself to a woman who hates you with every breath she draws." They stood in silence for a long moment, before he studied Brody as though he were looking at him for the first time. "I didn't know about you. Your mother was a hunter. Back then there was no truce between vampires and hunters, and when she caught my scent, she was ruthless in her pursuit, thought I'd earn her a reputation since she could guess I was fairly old."

They reached the steps leading up to the terrace, but Galen didn't make a move to go inside. "We weren't together long. She eventually started to talk of wanting me to turn her."

"And you wouldn't."

Galen shook his head. "She left, and since she was barren, or so I believed, I never thought anything would have come from that brief time in my life." His piercing stare moved slowly over Brody's face. "How were you blinded?"

"I was beaten." Brody shrugged, not bothering with the "repeatedly" part. Once, those ghosts had haunted him. Though the scars from the beatings by the father and older brother were no longer visible, only Julia's strong, quiet touch had ultimately buried them.

Looking at the ancient, Brody was strangely relieved to know the man who hated him for much of his childhood hadn't been his real father.

"If you leave Julia again, there will be no going back."

"Until these hunters get what they're after, or are somehow contained, she won't be safe with me."

Galen didn't disagree with him. "How many times did they capture you?"

"Three times since I left her. Morgan helped free me just days ago." With Julia showing up, he hadn't allowed himself much time to think about the six months they'd kept him caged like an animal.

"And in all that time, they never said what they were after, why you were important to them?"

"No, and even knowing where our real roots begin, I can't see any value that knowledge could be to them." That realization ate through his chest like acid.

"You had hoped to learn something that would stop them from seeking you out."

Brody nodded, cursing himself for daring to believe Morgan's insistence that coming here could change things. "They're going to keep coming."

The ancient offered him a tentative smile. "We'll figure it out."

\* \* \* \*

“Such an abrupt change for us took some getting used to,” Galen continued when they had gathered back inside. “Nothing we’d known, the comforts we’d barely grown accustomed to, none of it existed in ancient Rome. We adapted and stuck together. After almost a decade we realized none of us were aging. We all knew our injuries could heal, but not until the years started to pass did we notice that none of us were growing any older. By this time, through accidents alone we discovered humans could be changed by drinking our blood, and that the children who came from a true-bloods’ mating with a human were a mix of the two races.”

“So that means one of Brynn’s parents was a true-blood,” Julia said almost under her breath.

Galen frowned. “Who is Brynn?”

“A friend. She’s half vampire, half hunter.”

Galen looked to Brody for confirmation, but since the mention of Brynn made him realize just how much he didn’t know about Julia’s life, he could only shrug.

Brody didn’t miss Galen’s disturbed expression. “In your journal you talked of training the hunters. You taught them to hunt down your own kind?”

Galen nodded slowly, regret drawing his mouth into a tight line. “For a time we all got on quite well, even had our own community by then. The only downside was that the human half of our families had much shorter life spans, and we realized that the hunters, although could live upwards of four hundred years, did not inherit our apparent immortality.”

Hands clasped behind his back, Galen moved restlessly around the room, as though the more he talked of the past, the more uncomfortable he was with the ghosts. “The number of vampires being created had slowly been spiraling out of control. Too many innocent people were being slaughtered. And then things got worse. Some of the true-bloods changed, began to visualize that vampires, being superior to humans, should be the predominant race on the planet.

“We tried to stop the others from striking out, from planning their crusade, but quickly realized it was too late, and the few humans who knew about us then wouldn’t be much help in stopping them.”

“So you turned to the descendants of the true-bloods’ original offspring,” Brody put in.

“A thousand years had passed since we had escaped out extermination, but the hunters true-blood lineage remained consistent. As long as a parent was a hunter, the traits were passed down to their children. So a few of us began tracking them down, training them, preparing them.”

“And then you set them loose on the world.” Brody couldn’t completely mask his distaste for Galen’s involvement in training the very race who had been hunting him for nearly two centuries.

Galen eyes narrowed. “At that time, all we feared was becoming as our human creators predicted. Monsters. I wouldn’t let that happen.”

Julia threaded her fingers together in front of her. “But they don’t know, do they? The hunters don’t know they have far more in common with their prey than they realize.”

“A handful of elders on their high council are given complete access to their archives, so some are familiar with their roots.”

Brody crossed his arms, idly wondering if Declan was one of those elders. “What

happened to the other true-bloods who wanted war with the humans?”

“They are no longer a threat,” Galen said simply, but Brody knew there was far more to it than the ancient was saying.

\* \* \* \*

Julia stared out the window, sensing more than witnessing the first stretch of dawn across the eastern horizon. She eased back from the window and secured the custom fitted blinds, then turned to stare at the bed where she'd be sleeping. Alone.

After Galen had once again vanished under the pretense of things to take care of, Brody had again withdrawn. Not that she could blame him altogether. They'd all taken in a lot of information tonight, him most of all. Still it stung knowing how close he'd come to letting his guard down last night, and how close she'd come to regaining the part of him she'd hungered for the most. Which made it all the more difficult to see in his eyes that he believed there was no way to stop the hunters from pursuing him.

He would leave her again. The brutal certainty of it raked her insides.

Julia sat on the edge of the bed and closed her eyes. If he walked away, she'd survive. She had before, and she would again if it came to that. She hadn't been naïve this time, knew the risks when she allowed him to creep back into her heart.

The silky fabric of the bedspread bunched in between the fingers she dug into the mattress. There were no more tears, no more anger. For so long she'd denied herself the sheer fury and resentment over his abandonment, and some had clawed its way out last night. But no amount of crying or frustration or anger would give her what she wanted. Her body had been sated after the way Brody sought to exercise them both of their demons, but the distance between them felt as wide as ever tonight.

Maybe she really had been foolish to think she could find a way to get him to open up to her again. Foolish to believe that if Brody admitted he still loved her, it would be enough.

On a sigh, Julia stood up to undress. Her eyes felt heavier tonight, her mind exhausted from trying to piece everything together. As much as she wanted to crawl under the covers and sleep, being alone in the large bed held little appeal. Colin had already turned in across the hall, and given the not-so-subtle snores Julia could easily make out, he was already out cold.

She hadn't done more than move restlessly around the room in ten minutes. She'd stripped off her pants, brushed her hair, and still hadn't found a way to silence the voice that begged her to seek Brody out. And that was the one thing she wouldn't do. She'd followed him to Europe, seduced him, and pushed his buttons wherever possible, all in an attempt to recapture what they'd shared once. She didn't have anything left inside, nothing more to fall back on.

Her head came up slowly, sensing Brody outside her door.

*Can I come in?*

Julia swallowed nervously, and then crossed to the door to unlock it. His solid frame filled the doorway to perfection, and she backed up to let him pass.

He didn't move. His gaze slid over her face with a tenderness that terrified her.

He'd come to say goodbye.

Julia's fingers tightened over the handle, and she shook her head. As prepared as she had forced herself to be for this moment since he came back into her life, she wasn't nearly as ready as she planned.

“Jules,” he began.

She closed her eyes, digging deep to find the anger she’d grasped last night. Being mad might save what little bit of her heart was left intact. Maybe.

