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BLOOD POOL

B. ELLA DONNA

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B. Ella Donna

Dedication

To my husband, Michael. And my sons, Christopher, Matthew and
Ryan.
You're the lights of my life.

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Last, but not least, my husband. For giving me the opportunity to write, and for believing in me when I did not believe in myself. I love you, infinity more. Beyond. Ditto.

Chapter One

Artificial light gave the three dancing figures on stage the macabre look of corpses—and Raven knew corpses. Monotonous shades of gray stretched across the dance floor, even darker in the corners where secrets hid. She should be used to it. The dreary color surrounded her daily. Still, Raven longed for the vibrant jewel tones of the autumn season. But ominous shadows were part of the ambiance of Blood Pool, a favorite local haunt.

However, these three dancing works of art were far from dead. They were very much alive, and Raven took note of that fact intensely. Smooth skin covered rippling muscles, and the silky, oiled physiques, clad in miniscule costumes, caught her attention. That was, if you could call them costumes. There wasn't much fabric used on all of them combined.

No need for an imagination here.

The dancers tonight included a scantily-clad Amazon warrior, a biker in a tight, black leather thong, and, of course, the vampire with little more than the traditional Dracula cape draped over his chiseled, ivory physique.

Tonight was Ladies' Night at Blood Pool, a treat for the eyes because that meant dancing gods: hot, sweaty, gorgeous men, full of life with healthy auras. Raven also knew the beaming glow of a vital

aura. The reds and greens pulsed around them to the beat of the music. Her preternatural sight allowed her vision to go beyond 20/20. She delighted in the sights and sounds that surrounded her.

“Hey there, Raven. Can I buy you a drink?” Solaris, a petite, magickal powerhouse, asked as she wiped down the sleek bar top.

“Yes, thanks.” Raven looked over to where some friends from the hospital played pool. Beyond the pool tables in the back rooms were the video games “Kill the Hunter”, “Blade War”, “Hell Games” and War Mongers”, to name a few. Off to the other side of the game room was the sports bar. There she spotted Greg Davis, her young assistant.

“Hi, Doc,” he mouthed, waving.

“Hi there,” she answered, grabbing some nuts from a pumpkin-shaped bowl.

The lower level was for those who liked to gamble or play cards or roulette, and there was always a poker game going on.

Smoke from cigars and various pipes filled the room. The guests at this establishment had no worries of the dangers caused by cigarette smoke, or any other smoke.

The only possible exception was the warning smoke of a fire burning their flesh.

Raven winked at Solaris. Raven’s eyes were tired from lack of sleep, overwork and not enough blood. The blood bank needed replenishment. “Hey, can you make it a double? I’m not working tonight.”

Solaris obliged. “Enjoying the view?” she teased, her cognac-colored eyes sparkling in the dim lighting. “I’ve got some type O in the back fridge—you want?”

“No, thanks, I’m trying to cut down,” Raven replied, and smiled tightly.

“You’re looking extra sexy tonight. Gonna sample the help?” Solaris teased.

“Now, you know I don’t do that anymore,” Raven answered, pouting. Well, almost never. Occasionally, when the blood lust merged with sexual need, Raven indulged in a taste.

Solaris smiled and handed her friend a Grey Goose on ice. “I didn’t mean taste in *that* way.”

“You never know, I might,” Raven teased.

She checked her lipstick in the reflection of Solaris’s magick mirror hanging on the wall. Yes, Lamai had a reflection. Being non-reflective was one of the many stereotypes she found hilarious. That along with the tale of garlic being fatal to vamps. She loved garlic and cooked with it often. That’s right, they ate food, too.

She was hungry tonight, but not for blood, though it had been a while since she’d fed the Lamai hunger.

Raven eyed a tall, sandy-haired Adonis standing at the far end of the bar. His energy was especially masculine, raw yet vulnerable. Raven liked vulnerable. It complimented her need to be in control, and in her line of work as chief medical examiner, she had to be.

Outside, the autumn winds blew off the ocean, moaning as they hugged the rooftop and whipped around the back alley. Raven’s hearing allowed her to separate the sounds that originated inside the

bar from those outside. A preternatural talent. It felt like a storm was brewing. It was hurricane season, and forecasters predicted the northeast was due for one.

“Go for it,” Solaris joked as she followed Raven’s line of sight to the Greek god-like creature. He caught her watching him, and she that found a bit unsettling. Raven was capable of many things, and one was observing without attracting attention.

She psychically probed the handsome stranger to try to get a better feel for him. He was not like her, of that she was sure. He was neither a Lamai nor a shifter. There weren’t too many hybrids in the northeast. There were fewer still on the island. Raven detested the term “hybrid”, which was what she was. It sounded to her like an automobile: safe for the environment with great gas mileage. Regardless of Raven’s objections, that’s what people called those who were half-human and half-vampire. On the other hand, most of the island inhabitants were full-blooded vampires. The island’s occupants ranged from Vampires of the Lamai clan to shape shifters, fae, sirens, witches and wizards, with a smattering of gnomes and leprechauns.

Even though this was a magickal community, there still existed some pockets of prejudice. Solaris experienced it as much as Raven, she being a full-blooded witch from Africa. However, the bias was slowly diminishing, which was why they called Mirabelle home.

Raven sipped her drink, savoring the way it warmed her insides, if only for a moment. She gazed at the handsome man through narrowed eyes as he made his way over to her. She drew him toward her, whether he realized it or not.

She was hungry.

“Okay, I know this sounds really dorky, but do you come here often?” he asked.

Raven looked up into the bluest eyes she’d ever seen. When Adonis spoke, his voice echoed of loneliness.

“Matter of fact, I do. My friend Solaris owns this place,” she answered, directing her gaze at Sol.

He puffed out his chest a bit. “I knew that. I’m a little bit psychic.” He let out a nervous laugh. “Gods, I am so pathetic,” he muttered.

“What’s ‘a little’ psychic—how little?” Raven asked jokingly, noting the easy way he stood, relaxed and slightly self-assured, with just the right amount of awkwardness.

Handsome enough to be in a Ralph Lauren commercial, he had an upper-class air about him, of fresh sea air, tanned skin and sun-streaked hair. She could imagine him jogging in slow motion down the miles of white sandy beach, wearing the Amazon warrior’s swath of suede, his well-toned muscles flexing as he ran.

Nice body. Her gaze traveled to his hands. For as long as she could remember, Raven had had a hand fetish. After observing a man’s eyes, she checked out his hands, which in this case had not seen much physical labor. He was probably an artist, a bum, or in the healthcare field.

Or he was insanely wealthy.

He smiled and revealed the sexiest dimples and whitest teeth.

“Not that little,” he said, signaling Solaris for another round. “Psychic or otherwise.” He winked as he set the record straight.

Adonis pulled over a stool and sat. Raven could tell he wanted to become more than a bar buddy. Whether his interest was merely sexual or something more would take a bit more time to determine.

“Is this a natural ability, or one you’ve practiced over the years?” Raven asked as she grabbed a handful of pretzels that sat in a bowl. The bar top, adorned festively for the harvest season, overflowed with tiny gourds, apples, pumpkins and mums.

“I didn’t inherit these gifts, if that’s what you mean. Although there are stories told by my family that my great-great-grandmother was a full-blooded gypsy from Romania, or Austria, or some such place.”

“That’s interesting. I have family from there, too. Romania, I mean. Where are you from? I mean, in the States?” Raven lifted her cocktail, watching her attractive drinking companion.

“Gloucester, originally, then Atlanta. I lived in California for a few years, too.”