He pushed away from the frame and ventured farther into her room. She shut the door automatically, leaning against it as he faced the opposite wall.

“I’m not leaving,” he said finally. He lifted his head, his expression torn when he turned toward her. “I’m tired of being alone.”

“Then be with me.” Her voice was clear, strong, and at complete odds with the erratic rhythm of her heart.

His chin dropped to his chest as though he were afraid she would say that. “It’s not that simple.”

“It can be.”

“And if it gets you killed?”

She straightened away from the door. “You would never let that happen.” He needed to know she believed that.

“Don’t have that kind of faith in me.”

“Someone has to,” she said quietly, taking another tentative step in his direction.

He was only a few feet away now. “I never deserved you.”

“Probably not,” she teased as Brody closed the remaining distance between them. She placed her hand over his heart. “But I’m willing to give you another chance.” Her smile widened at the first sign of hope that flared to life in his eyes. “Just don’t blow it.”

## Chapter Eleven

He caged her face in his hands, and then slowly bent his head to claim her mouth. It was everything the perfect kiss should be. Soft, possessive, and utterly intoxicating. Julia could do no more than stand there as he took his time savoring her. The silky glide of his tongue as it pushed past her lips made her whimper.

His hand slid round to cup the nape of her neck, and he deepened the kiss, reclaiming her with no more than one coaxing pass of his mouth after another. She slowly twined her arms around his neck, wanting the moment to last forever even as her blood heated. By the time he broke from her mouth to lazily explore her throat, her stomach was tight and hot.

He hooked an arm around her waist and tugged until she was flush against him. His erection dug into her abdomen, and the soft throb between her thighs intensified.

“Tell me where to touch you,” he growled softly in her ear before catching the soft flesh between his lips. His thigh nudged hers apart, and she moaned at the pressure against her sex. “Everywhere.”

Brody’s hand slipped under the back of her shirt. He dipped a finger past the waistband of her panties to trace the curve of her ass. A moment later he pushed them down just enough to expose her bottom before cupping her ass in both hands and lifting her against him.

He dipped to recapture her mouth, his tongue boldly tangling with hers. He managed to keep a solid grip on her even as two fingers slid down the damp crease between her legs to find her opening. She instinctively pressed her thighs together.

He groaned, the sound raw and aching, before lowering her back to the floor. With one finger on either hip, he pushed her panties all the way down. Brody stooped to toss them aside, sliding his hand up the inside of her thigh on the way back up. This time no barrier stood in the way, and he traced her cleft, grinning when she caught her bottom lip between her teeth.

“Is this everywhere?” he gently demanded, then pumped a finger inside her.

Julia rocked up to the balls of her feet, her nails raking his shirt.

He kissed her again, harder this time. “I’ll take that as a yes.” And then he drew back.

A protest came quickly to her lips, but he was already pulling her shirt off. Her bra was next to hit the floor. Naked now, Julia let her eyes drift shut when he rested his palms against her ribs, just under her breasts. His thumbs trailed the contours with a sluggish precision that made her nipples ache.

He bent and trapped one between his lips. With a slow, wet pull, he tugged it into his mouth. Julia buried her fingers in his hair, holding his face to her breast. She moaned as he flicked the tip with his tongue before moving to her other breast. She endured as much of the exquisite contact as she could, then tried to ease out of his arms.

Brody didn’t let her. He tightened his hold, keeping her hips trapped as he pushed two fingers into her sex. Her breath caught, and he grinned, repeating the carnal motion over and over until her body trembled.

She shook her head, mindless now, then fumbled with his zipper barely able to concentrate on that much after Brody returned to licking and nipping each breast. He guided them towards the bed, and sat, pulling her down into his lap.

Julia rocked against him instinctively, her arms looped around his neck. He caught her behind and urged her to her knees, nuzzling her breasts as his fingers sought out her clit. Panting now, she squeezed her eyes shut, clinging to him as a fierce orgasm rippled through her.

Her hands itched to free his cock from his pants, but he only laughed when she tried, and turned with her in his arms. With her back against the mattress, he stripped off his shirt and then hovered over her. She reached futilely for his zipper, and he intercepted her hand.

“I’m proving I’m worthy, remember?”

“That is something you’ll never have to convince me of,” she managed to get out before he kissed her with the first glimpse of his restraint wearing. She lifted her hips, but instead of shucking his pants and driving his cock inside her, he bent to drop one shivery kiss after another down her belly.

“Part your legs.” His voice was thick with desire, his eyes brimming with it before he lowered his head and stroked his tongue up her slit.

Her back arched, her heels digging into the mattress, then harder as he swirled the flat of his tongue across her clit. The pleasure was too intense following her orgasm. He pushed her legs apart when she started to bring them together, skimming his mouth along her folds before drawing the slick knot between his lips.

She pitched her hips up, needing the pressure, needing to come again. Bloodlust rose sharp and strong within her, and she cried out. He didn’t stop until she was writhing beneath him, delicious tension coiling in her anew.

“Brody,” she groaned when she came again.

He tugged off his pants and moved back up her body, and her muscles clenched in anticipation of feeling his hard length push deep. But first he kissed her, feverishly now. He caught her hip and tugged her leg around his waist. His cock brushed her opening, and she whimpered, needing it, needing him.

His primal gaze locked on hers, and then he slid in. They both moaned, and she rocked up to meet that first, slow thrust. He drew back, then thrust back in, his hips pumping slowly at first, then faster, harder.

The first stirring of his thoughts teased across her senses, and she let go to embrace them. He growled in response, working his cock deeper. Even as the bloodlust roared in her head, she felt his control slipping.

“Yes,” she hissed.

He caught her mouth in a searing kiss, driving into her ruthlessly. Her insides drew taut, and her inner walls clamped down, another orgasm streaming down her nerve endings.

Brody groaned, and sank his fangs into her throat. Crying out, she clung to him, whimpering when he finally let her into his mind, into his heart. The sensations tore at her, more than she could handle. She knew he cared, knew he loved her, but the sheer intensity of what he felt overwhelmed her.

Julia shook her head, needing it to stop, but he refused. Brody pinned her arms over her head, grinding against her, abandoning control and taking her with a savage intimacy that knocked her senses into complete meltdown.

A heartbeat later he cried out, and rolled to his back as he came, dragging her mouth to his neck. He rocked his hips up as he emptied himself inside her, caging the

back of her neck when she drank from him. Her heart thundered in her chest, every barrier between them, mental and physical, shattering until she felt everything he felt. *Everything.*

Brody caught her chin, and tipped her face up. He tenderly brushed his thumb across her cheek. "I love you."

She didn't need to hear the words to know they were the truth, but knew he needed to say them out loud. Tears thickened her throat, and she leaned down to kiss him. She needed just another moment to adjust to the staggering connection between them. Their initial bonding had been intense, but even then she hadn't been shaken to her very soul. Not like this.

"I love you," she whispered against his mouth, smiling when he rolled to trap her beneath him.

"Say it again," he demanded.

"I love you."

He kissed her hard. "Again."

*I love you.*

\* \* \* \*

Deliciously satisfied, Julia crawled out of bed, not bothering to do more than drag Brody's shirt over her head as she crossed to the small desk on the opposite side of the room. Galen's servant had assured her it would be safe to call home from here. Not wanting to be away from Brody for long, she planned to be quick, but needed to talk to her family.

She dialed Will's number figuring he'd be easier to get a hold of, and waited for the call to connect.

"Hi," she said at the sound of Will's sleepy voice.

"Julia? Are you okay? Are you safe?"

She straightened at the concern she heard in his voice. "I'm fine."

"Jules, they took Gabriel."

\* \* \* \*

Brody felt the sweeping arc of pain resonate in his chest, and bolted up in bed.

Julia?

Next to him the bed was empty, and for that one split second his world came apart at the hinges. Then he spotted her in the far corner, her knuckles white where she pressed the phone to her ear.

Brody threw back the covers. "What's wrong?"

She glanced helplessly at him. "They took Gabe." She spoke into the phone again, panic lacing her fervent questions before she sought out Brody again. "How can Will reach me here?"

Someone knocked on the door. Brody squeezed Julia's hand reassuringly then turned back to the bed to jerk his pants on before opening the door.

Galen stood in the hallway. "Is there a problem?"

The ancient was far too intuitive.

Galen shrugged in defense. "I'm not used to having company and notice when people get scared."

Brody stood back to let him in. "The rogues have taken Julia's friend." *Friend* almost stuck in his throat as he foolishly wondered about her relationship to the other two

vampires. He knew Will and Gabriel were important to her, and he hated that after last night he could feel a ridiculous twinge of jealousy in the pit of his stomach.

Julia pulled the phone from her mouth. "How can I be reached here?"

Galen hesitated, then rattled off a number. Julia shot him a grateful look, and repeated it back to Will, hanging up a few minutes later.

"Declan's following a couple leads on where the rogues might have taken Gabriel, but he's got a bigger crisis on his hands. Dozens more hunters have gone rogue."

"Declan, the hunter elder?" Galen asked, as Colin shuffled sleepily into the room.

Julia sighed. "Is there anyone Declan doesn't know?"

"I don't know him," Colin said through a yawn. He took notice then of the tension in the air, glancing back and forth between Julia and Brody. "Something happen?"

Julia moved from the chair, her anxious strides carrying her to the foot of the bed and then back. "They took him two days ago. Maybe that's how they found us in Switzerland. I used his plane to fly most of the way." She swiveled, determination hardening her face. "I have to go home."

Brody shook his head. "That's what they want, to lure us out."

The fierce glitter in Julia's eyes made it clear she didn't care. "Gabriel didn't understand that I couldn't sit by and do nothing when I knew the rogues had you. Don't make the same mistake he did."

"Wait," Galen said, the voice of reason amidst the emotional upheaval raging within Brody. The price of opening himself to Julia completely. He focused on working through it, and reached for Julia's hand, needing her to try harder to rein in the icy fear lodged in her chest until he adjusted.

"Let me make a few calls," Galen continued, "and see if I can find out anything else. I should have been paying better attention to what these rogue hunters were doing."

He exchanged a pointed look with Colin, and they both left the room.

"I'm not letting you leave," Brody said. Better that Julia understand that now. For better or worse she was stuck with him now.

She shook her head. "If they hurt him--"

He tugged her into his arms, her head tucked under his chin.

"He and Will were all I had for so long, and if those bastards hurt him ..."

Brody held on, afraid that if he let go for a moment, she'd try to leave without him. "I'm sure Declan will be able to find him."

She sighed. "He wasn't able to find you."

"He doesn't mean the same to them."

"Meaning he's expendable." She tipped her face up, worry for Gabriel creasing the corners of her eyes.

Brody cursed. That hadn't been his point, but they both knew how true it was. "If they're using him to try to find us, they won't kill him. He's no good to them dead." He was fairly certain of that much, if only for Julia's sake. "Galen has been around for a few millennia, I'm sure he'll be able to find out something."

Julia let out a tense breath, and paced away from him.

"Why don't you get dressed, unless you like modeling my T-shirt for Galen and Colin, and we'll go wait downstairs."

At the mention of her state of undress, she gave him a tentative smile. She stared past him to the phone, but finally nodded and disappeared into the bathroom. Brody

wished he could drag her back to bed and spend the entire night there. It had been too much to hope for that the hunters would have stayed out of their lives for even a short time.

He was still no closer to knowing how his being the Key could help them. If Galen's telling of the origins of their race was the truth--and there really wasn't a reason to doubt him--how did that make Brody important? Knowing about the true-bloods couldn't be of any value to the rogues, could it? Or was there something else missing, something Galen hadn't told them?

A few minutes later Julia emerged from the bathroom freshly showered, her damp hair already curling down her back.

"He'll be fine," Brody said, seeing the worry hadn't retreated from her eyes.

"I know."

He tilted her chin up, and slowly kissed her. Her lips parted instantly, and her concern was edged aside by the moment. She splayed her hands across his abs, giving herself over to the kiss that too quickly heated his body, settling thick and heavy in his groin.

When Brody felt the urge to do more than just kiss her, he forced himself to let go, and retreated into the bathroom himself. As much as he wanted to lose himself in her, he was selfish enough to want that when she wasn't afraid for her friend.

By the time they arrived downstairs, Colin was already waiting for them. Spotting two plastic cups on the table, each branded with a village of blue people three apples tall, Brody snorted. There was something intrinsically wrong with drinking blood from a Smurf glass.

Colin beamed. "I can tell you're glad I packed them." He propped his feet on the end of the coffee table. "You'd think after a few hours sleep it would all seem less weird." He glanced at Brody. "Where's your dad, Dad?" He smirked.

Colin was enjoying that aspect of things way too much, and Brody scowled at him.

Almost as though he knew he'd been mentioned, Galen walked into the room. "I should hear something soon."

Julia nodded gratefully, but turned and walked to the open doorway leading to the terrace, staring out into the night. Her spine stiffened. "Someone's outside."

Brody moved to pull her away from the door at the same time Morgan staggered inside. The front of her shirt was ripped and stained with flesh blood. The hand pressed to her abdomen was stained red, and she was still bleeding.

Her eyes rolled back, and she weaved on her feet before Galen caught a hold of her just as her knees gave out. He carried her to the couch that Colin quickly vacated.

Julia and Brody exchanged "what's next" glances before watching as Galen fought with Morgan to examine her wound.

"We need to go," the true-blood said through clenched teeth. "He was waiting for me at my place. If he knew where to find me, he may have discovered how to find you."

Galen didn't appear concerned. "Let me see."

Morgan shook her head and shoved at his shoulder, not releasing the hand covering her injury. Blood continued to leak through her fingers. "There's no time. He could already be here."

"Who?"

“Cristos.”

“He’s dead,” Galen said flatly, but Morgan’s claim snapped his dark brows together.

“No, he’s not. And he’s not alone. He has both vampires and hunters with him.”

Galen stilled. “How is that possible?”

“Now you see where I’m coming from,” Colin griped.

The ancient silenced him with a look, then returned his attention to Morgan. “Did he do this to you?” The anger in Galen’s voice didn’t go unnoticed, nor did the fierce grip he had on Morgan’s other hand.