Raven turned toward the young man for a moment. “Let me guess, your father is a long-liner?”

Adonis fiddled with his shot glass as Solaris grabbed the bottle to fill it again. He smiled at the bartender. “Yup, for over twenty years. He has a small fleet of boats that he uses for lobsters, but he has a crew on a boat that still goes out for swordfish.”

Listening to him while looking into those pools of blue, she saw an intensity burning behind his eyes. Before she realized it, he’d taken her hand. His skin was golden and taut. Suddenly, the catcalls, hoots and hollering that filled the air faded away. Her skin warmed to his touch. Raven’s inner alarm went off. Not too many

people were able to physically affect her this quickly. The part of Raven that people thought of as unnatural ran on the cool side of ninety-eight point six, which was quite ordinary for her and about a third of the island's population.

The bar was noisy, and Adonis had leaned in closer so Raven could hear him. "I actually worked at the CDC for a time. Then I went off to the west coast to do my own research. Creating vaccines, or at least trying to make viable ones. It was very interesting work. Tedious and challenging, it kept my mind sharp." He smelled like sugar cookies.

Something was in the air—something more than lust.

Her curiosity piqued. "What type of research?"

"I actually worked with hot agents for a while."

"Wow, lethal viruses! That's risky work. Which ones? How did you get involved with that?" Raven asked. Her mind attempted to prioritize some of the hundreds of questions she wanted to ask.

He ran his fingers through his hair and said with a sigh, "I was personally invited and I really couldn't say no. It was a great opportunity. Not too many like that come up."

"Which viruses did you work with?"

In an instant, the excitement of talking with someone who'd worked with lethal viruses was eclipsed by the sound of a deeply male and extremely sexual voice from behind the bar. Bo Wasake. "Hey, Raven."

She knew that voice intimately and turned to find her gorgeous on-again, off-again lover, Bo Wasake, standing in the shadows. Her heart skipped a beat or two. He did that to her every time. For all of

her level-headedness, when Bo was near, Raven's knees went weak and her insides turned to mush. Even after ten years.

"Hey, Boo." He got a charge out of trying to scare her whenever he had the chance, hence the nickname.

Bo had mixed blood. Delicious blood. And the thought of it made Raven's mouth water in anticipation of a taste. Pavlov's vampire.

His mother was an extraordinarily powerful witch. His father was a Lakota shaman, like Bo's grandfather and great-grandfather, and so on down the line. Somewhere, a few sprinkles of human blood coursed through his veins, or so he claimed. Raven thought he said that just to make himself seem even more appealing to her—as if that were at all likely. He was pure perfection in every way possible.

"What about you?" Adonis asked, turning toward Raven.

"Oh—I'm the M.E. for the island." Raven's gaze followed the lines of Bo's taut muscles rippling beneath his sky blue suede shirt. A sterling and turquoise belt wrapped around his narrow waist, and she envied the silver strap. She ached to encircle her legs around his hips, but the timing was all wrong.

As was his habit, he would come into her life with exploding passion then disappear for weeks. Each time he left her heartbroken and unsure of herself, a feeling with which Raven was not comfortable. She had to guard herself against this magnificent creature. This creature who thought and acted like the wolf that was so integral to his being.

They were on pause at the moment, though Bo always managed to seduce her back into his arms. Standing over six feet tall, with the proud features of his native ancestry—long, silken hair and obsidian eyes—he was an incredibly hard habit to break.

She directed her comment to Bo. “You tending bar tonight?”

He smiled. “Yeah, I’m helping Sol out for a few hours.”

“*Can I come by later?*” The words appeared in her mind, an unspoken form of communication that for some reason only Bo and Raven shared. She could never say no to him, no matter how hurt she felt. He was irresistible.

“Hey ya, sweetness,” a familiar voice called from the other side of the bar. It was Bethany Logan, and she wanted Bo’s attention now. Raven watched the redheaded woman and noticed her brown eyes flash to gold for a brief second as warning to Raven. Bethany wanted Bo for her mate. She was the alpha female in their pack. Bethany had had her chance years ago and couldn’t hold onto Bo, but she wasn’t ready to give him up yet.

Raven ignored the childish power play. She knew Bethany would be going home alone, and eventually Bethany would realize it, too.

“*Sure,*” Raven answered Bo, trying not to look as excited as she felt, grateful for the part of her that hid the sudden blush she felt rise to her cheeks. His full lips spread into a delicious grin. Gods, she hated loving him. In spite of their weeks apart, there remained a connection that refused to be severed.

Raven finished her drink and started to get up.

“You’re leaving,” Adonis said, disappointment written all over his face. “We were just getting to know one another.”

She began to feel the hunger build within her. It was time to go. “Yeah, I’m kinda tired.”

She pulled her claret leather coat off the back of the bar chair, then, like a gentleman, Adonis helped her into it. He gently pulled her waist-length black hair out from the collar. His hands grazed her behind. Raven’s tight leather pants hugged her curves. She noticed Bo watching Adonis’s every move. Raven thought she heard a low rumble erupt from him. She liked to think of Bo as her man. Her warrior.

“Can I take you home?” Adonis asked softly.

Raven’s eyes widened. “I don’t even know your name,” she said, sensing Bo’s watchful stare on her back, feeling the heat of it penetrating inside like invisible fingers. His gaze sent waves of pleasure through her body.

She relished this taste of things to come.

He looked down at his feet. “I’m sorry, you’re right, that was rude. It’s Derrick. My name’s Derrick.”

Raven felt torn. It seemed to be the theme of her entire life: torn between one world and another, one man and another. She’d had other relationships, but Bo was always there in the back of her mind, like a song that refused to stop playing. She wanted stability in her life and, up until now, Bo had been far from stable. To her, Derrick felt grounded, dependable. Raven needed dependable—she craved it like the blood lust.

The wild times of her youth had passed, and now she longed for a life she could nestle into, perhaps even have children someday. Raven had always pictured that life with Bo in it. That would require great patience on her part. He would always be a proud shifter, and when the blood called out to him, he would long to run with the pack. Raven knew how he rejoiced in the feel of the wind gliding across his black fur, the sun beating down, warming the ground beneath him.

He loved the camaraderie of the pack—the same pack that included Bethany. She still had her sights set on raising a family with Bo as well, and she made that crystal clear.

“I’ve got my car,” Raven said. “I’m pretty tired.” Derrick was a tempting morsel of male sexuality.

Derrick smiled. “I’ll walk you to it.” When he put his hand on the small of her back, she felt a jolt. A snap of energy passed between them.

“Goodnight, Solaris, Boo.” Raven turned to look into Bo’s deep sable eyes. *“I will see you later.”*

“Later,” Bo replied.

As the two stepped outside, the frosty October winds blew across the Atlantic and harshly slapped their faces, a reminder that winter would soon be on its way to Mirabelle Cove, which was situated eight miles off the coast of Massachusetts. The night was clear and crisp with pinpoints of lights in the sky. Some of the trees that had shed their colorful leaves reached skeletal arms to the heavens as if attempting to pluck a few glittering jewels.

At night, one couldn't appreciate the painted landscape Mother Nature provided this time of year. Once more, in the dark, everything looked grey.

Barn owls screeched in the distance, and kamikaze bats flew across the purple sky. Raven shivered. It wasn't from the cold. Her hunger was awakening.

"I hope I can see you again. I would've wanted to spend more time with you tonight," Derrick said as they braced themselves against the wind. They stood next to Raven's car.