She nodded. “Shot me at close range. No exit wound.”

“The wound won’t close as long as the bullet is in there.” Julia voiced their collective thoughts.

“No time.” Morgan tried to sit up, and hissed out a sharp breath at the movement. “Not yet. We need to leave. Now.”

Galen scooped her up.

She glared at him. “I can still walk, damn it.”

“You said we were in a hurry. You limping will only slow us down.” Galen called out for Ciro, issuing orders when the portly man appeared. “Go down to the vault and lock yourself in. Stay there until sunrise. If anyone shows up I doubt they’ll linger long, and keep an eye on the surveillance so you know it’s safe to come out.”

The servant nodded and calmly left the room as though he’d just be requested to put another load of whites into the washer instead of ordered to hide.

Galen jerked his head towards the front door. “Let’s go.”

They followed him to the attached garage. Galen nodded to Colin to grab the keys on the third hook as he carefully set Morgan in front seat of his Hummer. Brody slid into the back with Julia and Colin.

“You have a lot of explaining to do,” Galen growled at Morgan, jamming the vehicle into reverse and tearing out of the garage. Instead of heading down the driveway that led to the main road, he drove around the backside of the villa and onto a dirt road at the rear of the property.

“You saw him?” Galen demanded a moment later, the air in the vehicle thick with tension.

“Yes,” Morgan hissed, another bump jostling her.

“Sorry,” Galen snapped, but didn’t sound as though he meant it.

Brody couldn’t decide if the true-blood’s anger stemmed from Morgan keeping things from him, or the mention of Cristos--whoever that was.

Morgan laughed, a sound born more from irritation than amusement. She tipped her head and glanced back at Brody and Julia. “Both in one piece I see.” Her pained gaze found Colin. “How thoughtful,” she teased, “you brought me a snack.”

Colin snorted.

“Don’t play with him,” Galen growled, surprising everyone at his quick defense of the only human in the car.

“Well, didn’t you get attached pretty quickly?”

He shot her a scathing look. “You and I have plenty to discuss about that, but right now I want to know about Cristos.”

She closed her eyes, the pain on her face drawing her features tight. “The twisted

bastard is after the others.”

Galen’s face turned to stone before focusing on the road ahead.

“He has two already,” she added, grimacing as she tried to get more comfortable.

The hands on the wheel clenched. “Yours?”

She nodded sharply. “I had just arrived in Rome when I heard, but he was there waiting for me.”

“Who are the others?” Brody asked, knowing instinctively it was tied to the Key.

Morgan glanced at Galen. “How much did you tell them?”

“Everything.” His gaze met Brody’s briefly in the rearview mirror. “Cristos is after the other true-bloods we imprisoned two thousand years ago.”

\* \* \* \*

Julia glanced back and forth as they were bounced over another dip in the road. Morgan’s face went white, the hand she pressed against herself, equally void of color.

“What did he say?” Galen demanded with another fierce look at Morgan that fell somewhere between concern and wanting to strangle her himself.

“Who is Cristos?” Julia cut in, needing to know that much in order to follow things further. As if last night hadn’t been enough to fill her quota for the unexpected.

“Another true-blood,” Morgan answered. “We thought he was dead.”

“The one who ultimately betrayed us to our makers,” Galen clarified. “He and his brother were also the first to start talking about eradicating the human race.”

Julia frowned, trying to keep up. “So if he’s been alive all this time, what’s stopped him from doing just that?”

Morgan ignored the question to stare at Galen. “He’s looking for Darius. He’s the last.”

“That is going to be a bit of a problem then.” At Morgan’s frown, Galen added, “Darius is dead.”

“How?”

“Darius is Cristos’s brother?” Brody guessed.

Galen nodded. “After Cristos was killed, or so we thought, the other four were locked away.”

“You couldn’t bring yourself to kill them.” The unspoken certainty of it echoed within Julia.

“Then we’d be no better than the humans who wanted us put down. They’re our family.”

“But you had no trouble training the hunters to slay vampires,” Brody pointed out.

Galen looked as unapologetic as he had last night. “I had no loyalty to the humans who were turned. My brethren were a different matter.” Galen exchanged glances with Morgan. “But we knew something had to be done.”

Dark shadows blurred beyond the windows as the Hummer tore down the back road. Were they being followed already, or had Morgan been wrong about Cristos following them? Cristos, who had taken Gabriel. Her gut clenched painfully, and she focused on the conversation to keep her mind off what the true-blood might have done to Gabe.

“How have you managed to keep the others locked away, but alive for so long?”

Morgan cringed as they bounced over another dip in the road. She glared at Galen before answering Julia. “They’re all comatose.”

“But vampires need blood, without it we die.” At most their kind could go only a few days, maybe a couple weeks without it. Or so she’d always believed.

“No,” Galen clarified. “Without it vampires eventually go crazy and wind up killing themselves or need to be taken care of if they’re too far gone. But restrained, so they can’t hurt anyone, they slip into a coma.”

“So you’ve had these four comatose true-bloods hidden away?” Brody asked.

Morgan nodded, before transferring her attention back to Galen. “What happened to Darius?”

“I don’t know.”

“You said there were eight of you.” Julia did a mental tally. “You and Morgan and Cristos and the four locked away makes seven.”

Galen and Morgan exchanged glances. “There is another, but neither of us has seen him in centuries.”

“Just out of curiosity how long has it been since the two of you last crossed paths?” Colin asked.

“Two hundred years,” they answered in unison.

“Life-mates,” Brody said quietly.

The two of them tensed as though hearing the reminder was like a stake through the heart.

That alone triggered more questions. Ones that would have to wait until they were certain a powerful vampire on a quest to find his brother wasn’t on their heels. “Why did Cristos wait all this time to reveal himself?”

“First he had to find the Key,” Morgan said gently, angling a look at Brody over her shoulder. “Cristos needed a bargaining chip to get Galen to release Darius.”

“I was bait,” Brody said flatly.

Morgan nodded. “He needed something to use as leverage, so he held onto you until he could locate Galen.”

“And when he finally did, I escaped.”

Morgan laughed, the sound sharp as though she realized belatedly it would hurt. “That was the only high point of my encounter with him.”

“So why is he changing his game plan now?” Julia asked.

Morgan frowned at her.

“He doesn’t have Brody,” she pointed out. “So how does he plan to get Darius’s location? There’s nothing to bargain with.”

The concern that flashed on Morgan’s face told Julia the other woman had been contemplating the same thing.

“But it gets worse,” Morgan added a moment later.

“Wonderful,” the other true-blood growled.

“His followers wear a mark.”

Galen frowned, as though he wondered, as Julia did, why that was significant.

“I’ve seen the symbol before,” Morgan continued. “And his men, as he called them have a name. The order of Orion.”

Galen shook his head. “No.”

Julia glanced at Brody, realization dawning with a sickening dread that pooled in her stomach. “The order of Orion is the same enemy you were created to fight, aren’t they?”

\* \* \* \*

Julia was still reeling from the recent turn of events when Galen pulled up in front an old stone home on the other side of Rome. They followed him inside, giving him a wide berth as he stopped to collect Morgan.