In heels, she was five feet seven inches, and Derrick still had at least six inches on her. The cold didn't affect her much, though she could see Derrick shivering underneath his Irish knit sweater. *Expensive taste.*

"I'd like that, too," she admitted to her new acquaintance. There was no doubt she was attracted to him. It had been too long since she'd lain in another man's arms. *It would serve Bo right if I left with this man, after all the times he's picked up and disappeared.*

But she knew in her heart she couldn't do it.

Derrick shifted his weight from one foot to the other. "I know it's none of my business, but I sensed something between you and the bartender, Bo."

Hmm. She laughed. "You *are* psychic." Her gaze darted away from his intense glare.

His head dipped down. "Am I wrong?" He leaned in as he rested his hands, warm despite the cold, on her shoulders.

Damn, I can't do this. She wanted to kiss him. *Tell him about Bo. Tell him he's right.* Her body raged with the lust for blood and sex. In the middle of the frosty October winds, she fought the attraction. The sound of his heartbeat pulsed in her head. His scent was intoxicating.

The desire would take over soon. She could see the rush of his blood coursing through his veins, almost taste it. She swallowed hard.

He must have sensed that.

Tell him. She whispered, "No..." His lips were on hers, and he pulled her into his embrace. Raven's head throbbed as the hunger grew, and she kissed him back, pressing herself against him, feeling his desire. Her lips parted, and she tasted him fully before breaking contact.

"You're gorgeous," he murmured.

No. No. No. Get away. Go home.

The music from inside the bar pounded louder in her head as customers opened the back exit doors and raced to their cars, clutching one another against the cold.

"Let me take you home, Raven," he pleaded.

A war raged inside her head. *Go. No, stay. Take him. You want him.*

Raven hated herself right then, but she couldn't help herself. The hunger was winning over self-control. She kissed him, this time taking his hand and placing it between her legs where her desire pooled. He did the same, and she felt his erection through the blue denim. Her body flooded with warmth. *Feels so good.*

She silently cursed Bo for staying away so long.

A moan escaped Derrick's lips as his other hand slid under her jacket and palmed her breast. She wished it was Bo's hand, his lips.

Finally she spoke, her voice raw. "Shit! I can't...I'm sorry." She stepped back from him, her face burning, her gaze cast downward. Her thick lashes hid the change beneath them.

Her eyes always gave her away, turning from their natural smoky color to icy silver. Desire did that to her as the Lamai part of her took over.

He spoke softly. "I know what you are...who you are, and it's all right. I want to...I need to..."

She turned her head away from him. "I—I can't. I'm sorry," she said. She willed her body to return to its human features. Her incisors, which had begun to lengthen, retracted.

He stood there in the cold, looking like a lost little boy.

I let this go too far. "I'm sorry," she repeated.

Raven got into her car and watched as he headed back into the bar.

You're such a tease, Raven. This time it was her inner voice scolding.

After a long day and even longer night, Bo entered Raven's home. He was comforted by the familiar surroundings of her place. Seeing the little things she kept around like her favorite vase or scented candle helped center him.

He had seen too much horror for a man so young. For fifteen years, he'd worked in law enforcement and seen events that

belonged in nightmares. And that didn't include what he'd witnessed running with the pack.

Making a conscious effort to leave thoughts of death at the door Bo made his way down the hall, undressing as he went.

He slipped between the sheets in the early morning, his skin cold from the brisk winds outside. His arms wrapped protectively around Raven's tiny waist from behind. "*Tewahila...*"

"I love you, too," she murmured sleepily.

And then there were no words. He was ready to bring her to a place where few mortals ever traveled, lost in the passions only he could provide. Bo could be free with her, entirely uninhibited. She had no need to hide her inner nature from him. And he had no fear of losing himself with her. They could be exactly who and what they were with each other, passionate and sometimes violent. It was their nature.

His hands traveled up toward her breasts and cupped them gently. She felt the strength in his powerful muscles. Bo's legs wrapped around her and his lips nipped at her neck. His wandering hand squeezed her buttocks as he ground his hips against her backside. A faint moan escaped her lips and she spread her legs to welcome him inside. She was visibly on the edge and couldn't take much more foreplay, but he wanted to enjoy her first. She turned to face him, placing his hand between her legs.

"I hunger for you..." he whispered, his voice gravelly.

She smiled coyly. "I've been here all along."

"Silence," he commanded and covered her mouth with his. Their lips parted and tongues teased. His lips worked their way

down her neck, his cheek resting upon her throat where he felt her artery pulsing. He scraped his teeth lightly across her shoulder and down toward her breasts. Raven clenched the sheets as desire welled within her, focusing on the sacred mound between her upper thighs.

“Easy, my love...” he taunted her. “I’ve waited a long time for this, too.”

She groaned. “Too long, you stayed away too long. I want you inside me...fill me up...”

His lips curled in a wicked grin. “Soon.”

He explored her skin with his mouth and tongue, teasing her. Tenderly, he bit her inner thigh, and the sounds of her pleasure filled his ears as she made a cat-like purr. He licked her between her legs, the wolf part of him emerging to possess his mate and to pleasure her. Bo held her still and forced her to allow his attention. She was moist and ready for him, and he was hard. Bo had been walking around with an erection ever since he’d seen her at Blood Pool earlier that night.

“Now...please...I ache...” she begged.

He lifted his head from between her legs and smiled with a devilish glimmer in his eyes, eyes that shone with a spark of gold. His mouth suckled and laved her skin as she writhed in agonizing bliss.

Bo knew the peak of passion was merely a moment away, and he brought her to the precipice. His tongue gently stroked her tiny pearl hidden within the folds of her silky skin. She thrust her hips upward, and he felt her climax as wave after wave of orgasm shook her. He wanted to dissolve into the sensations.

He took her hand and wrapped it around his sex. “It’s your turn...” he whispered.

Raven’s body trembled with the aftershocks of his ministrations, her fangs extended in excitement. She was beyond rational thought. She tried to wiggle her hips down toward his erection and guide him inside her. His fingers played with the folds of her skin, and he guarded the entrance.

“Not yet...” he moaned as she began stroking him.

“You’re not playing fair,” she whimpered.

“I’m not playing at all, love.” He kissed her hard as he wrapped an arm around the back of her neck, pulling her to him while her hand gently stroked his sex. Her thumb caressed its silky tip and worked down to where his jewels awaited their turn to be seduced.

She looked into his eyes. “Okay, then...”

Bo watched as she kissed her way slowly down his body, taking a detour at his chest. It was her turn to tease as she covered every inch of him with her lips and tongue. She brought Bo to his knees. He clung to the cushioned headboard, arched his back and pushed his hips forward, waiting for her velvety mouth to encircle him. She could sense he ached for her, but she turned the tables on him. She wanted to play.

One hand cupped his scrotum as the other taunted his cock. All the while, she tortured him with petal-soft kisses, licking him like a soft swirl ice cream cone. She savored every mouthful, enticing him with her lips.

She raised her head and glanced up at him, still stroking his cock. “You’re on fire, my sweet.” She smiled seductively. She

grabbed her glass of ice water on the nightstand and took a sip. One tiny sliver of an ice cube remained. She kept it on the tip of her tongue and took him once more into her mouth, sliding the ice up and down his shaft before it melted.

“I’m going to explode, my love...” He let a groan escape, and it soon became a howl. “You feel so good!” His eyes were golden orbs flecked with crimson. His hips rocked.

“No, you won’t. Not until I tell you to.” She looked up at him right before she took one testicle into her cool mouth. Her tongue flicked at it, sucking gently. She took in the other while massaging his shaft. Bo made a guttural sound that emanated from deep within him.

Her hand went around his firm butt, and she pulled him closer as she plunged her mouth over his sex and took him fully into her mouth. She swirled her tongue around the juncture between his satin crown and thick shaft. He tasted exquisite.

“Oh gods, Raven! Now...I want you.”

Raven pulled away and looked into his eyes. She smiled, knowing Bo couldn’t handle the temptation any longer. She playfully licked the tip of his cock. Her hands massaged his thighs while she teasingly nipped and kissed his engorged sex.

She felt a sense of power over him and wasn’t ready to relinquish it so soon. He held the power over her when he decided to leave her and run with the pack. She could never be certain what was going on in those woods when the animal blood took over. Was he rutting with Bethany? The way she strutted around town, she certainly acted like it.

Now it was Raven's turn. She got up from the bed.

"Cante skuye, what..."

"I'll be right back." As promised, she returned in a flash.

Raven hopped back into bed with a bottle of absinthe. She watched Bo squirm. She dribbled some on his erection, and his cock jerked toward her. She placed some on her nipples.

The powerful magick infused in the brew would take her and Bo on a sexual journey neither would want to end, lasting for hours, reaching the point of climax then slowing the pace. As their skin absorbed the absinthe, it magnified the sensations to the tenth power.

"Mmm." Bo let out a long sigh.

Raven placed the bottle down and began lapping the absinthe off of Bo's shaft. She knew the sensations she created felt as if a hundred tiny flames were licking him. He turned his head toward the pillow and let out a groan.

"Mmm... So good," she said. Her lips were slightly numb from the straight absinthe as she showered his body with a blaze of kisses.

He sat up, took her by the shoulders and placed her on her back. He began to kiss the green liquor off of her breasts, sending shockwaves through her. She was certain he would slide right inside her and ease her aching. She waited longingly for it, begging him to fill her. *Ah, there*, she thought as she felt the tip of him enter. Then he abruptly stopped.

She wrapped her strong legs around him, ready to press him farther inside, but he held tight. Her eyes turned to crystals, and her skin paled to translucency.

“I’m waiting...” he said with a smile.

“Oh, you suck...” she whined aloud.

He laughed. “No. You do.”

“You want more?”

He used his powerful arms to steady himself as he kissed her earlobe and whispered, “You were going to tell me when, sweetness. I’m just waiting to hear the words.”

He continued leaving soft, breathy kisses around her ear and neck. Her head pounded with lust. Blood lust, and lust for Bo.

Her incisors nicked at his neck, just enough to break the skin. Then she lapped the blood that trickled out. When she felt him relax a bit, she tightened her legs around him and pushed him deeper inside her. Thrusting her hips to meet him, she wanted to turn to mist and truly merge.

The words came out of her mouth, uncensored. “I love you,” she whispered, sliding him out, teasing and giving him a little taste of what was yet to come. She scattered kisses over his face and neck. His hands caressed the small of her back and pulled her hips toward his hard sex. Raven’s slender fingers slid down to his narrow waist. She kissed every inch of skin along the way and licked at the tiny nicks she made in his copper skin.

“I have to have you now, Raven.”

She claimed the sacred area, his inner thigh, as hers. The mere act of sucking his blood from that tender spot could cause him to

climax. She switched positions, taking him once more into her mouth, careful not to nick him. Her teeth grazed over the length of him, and his body squirmed in spasms. As he thrust forward, her tooth nicked his skin, and she tasted his blood in her mouth. Instinct took over, and she began sucking his blood. Bo slammed his fists on the bed.

“Going to...come,” he ground out.

The intense orgasm threatened Raven’s slim grasp of reality. She tumbled into pure bliss. Her hand gently held his cock at its base and intermittently added slight pressure to it, causing the blood to ooze. An animal sound escaped her lover as he rode the waves of pleasure she provided.

His blood was sweet, like May wine. She was lost in his heady scent and taste, her body racked with desire for him as the blood cast its spell on her psyche. In the distance, she heard him moaning in delight as his hips writhed beneath her lips.

She drank on, murmuring, “*Meu dragoste...*”

In the depth of the hunger, the two became voracious lovers. It was unlike any experience she’d ever had. She timed her actions perfectly. They danced the dance to perfection. Her lips traveled downward, tenderly biting and taking in his blood while her hand massaged the base of his cock. A rumble emanated from deep within his chest.

“Now!” he demanded.

She reveled in the feeling of being in control. Raven knew what he wanted, what he needed, and she planned to give it to him. And he would never forget. She licked his blood from her lips.

Finally, she straddled Bo, sliding him inside of her—but just a bit. Then she pulled up.

“Oh, gods, Raven, I’ve missed you...” He tried to ease her down, but she hovered just above the tip of his shaft.

His eyes were almost all red now, and she felt his passions cresting. The air surrounding them was electric, pulsing with the beat of their hearts. The blood had quenched her lust enough to hold her over for a few more moments. Soon they would both be past the point of no return, and their animal natures would take command.

“I love you,” he said, obviously desperate to be inside of her. “I haven’t been with anyone since you, my love. Forgive me for staying away. You know you own my heart. Love me, Raven...”

He held her, pushing her down as he thrust deep inside. Raven’s skin, ivory against his tanned form, glimmered in the darkness. A growl resonated from within him, and she felt the same hunger. It inundated her. He stared into her silver eyes, and she saw everything he did, even experienced his emotions.

Still inside her velvet sheath, he turned Raven over onto her back and looked down into her loving eyes. Their gazes locked. His hot, hungry lips grazed her neck, wanting a taste. His tongue swirled upon the spot where he could drink, his hips slowly rocking against her. Back and forth.

“*Mine.*” He claimed her.

“Yours,” she answered.

“*I mean it.*”

“So do I.”

“No other will ever have you and live. No playful flirting. Mine.”

“Only yours. Go ahead...” She moaned. Her incisors extending further from the excitement, her hips rose to meet his. She moved faster beneath him. The hunger was in control. Her hands clasped his shoulders, and her fingers dug into his flesh. She rode another wave of pleasure.

Faster still she writhed. “Harder.”

The blissful pressure built. His cock slid in and out to the rhythm of their hearts. He was insatiable.

The growl from within him intensified into a howl as his hands found the small of her back and he lifted her closer. She wanted him to get deeper inside, making sure she’d come at the same time as he. Her head lolled back against the pillow, exposing her neck to him as he broke her skin with his sharp teeth. Raven wouldn’t trust any other shape shifter to taste of her blood. The passions were too intense, and he could rip out her aorta.

“Oh, Mighty Hekate!” she cried.

Flesh slapped against flesh as Bo drew her blood into his mouth, his hands pushing her ass up while he drove himself into her hot core. His fingers caressed her between her buttocks. Her muscles clamped around his cock. Her arms pulled him down. With her legs wrapped around his waist, she arched toward him.

“Harder,” she begged.

Her body convulsed with a powerful orgasm of seemingly endless waves. She gave of herself and took from him simultaneously as they climaxed. A delightful rush emanated from

within her and spread wildly as every neuron fired and the world went stark white. Raven couldn't tell who cried out louder. Bo grabbed the back of her head as he thrust his teeth deeper into her neck, sucking the blood that tasted like wine, causing them both to climax once more as his body shuddered with his release.

“Be mine, Raven. Always. I want you...”

“I want you, too.”

She kept him hard and toyed with him mercilessly until he begged to spill his seed within her once more. Their lovemaking lasted for hours as they reached the point of climax then slowed the pace. Raven understood when he'd reached the point of no return and, in the ultimate synchronicity, they found release, together—over and over—until the dawn came.

Chapter Two

An incessant ringing in Raven's ears caused her to lash out at the alarm clock.