Inside, he nodded to Morgan's wound. "We need to get that looked after." He deposited her on the large settee in the main room, and then backed up. "I'll be right back."

"Let me take a look," Julia said, crouching next to the other woman.

Morgan shook her head.

"Or you can wait for Galen," she added pointedly.

A tight-lipped smile tugged at the edges of the true-blood's mouth. She nodded grimly. "Go ahead."

The raw gunshot wound was bigger than Julia expected, and still bleeding.

Through gritted teeth, Morgan dragged in a breath. "The bullet needs to come out, but Galen can't do it."

"Why?"

"I can't have him touch me any more." The silent plea in the other vampire's eyes was obvious.

Julia nodded, using the hand towel Colin handed her to press against the wound while they waited.

Morgan whimpered, then glanced to where Brody stood on the opposite side of the room. "I was right, wasn't I? He still loves you." At Julia's nod, Morgan looked almost smug, but for the pain she could no longer hope to mask.

Julia rocked back on her heels. "What I don't understand is how you could have been genetically engineered to fight an enemy that true-bloods ultimately created?"

"Predestination Paradox."

All three of them glanced at Colin.

He grinned sheepishly. "I read a lot."

"Go on," Morgan urged.

"With time travel, there are theories that say the laws of nature would ultimately prevent people who could travel back in time from altering things. Say a person went back in time to assassinate their grandfather. But every time they tried, something stops it from happening. The bullet jams in their gun, they miss, or they shoot the guy only to realize he wasn't actually their grandfather."

"I'm not following," Julia said.

"I'm saying that it's more about the true-bloods going back in time to *fulfill* their role according to the laws of nature, so that nothing already set in motion is altered."

"That only works if there are things in life that are predestined," Brody said.

Colin shrugged. "I didn't make up the laws of the universe. Besides, it's just one of many theories."

But if Colin's theory was correct, it also meant that nothing might stop Cristos from building an army capable of wiping humanity off the map.

Galen returned seconds later and deposited a handful of supplies on the table.

Julia reached for the tweezers, her hand surprising confident under Galen's critical gaze, as though he recognized the significance of her treating Morgan's injury.

He met Morgan's troubled eyes, then nodded. "I'll be back in a minute."

Brody came to stand by Julia's side as she dabbed at the wound to clear some of the blood away.

Morgan closed her eyes and cocked her head, a look of concentration tightening her face. Her eyes snapped open. "He lied."

"Cristos?"

The ancient shook her head. "No, Galen." She darted a look to Brody. "Darius isn't dead. He's close by. I can feel him."

Julia frowned. "Why would he lie?"

"Because he plans to see it come true," Brody answered.

Morgan's brows snapped together. "Son of a bitch." She glanced at her wound. "It has to come out. Now."

Julia struggled to keep up. "What's wrong?"

"It's like you said, without Brody, Cristos has nothing to use as a bargaining chip to convince Galen to tell him where he hid Darius away."

"And?"

"And if Galen knew Cristos was close, he might do exactly what Cristos anticipated after I told him what happened."

"He came here to eliminate the threat Darius posed should Cristos find him," Julia said.

Brody studied Morgan's wound. "You think Cristos did more than shoot you, you think he's been tracking you, been tracking us?"

Julia was grateful when he nudged her aside and reached for the tweezers. Morgan clenched Julia's hand. The ancient's pain radiated through Julia's mind, taking her to her knees.

Colin rushed to her side. "What can I do?"

Her eyes locked on to Brody. "Tell him to be quick."

With a grim determination, Brody carefully used the tweezers to extract a bullet unlike Julia had ever seen before. Morgan instantly released her grip, and the pain left as fast it had taken hold of Julia's mind.

The bleeding started again. "You're going to need to feed soon."

Morgan shook her head at the unspoken suggestion in Brody's voice. "Not in a million years."

He pressed a dressing to her wound. "How come you hate him so much?"

"Is that what he told you?" Morgan nudged Brody's hand aside and covered the wound with her own. Without waiting for a response, she sat up. "We may not have much time. Go tell him Cristos could be here anytime."

Brody left the room, and Colin stayed close to Morgan should she need the extra help as she insisted on getting to her feet. Julia could feel Morgan's rising anxiousness roll off the other vampire in thick waves.

Julia tensed, an icy awareness skating down her spine.

A shadow passed the rear window. Julia barely had to reach out with her senses to know it wasn't Brody or Galen out there.

She glanced at Morgan at the same time as the front door was kicked in.

## Chapter Twelve

Brody almost missed the nearly concealed staircase that twisted down to the cellar. He didn't try to hide the fact he was coming down. No need to put the true-blood on the defensive when all their emotions were already running on high.

He found Galen facing a stone door that looked like something straight out of a medieval dungeon.

"Cristos can't get a hold of his brother," he said resolutely.

Brody knew now wasn't the time to discuss that. "They were tracking Morgan. It was in the bullet he shot her with."

Galen's head snapped up. "There's no way to know how close he could be." He stared over his shoulder at the door.

A second later, Brody felt it too. Right before Julia's fear tore through his chest. He turned and sprinted for the stairs, Galen on his heels.

Hunters were in the house.

A blur of movement slashed across Brody's peripheral vision as he broke around the corner, and he jerked to the right as the first hunter came at him. The hunter nailed him in the side, but Brody turned, managing to deflect most of the blow. His muscles stretched and burned from the hit, but it didn't slow him down as the hunter straightened and came at him again.

Cristos was a fool to surround himself with such young hunters. They were too green to realize the wisdom in assessing their prey before attacking.

Brody hit the wall, knocked only marginally off balance before retaliating with a solid punch that caught the hunter in the chest. The sickening sound of ribs cracking greeted his ears, and he grabbed the hunter and dragged him closer. He pierced the hunter's throat with his fangs, drinking deeply before leaving him dazed on the floor.

Another one filled the end of the hallway. Brody kicked out, knocking the weakened hunter at his feet unconscious, and bracing himself for the next attack. He didn't need to turn around to know Galen had taken out the hunter who had engaged him.

Julia's spiking fear coated Brody's insides with a layer of ice, but he waited for the hunter opposite him to make the first move.

Those sharp golden eyes darted to the other hunter already out cold. A grin that did nothing to reassure Brody, spread across the enemy's lips before he backtracked the way he'd come. Back toward the room where they'd left Julia, Colin and Morgan.

Galen nodded, knowing as Brody did that there wasn't much to be done but to follow the hunter. Julia wasn't hurt, but Brody prepared himself for what he might find as they edged slowly up the hall.

No other hunters waited to pounce as Brody reached the main living room. He half expected a small handful of rogue elders to be waiting around the corner.

Brody spotted Colin on floor immediately, his heart kicking painfully in his chest at the sight of the blood near his head. Brody brought his head up slowly, pulling the familiar hunter holding Julia into his line of sight.

Chester grinned. "Nice to see you again, Brody."

Brody didn't take his eyes off Julia. With both their adrenaline levels on max, he surveyed her quickly to make sure she wasn't injured. The uncertainty and fear she tried to hide in her eyes made Brody want to rip the elder's throat out.