"Phone..." Bo murmured, turning over in bed.

"Yeah..." she mumbled into the receiver.

"We need you here, Doc." Bianca's voice cheerily echoed through the phone.

Raven squinted, trying to see the alarm clock. It was noon.

"Shit! Give me thirty minutes."

Reluctantly, Raven rose from the warmth of the bed. Bo reached for her, but missed as she headed for the bathroom.

He called sleepily out to her, "You want me to make some coffee?"

"Go back to sleep, Boo," she yelled from the shower.

He answered with a loud snore.

Raven showered quickly, thinking back on the night's long love making session. She wished Bo was in the shower with her. She felt the hunger returning. Her nipples pebbled as she ran the loofa across her breasts.

Stop. You have to get to work.

The coroner's office at Seacrest Hospital was less than fifteen minutes from Raven's home, making it possible for her to arrive precisely thirty minutes from the time of Bianca's phone call. The offices bustled with activity on the main floor. Raven thanked her lucky stars every day that her office occupied a corner of the building on the street level.

She had windows. In spite of what she was she loved the day almost as much as she did the night.

Seacrest specialized in diseases that affected the magickal natives on the island. Mirabelle Hospital catered to the mortals.

Seacrest had started as a small clinic many years ago, run by the healers on the island. Since then, generous benefactors had added onto the original building, creating an eight-storey, up-to-date facility.

"Good morning, Doc," Bianca said, handing her a large mug of coffee scented with cinnamon.

Smoothing her navy skirt, Raven reached for the brew. "Morning. Thank you, Bianca. You know, you make the best coffee." She took a hungry gulp, still trying to wipe the cobwebs from her mind.

Bianca glowed. "It's my secret ingredient."

Raven held onto the arms of her chair and eased into the seat.

"What is it?" she asked. She placed her mug on top of her desk and took a few moments to compose herself. She opened her desk drawer and pulled out a compact mirror, hoping to finish her hurried application of make-up. She applied a soft amount of blush to her

cheeks, just enough to give her a little sprinkle of color. Not that the corpses minded.

Bianca chuckled. “If I tell you that, boss, you’ll have no need of me.”

Finished, she replaced the compact in her drawer. “Never. You’re my right-hand goddess.” Raven sighed. “Okay, where’s the body?” she asked, sipping from the oversized mug.

“Room one.”

“Who brought the body in?” Raven rose and headed for the exam room. On the way, she stopped to readjust the strap on the low-heeled pumps she’d grabbed on her way out the door. They pinched her feet. Just another annoyance that seemed to be building up to something. What? She wasn’t sure.

“Davis brought it in,” Bianca said, lagging behind her. “He did an abbreviated preliminary.”

Raven grabbed her lab coat and headed into the cold autopsy room. “Do we have an I.D. on the body?” She never heard the answer. The light shone directly on the familiar, handsome face. She knew who it was.

His eyes, glazed over in death, were still blue.

Adonis!

Raven tensed. “Bianca!”

Bianca stood right behind her, peering over her shoulder. Desperately, Raven tried to hide her shock, but Bianca knew her too well.

“You all right? Do you know him?” Bianca’s eyes were wide with wonder.

“Yes. Please get Tracy to do the blood workup—ASAP. Thank you.” Raven quickly surveyed the body. No outward trauma that she could see. He was dressed in the same blue jeans, shirt and sweater as when she’d seen him last night. Lying there, he looked so peaceful.

“I just spoke to Tracy. She’s on her way here from the hospital,” Bianca answered.

“Did Davis take the x-rays already?” she asked impatiently while staring at the man she’d kissed less than twenty-four hours ago. “Did anyone check for trace evidence?” Raven’s heightened senses kicked up to overdrive. All she could think about was how young Adonis was and what a waste. He had so much to live for, so much promise.

“Yes. The films are on the desk. And no, I don’t think Davis went over him for trace yet. Are you sure you’re all right?”

Raven spun around and caught the look of concern in Bianca’s soft brown eyes. “Yes—yes, of course. Why hasn’t the body been cleaned? What’s Davis doing?” She fought to concentrate.

“He’s in radiology. He took a few more films. Davis just brought the body in. He thought you’d like to take a look at the corpse first, before he did the full prelim. He said he’d be right back with the other films.”

Raven walked over to check the equipment she would need for the autopsy. The dissecting scissors, forceps, scalpel blades, bone shears and saws all seemed in order and sterilized.

“The body is Derrick. His name is—was—Derrick. I don’t know his last name,” Raven stammered. *Damn. When did this happen and who could have done this to him? And why?*

Finally, Bianca kept still.

Raven walked over to get the films and flipped on the light box hanging by the metal table that acted as a makeshift desk. Looking from one x-ray to the next, she already knew there would be no internal trauma. Her preternatural vision showed her that. Raven’s sixth sense informed her he’d lost some amount of blood.

But how?

Her mind raced as she fired off more questions for her assistant. “Who from the sheriff’s office has this case? Bianca? When was he brought in?”

Bianca tripped as she tried to stay out of Raven’s way. “I’m sorry, boss, Joe Menendez. H-how do you know this guy?”

Raven was rattled. The room seemed to close in on her as thoughts of what might have happened snuck into her mind. *Maybe if I’d brought him home with me, he would still be alive.* Then Bo’s face appeared in her mind, and she knew the evening progressed just as it should have, how it was meant to have been.

Yet no puncture marks were visible. So how did he lose blood?

“I met him at Blood Pool last night,” she said. “You said Joe Menendez is working this case?”

Bianca’s face flushed at the mention of Detective Menendez. Raven knew she harbored an enormous crush on the cop. “That’s where Joe said they found the body. Solaris found him behind the bar.”

Joe Menendez was a good detective, but a human. His family tree boasted a bruja here and there, a fact he tried to deny. He and Bo often worked cases together. Raven wondered why Bo wasn't on this case...unless...he was, and that was why he'd been so late last night.

The arrival of Tracy Polchek, forensic pathologist, jolted Raven back to the present. Tracy was a fifty-two-year-old fount of knowledge. Raven trusted her implicitly, enough so that Tracy occasionally supplied Raven with healthy blood when the blood bank was short on supplies. Raven didn't require it often, but when she did, Tracy always came through with a pint or two.

"What have we got here?" Tracy asked, hands on hips. Her eyeglasses hung from a crystal-beaded chain that clinked against yards of colored necklaces. She wore a long broomstick skirt and a worn out pair of Birkenstocks. Tracy's quintessential hippy-chick attire disguised the brilliant woman lurking beneath.

Raven took the chart from Bianca. "Male, approximately twenty-eight years old, six-feet-one-inch tall..." Raven checked the paperwork. Not much was filled in. "One hundred sixty-one pounds. I'll need a full tox screen, Trace.

"Bianca, get Davis in here to do the prelim, please," Raven continued as she walked out of the autopsy room and headed toward her private office. "Bag his clothes," she called over her shoulder.

She opened the door and stepped into her small office. Diplomas lined the peach-shaded walls of the room. She'd graduated from Harvard Medical School, board certified in anatomic, forensic and clinical pathology—the perfect career choice

for one so intimately and intrinsically linked with death. Wooden shelves also adorned the walls of her office. She stared at the plethora of dioramas on the shelves: crime scenes with blood-splattered walls and miniature dolls lying in pools of dried blood, albeit fake blood. At that particular time, Raven thought it would help the trainees to learn about the different types of death scenarios, to foster their ability to analyze a crime scene. It had worked.

Buttery rich leather met her sore bottom as she thought back to Bo's relentlessness in bed the night before. The memories warmed her inside. Raven craved him more than blood, but she could not—would not—reveal too much of her heart's desires. Not yet.

Sitting at her desk, she refocused on the situation evolving in the autopsy room. She tried to recall exactly what Adonis had said to her the night before. Raven came away with the impression that his interest had more to do with her being a Lamai rather than her potential as a sexual partner. He'd said he knew "who she was" and that he "needed to"...what? To tell her something, ask a question, kill her?

Perhaps Solaris had some useful information about the stranger in the exam room. A knock on the door signaled that they were ready for Raven. She gulped down the rest of her coffee and headed back to room one.

Three blank faces stared at her as she entered the icy room. Wide eyes and stunned expressions locked onto her. A single light shone down on the table.

It was empty.

Raven whirled around. “Who took the body?” she asked. No one answered. Everyone just kept staring. “Bianca, please tell me, where is the body?”

Bianca shook her head and shrugged, her face as pale as her lab coat.

Raven began to pace. “Davis?” She walked over to the now empty table. “It didn’t get up and walk away, did it?”

He looked over at Raven. “I-I came to do the preliminary report for you, b-but when I got here, it—he—was...gone,” the young man stuttered.

“Gone? What do you mean gone?”

“I just came in to draw blood, and Davis was freaking out,” Tracy whispered, turning toward Raven, nervously fingering her pixie-styled hair. The silver bracelets that adorned her arm clanked as she placed her hands back on her hips.

“Shit!” Raven spun on her heel and marched toward her office.

Davis ran after her. “Raven...Doctor Strigoi?” he called to her. “Should I call security?”

Jamming her hand through her hair, she took a deep breath in an attempt to calm down. “Good idea,” she snapped, slamming the door and grabbing the phone. She punched in Bo’s cell number, hoping he was awake by now.

Her fingers tapped the top of her desk.

“Hullo?” Bo answered.

She heard the sleep still holding him. Immediately, tension seeped out of her. “Can you come down to my office? Something’s up.”

Bo was naked, just out of the shower and trying to wake up. She knew it. They had that kind of connection. She silently wished she was there instead of smack in the middle of this disaster.

“I was going to head over as soon as I got dressed.” His voice oozed sexuality, even when his thoughts were light years from mating.

Or perhaps he only has that effect on me, she thought.

Bo cleared his throat. “What’s wrong?”

Silence. “Plenty.”

“I’ll be there as soon as I possibly can,” he reassured her.

“Great, thanks.” She let out a long sigh, pushing her hair behind her ears. She thought back to the words of love he’d whispered in that ear.

“Hey?” His voice soothed her frazzled nerves.

“Yeah, Boo?”

“I’ve missed you,” he whispered. “I wish you were still here with me.”

Raven smiled. “Me, too.”

Bianca came rushing into the office as Raven hung up the phone, practically knocking her over, her chestnut curls bouncing in every direction.

“The body is gone. It’s not here—not anywhere. The security team is still looking, but an immediate search shows nothing. What—how can that be?” Her voice lowered. “Do you think? Was he a...?”

“Lamai? No, definitely not—at least not when I was talking to him. He was human. Bo will be here soon. We’ll put our heads

together and try to figure this out.” Sitting behind her desk, Raven handed Bianca her empty mug. “Could you, please? High test.” This day was turning out to be a living nightmare, complete with zombies. *I should have stayed in bed.*

“Of course,” Bianca answered. She filled Raven’s mug.

“How are Davis and Tracy?”

Bianca walked over to the coffee maker. “As you’d expect, Tracy is taking it in stride, but Davis...” Bianca poured fresh coffee into a cup from Raven’s personal machine and took a sip.

Raven nervously cracked her knuckles. “Gary Davis came highly recommended from St. Vincent’s in New York City. He’s fairly new to the area, right? That’s about all I know. What do you think? Is he up on the lore of the island?”

“He appears to know quite a bit. He was asking me the other day whether I knew there were sirens off the coast—and about how, two hundred years ago, the Nereids came and settled here, and then the fae. I don’t think he’s gotten to the meat of the history, though,” Bianca said, peering through the blinds. Raven came up behind her and gazed at the splashes of orange and crimson dotting the trees outside. “He definitely doesn’t know about the Lykans. Hell, I don’t know much about them. Do you?”

Raven smirked. “You taught me about the Lykans. My father avoided the subject of werewolves. Why do you think Gary doesn’t know about the other demons?”

“I don’t know. He just seems to be romanticizing the whole thing: beautiful sea creatures languishing on the rocks, brushing

their hair and aiding the local fishermen. He hasn't talked about the Empusas or Keris demons, either."

Raven understood. "Hmm—the flip side. There are no love stories there. The Empusas are hideous in every sense of the word and, as luck would have it, Hekate has a soft side for them."

Bianca rested her hip on the corner of Raven's desk. "The Empusas have done her bidding for many centuries, but they stay away for the most part. Busy fighting with the gorgeous Keris, I suppose. Lucky for us, the patron goddess of the island has found the middle ground."

"Has Davis claimed to see any of the sirens?" Raven asked.

"No. Not that he's mentioned, and I'm fairly certain he would say something."

Bianca and Raven simultaneously noticed the red blinking light on her phone. Bianca reached for it first.

"Dr. Strigoi's office," she answered in a professional tone. "Yes, sir..." She mouthed *Mayor Dubois*.

Raven winked and held out her hand, taking the phone call. "Hello, Frank, how've you been?"

"Raven, sweetheart. I'm good. How's my favorite M.E.?"

"Chief M.E., remember? I've been better, but I guess you already know that. You heard?" Her head began to pound. This day was not off to a good start. Bianca left, closing the door behind her.

"What's this I hear about a missing body? Is he Lamai?" Frank Dubois was Raven's mentor, the only decent father figure she had in her life. Originally from New Orleans, Frank had close ties to the *bokurs*, *houngans* and *manbos* of the south. Exactly how close,

Raven wasn't sure. In spite of these connections—or maybe because of them—he and the Seacrest PD kept the island peaceful and fairly demon-free.

“Bo’s on his way, and we’re going to attempt to figure this out. Frank, I-I met the victim last night. He was alive and well when we parted ways. He did say he had something he wanted to talk to me about, but we were never able to continue the conversation.” Raven scribbled on a notepad as she recited the story of her meeting with Derrick to the mayor. Question marks filled the top half of the paper.

“Interesting. What exactly did he say?”

“Nothing, really, just that he wanted to—or rather, needed to—talk to me, and that he knew what I was. I didn’t get a chance to examine his body, obviously, but I noticed he was missing a bit of blood. Not much, and anyone else wouldn’t have noticed.”

The silence on the opposite end of the phone had her perplexed. Frank was rarely at a loss for words. “Raven, when Bo gets there, I need you two to meet me at my office.”

At that moment, Bo walked in.

“We’ll be on our way.”

Raven filled Bo in on the latest happenings at the O.C.M.E. as they headed out to his car, a sleek 1969 Ford Mustang, black and in mint condition. It had literally been owned and driven by a little old man who used it to get to the post office and the grocery store. The old man’s grandson had it in his garage for approximately twenty years and, after his grandfather passed in 1988, he sold it. Both men

maintained it meticulously. Oh, and of course, it was a convertible. Bo loved his car.

Finally able to appreciate the colors of the season, Raven took in as much of the sights and smells surrounding them as she could with the top down while they drove to Town Hall. The scent of burning leaves filled the air as the sun beat down on them. A gentle breeze ran through their hair.