"How's the wrist?" he asked, reminding the elder of their last encounter.

The satisfied smile on the elder's face dimmed.

Galen slowly stepped up next to Brody, both their gazes locking on the figure bent down behind the chair. As if sensing their attention had finally zeroed in on him, he straightened, wiping blood from the corner of his mouth.

Cristos, Brody guessed.

A bright smile loaded with vengeance clung to the true-blood's face. "Galen, it's been too long."

Next to him, Galen remained relaxed, appearing no more bothered by Cristos's appearance than he would a new neighbor dropping by with coffee cake. "Can't say the same. You are looking well for a dead man though."

Another step to the right and Brody caught sight of Morgan on the floor, her face turned away and gaping puncture marks in her neck. Given the blood loss from her gunshot wound, and without knowing how much Cristos drank from her, Brody wasn't sure if she'd survive for much longer.

Sensing the direction of Brody's gaze, Galen eased close enough to see what held his attention. A muscle ticked in the ancient's jaw, the only outward sign at seeing his life-mate unconscious.

"She's not dead. Yet," Cristos added.

When Galen's spine locked like an animal about to attack, Cristos held up a hand in warning. He tipped his head to indicate the handful of hunters in the room. "Give me one reason to finish her off. Just one."

Brody didn't doubt the true-blood had every intention of doing it anyway if he could get away with it. Had they taken any longer coming into the room, Cristos most likely would have drained Morgan completely.

Cristos glanced thoughtfully at Julia.

"Don't," Brody growled, anger pounding viciously through his veins.

Chester tightened his grip on her, one meaty hand gripping her neck.

Cristos grinned, but moved no closer. "I knew the idiots were wrong when they claimed you didn't care for your life-mate." He gave Julia a leering once-over that made Brody's stomach crawl. "I should have investigated the matter more myself. It would have been nice to have her around. You might not have escaped me." He pinned Galen with a glare that promised retribution. "Where is Darius?"

Galen didn't respond.

The other true-blood didn't look concerned. "I know he's close." His gaze drifted meaningfully to Morgan.

"Downstairs," Galen snapped.

Cristos nodded to a group of three hunters, who quickly exited to retrieve the comatose true-blood. That left three more in the room plus the elder holding Julia.

From her prone position on the floor, Morgan moaned softly. Cristos crouched next to her and Galen managed three steps before two hunters filled the short distance separating them. Galen didn't pay them much attention, his chilling gaze warning Cristos not to touch her.

Brody edged closer to Colin.

"Easy vampire," the elder warned, flexing his fingers against Julia's throat.

"If you killed him, I'll tear you apart." Brody could detect Colin's thready pulse, but without a closer look it was impossible to know how much damage had been done.

The elder's lips parted in a cruel grin. "Not today you won't."

Julia caught Brody's eyes, and then she glanced down at Colin. More precisely the gun tucked close to his unconscious body. He hadn't even been able to use it. The hunters had been too fast this time.

Cristos crossed his arms, circling around the hunters separating him and Galen, but wisely didn't get within arms reach. The confidence the true-blood exuded made it clear he wasn't worried about Galen actually getting the jump on him, but he wasn't stupid enough to put himself directly in Galen's path.

"Had it crossed my mind you would have stuck so close to where it all began for us, I would have torn this country apart to find you."

Galen was too busy studying Morgan to pay much attention. Cristos's face stretched taut, obviously wanting his enemy's complete attention after announcing he'd been hunting Galen for centuries.

"She wasn't as good at staying underground as you," Cristos said. "A time or two over the years I've caught scent of her, but never managed to track her down." He smirked. "Until recently. And I hadn't truly imagined she would actually lead me to you." He circled the edge of the room coming close enough to Julia to make Brody's jaw clench. "Of course, I had hoped she would try to warn you."

"If she dies, you won't be walking out of this room alive," Galen vowed.

Cristos tsked. "Perhaps you should be more worried about the others than me. As we speak they're being rejuvenated, and soon my brother will join them."

To his credit, Galen didn't look worried. "How is it you managed to find the crypts, but you couldn't find me?"

"Perhaps I should clarify that locating the others and freeing them was easier than finding you and knowing how to force you to reveal Darius's location. Even I never dreamed you'd keep him so close."

Brody watched the two true-bloods edge closer, their mutual hatred of each other riding so close to the surface you could almost see the hostility simmering between them.

"For centuries I pondered how I would ever find a way to convince you to release my brother once I found you." Cristos glanced at Brody. "Then one day I came across a special young woman, a hunter. One who told me the Key to ensuring the strong future of the vampire race would soon be within my reach."

Cristos laughed. "That such a thing should turn out to be your son couldn't have pleased me more. I took but one look at him and knew the truth."

"Why me?" Brody demanded. "Surely he had other descendants, other children you could have used for leverage." If true-bloods weren't sterile there would have been other children, wouldn't there have been?

"Oddly enough, no." Cristos turned and strolled back to Morgan's side. "I think he felt too loyal to this one to impregnate another female."

"Yet you took a risk. You had no way of knowing he would care enough for a son he didn't know he had."

"True enough. But if such a gifted creature could foresee your importance, it was a gamble I was willing to make." He faced Galen. "Turns out I didn't need your son at all."

"What about your daughter?" Julia demanded.

Brody glanced sharply at her.

Curious, Cristos refocused his attention on her.

Julia jerked at the tight hold the elder had on her throat. With a nod from Cristos, the elder reluctantly eased his grip.

“Aren’t you worried that Galen will use your daughter as leverage against you?”

Cristos glanced curiously at Galen, amusement lurking in his cold gaze. “I haven’t sired any half-breeds in centuries.”

“That’s what Galen believed too.” She nodded at Brody. “We all can see how that turned out.”

The patient laughter faded from Cristos’s eyes. “I would have thought being turned by the son of a true-blood, you would have the sense not to play games with me.”

Julia tilted her chin defiantly. “Her name is Brynn.”

From the corner of his eye, Brody detected the slightest edge of surprise in Galen’s expression before he masked it.

“In fact,” Julia added, “a few of your flunkies have probably crossed paths with her. And as we speak she’s no doubt tearing apart as many of your followers as she can to find her friend.”

“The vampire,” Cristos put in, still not convinced.

“Read my thoughts,” Julia challenged. “Like with Brody and Galen, there is no mistaking the resemblance she shares with you.”

Cristos stalked over to her, and Brody went stiff as the true-blood stopped centimeters from Julia’s face. “If you lie,” he warned, the viciousness in his voice snaked down Brody’s spine. Julia didn’t even blink.

A moment later Cristos turned and offered Galen a sardonic grin. “Perhaps we should celebrate Father’s Day together?”

Wary, Brody watched the true-blood turn back to Julia.

“Of course, should I be concerned for the welfare of my daughter, and unlike Galen, I’m not so weak as to care if my blood pounds through the veins of another, Galen couldn’t use her as leverage if she’s across the ocean.” He looked smug that Julia had slipped by mentioning Brynn searching for Gabriel.

A moment later the three hunters returned, a husk of a body tucked between two of them.

Cristos’s eyes narrowed to glittering slits as he saw his brother, then he whirled on Galen.