Roadside stands lined the landscape, bulging with bushels of the fall harvest. Signs boasting “Fresh Baked Pies” were everywhere. It was hard to believe the strange happenings that had recently plagued the office of the chief medical examiner. Then again, it was getting closer to *el Día de los Muertos*, the Day of the Dead.

The beauty of the island, including the Victorian-style homes, quaint shops, seaside cafés and Witches Rock lighthouse, was only part of its charm. Frank Dubois insisted the residents of the town of Seacrest maintain a certain style, true to its two-hundred-year history.

Holistic healers, herbalists and astrologers along with an enormous art community—not to mention fabulous restaurants—all found their businesses thriving. There were crystal shops, art galleries, antique shops, bakeries and bookstores on almost every block. Each one was successful.

It was a festive time of the year on the island of Mirabelle Cove with the upcoming Samhain/Halloween Fair. Mardi Gras in the French Quarter had nothing on Mirabelle. The islanders partied not just for one day, but from mid-October through the New Year. Most

of the summer folk returned to winterize their homes and remained for the harvest fair, then they headed home for the holidays to be with their families and hunker down for the winter. Winters on the island could be, and often were, brutal.

Raven always looked forward to these months of celebration. She thought of years past, the amazing partying interrupted by hours of work, which eventually gave way to more partying. Memories tugged at her, more often than not of Bo. He was such an integral part of her life that nearly all memories included him.

But what she felt the strongest at that moment was the palpable passion between them. He sat next to her, guiding the vehicle down winding roads. The uncontrollable image of tearing his clothes off and taking him inside her once more played over and over in her mind. As if he read her thoughts, he looked at her and smiled.

“I could pull over,” he whispered.

She ran her hands through her hair and let out a frustrated moan. “Don’t tempt me, Boo.” She placed her hand where his thigh met his hip and rubbed gently. “Damn, but you are so tempting.”

Bo half-heartedly pulled up to the stone-faced town hall.

“*Kagi Taka*, don’t awaken the beast and then not be able to finish what you’ve started.” He winked playfully at her.

She leaned over and gave him a deliberately seductive kiss. “Who says I can’t finish?”

He grabbed her by the back of the neck and held her face close to his. “Then marry me. Let’s finish what we started ten years ago.”

Raven pulled away. “What? Where’s that coming from?”

Staring intently at her, he said, “My heart.”

Raven opened the car door and stepped out. She turned back to look into his deep, expressive eyes. “I need to process this. You know I love you.”

Taking in a long breath and holding it, he finally sighed with exasperation. “I hear a ‘but’ coming. It’s all right, sweetheart, take all the time you need. I’ll be here.” He slipped out of the car.

They walked past an assortment of brightly colored asters, mums, pumpkins and crisp, white Montauk daisies. The brilliant colors of the season offset the drab interior of the town hall offices. Bo held the door open as they headed straight for Frank’s office, giving Vivian, his secretary, a wave on the way. At least her festive desk dripped with gourds, a basket of candy and tiny scarecrows.

Frank signaled the two into his spacious office as he was finishing up on the phone. Standing just shy of six feet tall, with thick, cottony white hair and skin the color of chocolate, Mayor Dubois wore a constant expression of authority, always in control. Raven couldn’t remember the last time she saw Frank laugh aloud.

His office was plain, with little color, the only exception being a palm tree tucked in one corner. The floors were pine and the walls were a drab yellow. Raven recalled it being an antique white in days gone by. He did, however, have comfortable furniture.

A large window provided a scenic view for the mayor. Raven was aware of his tendency to daydream while staring out of it until either his secretary or a phone call forced him back to reality.

“I’ll try to be home on time for dinner, *chéri*. But don’t wait for me. See you soon.” He motioned for them to sit as he hung up the

phone. Raven noted the look of worry as it flashed across his handsome face. “I take it you’re up to speed, Bo?”

“Yes, sir, Raven filled me in. I thought I’d wait to tell you that I saw the victim at Blood Pool last night as well. He was there until approximately two a.m., alone—most of the time.” Bo stole a glance at Raven. “When Solaris and I closed, the place was empty. He obviously came back, or was brought back—and had been attacked and left for dead.” Bo twisted his white gold wolf’s head ring as he spoke.

Raven pulled her leather coat tighter around her, sensing she was about to hear bad news.

Frank looked at them. “Before I begin, I want you two to know I called Solaris earlier, and she has confirmed, psychically, the same information I’m about to share with you. It seems we’ve got a few new visitors in town. I don’t know what they’re up to yet, but it’s not good. A powerful *bokur* named *Courtier de Sang* arrived, and he’s not alone. I don’t know who or what his partners are, only that they’re powerful *sorciers*.” Frank stood and walked over to his oak and glass cabinet. It housed an assortment of trophies, behind which was hidden his secret liquor stash, which wasn’t so secret.

“Raven, a drink? Bo?” he asked. “I’d offer you some absinthe, but I’m waiting for a shipment. Emerald of the Fae is bottling up her latest batch.”

They both smiled, but declined. Raven thought of their last encounter with absinthe. Raven still had more than half of the bottle Emerald had given to her. She’d had only a few drinks and some licks from it. The pure concoction would last a long time.

“May I ask where this information about *sorciers* came from?” Raven asked. Bo looked over, shaking his head slightly as if she’d made an error in judgment by asking such a question.

“Julianna Starr,” Frank answered, tapping his fingers upon his desk while staring at the autumnal beauty outside his window.

“Owner of The Bed and Brew?” Raven asked.

“The one and only. She had a premonition, and I’ve come to trust Julianna’s visions. Her daughter, Bridget, confirmed the information along with Solaris. The mother and daughter are powerful hereditary witches. The Starrs were among the founding families of Mirabelle Cove.”

Raven shifted in her seat. “I’d heard stories that somehow our families were related, way back down the line. Julianna’s great-great-grandmother and my great-great-grandfather married and had a family.”

“Yes, I seem to recall your mother telling me the same story a long time ago. It’s through your mother’s bloodline. Your great-grandmother’s one of the children of that union,” Frank reflected, seemingly getting lost in the past. “I think that’s the Irish part, and where your mother got her green eyes.” He smiled wistfully.

Raven plucked Frank from his memories of the past and her mother. “Any specific information, Frank?” she asked, rethinking her choice not to have a brandy. It was after five...somewhere in the world.

“Just that Julianna feels trouble is coming. Big trouble of the magickal kind.”

“Do you want us to go talk with Julianna and her daughter?” Bo asked, getting up to stretch.

As Bo walked past her, she grabbed his hand in a reassuring gesture.

Raven felt Frank’s gaze on them. She and Bo were so in sync with each other. “Yes. You two get along well with Julianna, and I think she’ll share the information. Perhaps you may get more from her, even have her read for you,” he said, his voice guarded.

The heat from Bo’s hand temporarily thawed her insides. “Okay, we’ll grab a bite to eat while we’re there and see what they have to say.” She let go of his hand and stood, ready to leave.

Frank looked over at her, appearing confused as if not sure what to say or where to begin. “Raven, be careful. I don’t have a good feeling about this. Something’s been in the air, and it doesn’t feel right. Your mother has been coming to me in my dreams, giving me veiled warnings concerning you.” He put his hand on Raven’s shoulder and squeezed lightly. She saw her mother’s beautiful face in her mind, her silken, golden brown hair and green eyes. Her mother looked frightened.

Raven hugged Frank, hoping to get a clearer image of her mother. She missed her more than she let on to anyone. *Frank was incredibly lucky*, she thought. He was always telling her about some dream or another that he’d had about her mother—and yet Raven hardly dreamt of her at all.

“Someday you’ll tell me about you and my mother, won’t you?” she whispered in his ear.