Having seen the tell-tale fury alight the true-bloods eyes, Brody had been ready. He dropped to the floor next to Colin, snatching the gun from the floor. He focused only on the impossibly fast movements as the two ancients collided. There was no time to calculate the angle of the shot or worry he might hit Galen instead.

He depressed the trigger.

Cristos staggered back. The brief moment of shock was all it took for Galen to gain the upper hand. Brody whirled around as Julia drove her foot and elbow back as the elder holding her had been predictably distracted by watching Cristos take a hit.

The hunters carrying Darius’s body bolted for the door and slipped out into the night.

“Get Colin and Morgan out of here,” Brody ordered as Julia jerked out of the elder’s reach, then he dove for the hunter himself.

He caught him around the waist, taking him to the floor. The elder was fast, the

weight behind his fists enough to knock Brody's vision sideways. Brody snared his wrist to bring it to his mouth, his fangs already lengthening in anticipation.

The elder's knee caught him in the ribs, and Brody instinctively released his grip. Behind him, he felt the only other hunter who remained once the true-bloods engaged one another go after Julia.

The moment's distraction earned Brody a solid punch to his jaw, but he managed to dodge the next one at the last second, flipping the elder over before the hunter could smash a floor vase against his face.

The younger hunter hit the wall next to Brody, and Julia rolled to regain her feet. Trusting her to handle it, Brody kept his attention on the elder, who he could already feel waning. Not as strong as he used to be.

His next attempt to latch onto the hunter was successful, and he growled at the power that rejuvenated him when he found the hunter's vein. Even as the warm liquid pulsed through Brody, he could feel the intensity of the true-bloods, the power struggle that would ultimately be won by only one of them, and already Cristos was barely hanging on.

Brody caught the dazed elder by the throat, relieved to discover Julia had neutralized the threat of the younger one. "Where did you take the other vampire Gabriel?"

The elder shook his head.

Brody increased the pressure against the man's windpipe. Unlike vampires, hunters were limited in their healing, and a crushed trachea wasn't anything they were coming back from.

The elder's eyes widened and he frantically tried to pry away Brody's hand before finally rattling off an address in New York.

"What was in this for you? Don't you hate vampires by nature, and yet you've been working for one?"

Fury leapt to the elder's eyes. "Imagine spending your entire existence hunting something that is nearly impossible to kill."

"So you're afraid to die?" Brody easily deflected the futile blow at his head, realizing Cristos must have been promising to turn the rogues into vampires in exchange for their help.

"I'm afraid of nothing," the elder hissed, his eyes starting to roll back into his head.

"How about imprisonment?" Brody taunted, knowing the elder lied. "I think the only thing worse than knowing you're soon going to die, is knowing it will come when you're locked away."

The elder trembled at the possibility, then, mercifully for him, passed out.

Brody might have been disgusted that the elder, who'd hunted him down for the last time hadn't put up a stronger fight, if not for the reminder of Colin.

He pushed to his feet as another heavy thud preceded Galen throwing Cristos against the wall. Cristos tried to shake it off, but his movements were awkward and slow. Galen jerked him around, and Brody watched as the ancient snapped Cristos's neck. That alone wouldn't kill the true-blood. Even with those nerves severed, his body could still heal itself.

Pinning Cristos's limp body to the wall, Galen sank his fangs into his throat.

Leaving the other vampire to his enemy, Brody crouched next to Julia, who was already examining Colin's wounds. "He needs a doctor," she said, "but I think it's more a possible concussion than anything else that's keeping him unconscious."

Brody prayed she was right. He gently lifted Colin up as Julia moved to check on Morgan. He straightened, understanding Galen's vengeance when the true-blood ripped out the other vampire's throat altogether.

Julia backed away at the feral look on Galen's face as he released Cristos and approached Morgan's prone body. He scooped her into his arms only to drop onto the chair behind him with her cradled against him.

"Drink," he pleaded with his life-mate, tipping her face to his throat.

She remained limp, and he shook her. "Morgan, please." His voice was hoarse, fear glittering in his eyes as he urged her again to his neck.

Brody found it difficult to watch, to see the grief so plainly etched on Galen's face, only to be grateful he wasn't in the ancient's position. Grateful it wasn't Julia near dead in Brody's arms as he pleaded with her to help him save her life. If Morgan didn't drink from Galen she'd be lost, and all three of them knew it.

Morgan whimpered, and the grunt of relief that came from deep inside Galen sounded raw and aching.

Brody followed Julia outside, leaving the other two alone.

*Get your human back to my place and have Ciro send for the physician.*

*What about you and Morgan?*

*She needs to rest. Have Ciro come back for us at sunset tomorrow.*

Brody relayed Galen's instructions to Julia, and carefully set Colin in the backseat. Idly wondering how far the hunters had already gotten with their comatose true-blood, he slipped behind the wheel.

\* \* \* \*

Julia watched from the doorway for a long moment, her chest expanding at the sight of Brody asleep in the chair next to Colin's bed. The doctor had stitched Colin's minor wounds up without any questions, and assured them after Colin roused long enough to complain of a headache, that he would recover in no time.

The sun had set nearly an hour ago, but she hadn't slept all day. She'd been as eager to keep an eye on Colin as to wait for word from Declan that they'd found Gabriel. He was alive, but barely Declan had warned her. Though Gabriel had said nothing, it was clear Cristos had tortured him to the brink of death.

"I'm glad Cristos is dead too," Brody said quietly, and having apparently sensed her anger, was awake now. He straightened in the chair, motioning her closer.

She perched on the edge of it, leaning in when he slid his arm around her.

"It feels like it's still not over." Not when the hunters had gotten what they'd come for. Darius.

"It might not be for a long time."

Julia knew he was thinking of the future the true-bloods had come from, the one the order of Orion would bring to its knees. Assuming the loss of Cristos didn't bring the rising faction to a grinding halt. Declan was already on damage control and looking into assigning whole groups of hunters in tracking down both rogues and vampires who might have already claimed some kind of allegiance to the order.

While she herself had often wondered what a world of vampires would be like,

not having to hide their true nature, it was an unrealistic fantasy. If only because the humans offered them the one thing they needed most to survive. Blood. Short of enslaving large groups of them to sate the bloodlust, Julia could see no way to convert the entire human population without sentencing the vampire race to extinction by starvation.

With Cristos dead, it was impossible to guess what his ultimate goals were beyond freeing the other true-bloods. Either way, such a dangerous faction posed a serious risk to the truce between hunters and vampires. The thought of their race again being hunted because of the Order of Orion concerned Julia.

“It will be nice to finally walk around New York without a babysitter in tow, one suspected of being the Key no less,” Colin said, looking more chipper now.

Julia arched a brow. “New York?” Aside from her plans to return there as soon as possible to check on Gabriel, she and Brody hadn’t discussed much beyond the events of the last few hours, least of all what had happened between the two of them.

“Well, things will be different now that I can do what I want without Dracula there breathing down my neck.” Colin smirked. “Plus, he won’t need me watching over him anymore.”

Brody snorted.

Julia laughed. “Why is that?”

Colin grinned like the parent of a thirty-something who was finally moving out. “Now he has you.”

Did he?

Since the night Brody had come looking for her, no longer wanting to be alone, there had been no chance to talk about what that meant for either of them, or what it meant now that he would no longer be sought after and imprisoned by the hunters.

Brody frowned.

“Okay, out you two go.”

They both looked at him.

“The looks on your faces means one of two things,” Colin said, looking pleased he was able to read them so easily. “Either you two are going to argue--and since my head still hurts I appreciate not being subjected to that, or you’re going to tear each other’s clothes off--” he closed his eyes and shuddered as if saying that much was painful. “Come back when we’re ready to get out of dodge, okay?”

Listening to Colin, Brody stood and dragged her out of the room, leaving her believe he actually had fighting on his mind given the rigid slant of his jaw.

He closed his bedroom door and whipped around so fast, Julia stumbled back.

Brody glared at her. “Tell me you didn’t think I was going to leave you a minute ago.”

“No.” Not exactly. That thought hadn’t crossed her mind in those terms so much, but he hadn’t said otherwise either.

He caught her chin and hauled her forward to meet his mouth. She moaned at the achingly possessive kiss, wanting nothing more than to push him down on the bed and drag a promise from him that they were starting over, together.

“Did I, or did I not tell you I loved you?” Brody demanded.

Julia didn’t need to verbalize that he’d loved her once and still walked away.

The second the offhanded reminder scrolled through her thoughts, he frowned. “You’re going to hold that against me for a long time, aren’t you?”

She smiled. "Only for eternity. No biggie."

He growled and caught her in his arms, tossing her on the bed. Before he dipped down to conquer her mouth as the dominating gleam in his eyes promised, she planted a hand against his chest.

*We're starting over. Together.*

Julia beamed at the heartfelt vow that echoed in her thoughts. "So," she asked tentatively, "how do *you* feel about New York?"

\* \* \* \*

*Two weeks later*

The sight of the packed night club made Julia grin. She turned from the window overlooking the bar and faced Will and Lanie. She'd been listening to them argue about Will having promised Lanie one dance before they left for the last few minutes. Tonight, and every night for the last couple of weeks she'd been able to look at them without envying what they shared.

"Brody is back tonight, isn't he?"

Julia shook her head at Lanie. "Not until tomorrow. He just called to tell me." And Julia had been trying her damndest not to foolishly pout about that since the other two had strolled in.

Lanie poked Will in the arm. "You promised me a dance," she reminded him for the umpteenth time.

"And you promised me--"

Lanie slapped her hand over Will's mouth. "Be nice."

Will offered a devilish grin, then stood and hauled Lanie to her feet.

"The gang's all here," Gabriel said from the doorway.

The three turned to look at him. Under their combined scrutiny, he did manage a grin that fell rather close to his usual cocky self, but the playful gleam didn't reach his eyes, or hadn't since Declan had found him.

Though Julia had tried, Gabriel still refused to talk about what happened, insisting he didn't blame her or anyone, and that it was best to put it behind them. If not for the occasional glimmer of pain she picked up on when he lowered his guard, she'd almost believe him.

Gabriel flopped onto the couch Will and Lanie had vacated and propped his feet on the table. "So where's lover boy?"

Although Gabriel hadn't hidden the fact he wasn't ready to forgive Brody for walking out on her, he'd settled into a predictable routine of trying to get a rise out of Brody wherever possible.

"He'll be back tomorrow."

"Goody," Gabe snagged her stress ball off the table and tossed it into the air.

Julia smiled over his head as Will and Lanie headed downstairs, their bickering continued until she heard Will finally cave.

Free to focus on Gabriel, she dropped into the chair behind her desk. "How's work?"

Gabe shrugged. "The usual."

Which was a lie, but seeing the coolness enter his gaze, Julia didn't point it out. Without knowing what Cristos had done to him, they'd all agreed to give him his space.

She leaned her elbows on her desk. "Colin says he's already waiting to test the

next game.”

Gabriel grinned at that, and she knew Colin’s brief visit and questions about his business had helped taken Gabriel’s mind off those few days he’d been held by the hunters. “Where’s he off to anyway?”

“Baja.”

“Maybe I should join him.” The genuine smile was fleeting, but reassuring none-the-less.

“Just be sure to stay out of the sun, slick,” Brynn said from the doorway.

Gabriel’s smile dimmed, and he set the ball down before he stood up. “I’ll see you at home, Jules.”

For a moment, a look of hurt crossed Brynn’s face before the hunter straightened from the doorway. She’d taken the news of her father being a true-blood, one with designs on eradicating the human race in stride, which for Brynn meant revealing very little.

She sighed, and glanced back over her shoulder the way Gabe had gone. “He’s never going to forgive me for what Cristos did to him, is he?”

Julia suspected it was Brynn’s resemblance and same shade of amber eyes that had to do with Gabe’s sudden discomfort around the hunter. “He’ll come around. Sooner or later his reserve of come-ons will be overflowing and he won’t be able to help himself.”

Brynn snorted, but whether it was because she grudgingly hoped that was true or because she thought a snowball had a better chance in hell, Julia couldn’t say.

“Have you heard from Declan lately?”

Though Brynn and Declan had always had an odd relationship, the elder had decided the council could use her to help them keep tabs on the order of Orion.

Brynn shrugged. “He doesn’t seem to get that I’m not big on playing for their team anymore.” She nodded towards the ceiling. “So with you and Brody finding a bigger place, are you interested in renting out the space above the club?”

“Plan on sticking around a while?”

“Maybe.” Then with a smile that was as close to amused as Brynn ever got, she turned on her heel and left.

Julia sighed, glad to be home and knowing that things were getting back to normal. With a lot to catch up on after her absence, Julia turned on her laptop and fell back into the regular rhythm of her night.

A few hours later the music had already been shut down and the staff nearly done cleaning up, when she glanced at the door.

Brody leaned against the jamb.

A wide smile broke across her face. “You lied to me.”

He shrugged, and closed the door. “You’ve forgiven me for worse.”

“I do believe you’re sounding awfully cocky about that.” Julia stood and came round the edge of her desk to meet him. Her stomach warmed at the blatant hunger reflected in his eyes.

“Well, I have been blessed with an exceedingly compassionate life-mate.” He slipped a finger through the belt loop on her jeans and tugged her forward.

“Compassionate?” Julia mulled it over. “You know, I’m not sure that one is going to win you any points tonight.”

He leaned down and nuzzled her neck. "No? How about intelligent?"

She closed his eyes as he gently nipped her throat. "Better."

"Beautiful?"

"Getting warmer," she whispered against his jaw, shivering at the rasp of his stubbled skin against hers.

He drew back slowly, his thumb trailing down her cheek. "My only true light in a world of eternal darkness."

Her breath caught at the tender conviction in his voice. "That'll work for me."

Brody's boyish grin tugged at her heart before he added, "That one gets them every time."

Laughing, Julia punched him in the arm, but he quickly caged her wrist and imprisoned it behind her back. "If you think one good line will get you off the hook--"

Brody silenced her with a devastating kiss. "No," he assured her a moment later, his voice rich with sensual promise. "I'm just getting started."

The End