“Someday. I promise.”

Chapter Three

The sun began its descent across the sky of Seacrest, the main village of Mirabelle, during Bo and Raven's meeting with Mayor Dubois. Walking outside, they noticed the intensely colored lights in radiant oranges and vibrant purples that outlined the shops and homes. Old-fashioned street lamps dotted the walkways as a small number of shopkeepers closed up for the evening. The couple strolled over to The Bed and Brew, which was located around the corner from Town Hall.

The fragrance of burning leaves was a familiar scent at this time of year. Smoke from warm fireplaces filled the autumn air as the two walked from the parking lot to The Bed and Brew. The sky was clear and the moon was waxing, every day swelling until the full phase. They both felt the pull from *la bella luna*. Bo let his arm rest protectively around Raven's shoulders as they entered the restaurant.

He wondered why she hadn't brought up his marriage proposal, but thought it best to let her mull it over. He imagined a very different response, one that included jumping for joy and smothering him with kisses—which would then, undoubtedly, lead to an incredible evening of lovemaking. Alas, that was not how it

played out, and Bo considered whether she might actually turn him down.

His family originally had wanted him to pair with Bethany Logan. Eventually, they realized his heart belonged to Raven. Regrettably, Bethany still had her canines set on Bo. Bethany made no secret of her goal to mate with Bo and become his alpha female. Bethany even told Bo that if she had to, she would tolerate the Lamai, so long as Raven knew her place as second in line.

Bo held the door open for Raven in a courtly manner and the two entered. Candles lit the oak-lined dining room of the Starrs' establishment. It was a lovely two-hundred-year-old bed and breakfast, and home of the island's first brothel. Huge hurricane lamps occupied the four corners; each had a rune symbol of protection painted on it. A large fireplace strategically placed in the center warmed the whole room. Tapestries and antique sconces lined three of the four walls, creating an air of medieval magick. A mosaic tiled bar took up the entire length of the other wall. The pub-style restaurant was always busy, and the meals were always delectable.

"How nice to see you two together," Julianna called in a singsong voice from across the room. She gestured for them to join her at the bar. "I've been expecting you, Raven. Hello, Bo."

"Julianna, always a pleasure," Bo said, pulling out a stool for Raven.

"Bo, you're as handsome as ever. You're one lucky woman, Raven Strigoi. He's scrumptious! You have any brothers as handsome and hunky as you are, doll?"

Bo flushed with embarrassment, and Raven laughed good-naturedly. There were some women, Bo noticed, that Raven tolerated flirting with her man, while others caused her incisors to extend. Bethany triggered the latter.

Julianna inspected Raven. “As always, you’re working too hard, Raven.” She bobbed her head down behind the bar and popped back up. Her copper hair was meticulously coiffed, as always. She held a large bottle of absinthe in one hand as she signaled Mordred, the bartender, to bring over three glasses.

“Jules, you never age. What’s your secret?” Raven teased, looking over the velvet-clad witch as she skillfully poured a bit of the Green Fairy over cubes of sugar into ice-cold water.

“You’re about to drink it, honey.” She laughed, her blue eyes twinkling. “The usual?”

Raven licked her lips and winked at Julianna. “You have the best steaks, of course—marinated Porterhouses, and a side of your smashed potatoes.” Raven smiled as Bo put up two fingers, his full lips curled into a sexy smile.

Julianna pushed the kitchen’s worn double door open to peek in. In the kitchen her daughter Bridget reigned as queen. “Two marinades with the works, Jet.”

Bo could sense that Raven was feeling warm and fuzzy inside as she sipped the emerald liquor. He dreaded bringing up the horrid business that brought them there in the first place. It was a lovely night, he was with Raven and they were about to enjoy a wonderful meal. However, death also seemed to be his constant companion, and he knew, eventually, that it would demand its comeuppance.

“Enough small talk for now,” Jules whispered, moving a cornucopia to the side. “You need to take care, Raven. There is serious magick—evil magick—in the air.” The crone brandished her slender hand over the three glasses filled with the absinthe. Brilliant sparks flashed above them. The fluid in Raven’s glass changed to crimson. Bo looked in both fear and astonishment at Jules.

“What are you saying, Julianna?” he asked.

The liquid turned back to green—or could it have been an illusion of the candlelight?

“I’m saying that someone is out to hurt the magickal beings of Mirabelle Cove, and Raven will be in the middle. You need to take care also, Bo.” Julianna fingered a small gourd, which poked out of her centerpiece. “I can’t see too many specifics. I’m sorry. Certain things I cannot see, no matter what magick I try to conjure. That can only mean a powerful being is using protective shields against prying eyes. I can see, though, that there will be more bodies like the missing man at your morgue, and...something unexpected is coming your way. Things that have been buried will resurface.”

Bo wasn’t surprised Raven didn’t bother to ask how Jules knew about the dead body. She was a witch, after all. Mordred, a handsome young man with strawberry-blond hair, slid their plates over. They overflowed with thick, juicy steaks, garden greens and chive-with-cheese smashed potatoes. Bo began to feel the absinthe relaxing him after a long, harrowing day. Should a mortal take a taste of Emerald’s absinthe, it would be the trip of a lifetime, but for the magickal beings of Mirabelle Cove, it had the same effect as potent liquor—a very potent liquor.

Jules stared intensely at Raven. “Did Frank tell you anything else?”

“No, nothing—is there more?” she asked.

“He told us to come speak with you. Are you certain there’s nothing more you want to tell us?” Bo probed.

Julianna sighed, appearing puzzled. “Detective, you’ll have to ask Frank. I’ll let you two eat in peace. Do you want a private table?” Jules pointed to a vacant booth in the back. The cubicle was by a window in a secluded corner, lit only by the orange scented candles on the center of the table. They decided to sit there.

“That was weird,” Raven said as they walked toward the table. “Is it me, or did it seem as if she was hiding something?”

Bo agreed. “Something is up. I’m not so certain it was that she was hiding information. I think she has information she feels...obligated to conceal.”

“You mean like a confessor, or doctor-patient confidentiality, or attorney-client privilege?”

“Yes, my love, exactly like that.” Bo stood while Raven slid onto the sleek leather seat then sat across from her.

Raven took a slice of warm peasant bread with sun-dried tomato and dipped it into the rosemary-flavored oil in a small cup on the table.

“Mm...this is fantastic. Try a piece.” Raven offered Bo a bite as she chewed the flavorful bread.

“I’ve suddenly lost my appetite,” Bo said, looking into her eyes. He wanted to protect her, to keep all the dangers of life far away from her. Realistically, he knew that wasn’t possible, but he

still held that wish nearest to his heart. Bo was a powerful man and a vicious wolf. Police training and animal instinct were his tools, and he planned to use them to their fullest capacities to shield the woman he loved from any and all predators.

Her eyes flashed like lightning. “Are you worried about *me*?”

Bo caressed the silken skin of her face. She felt soft and inviting. “You promise to take precautions? Do you have my medicine pouch?”

Raven pulled the tiny, suede beaded bag from under her blouse. “Close to my heart, Boo.” She smiled and started slicing into the meat, watching the blood ooze out and into the potatoes. “Maybe you can meet with your grandfather. I wonder if he’s had any visions. Have you spoken with him lately?”

Bo rubbed his boot against her leg under the table while she fed him a piece of meat.

“I’m due for a visit,” he said while chewing the tender porterhouse. Raven’s eyes sparkled in the candlelight. They ate the rest of the meal in silence, comfortable enough with each other to allow the quiet.

Leaves danced outside the window. “You want dessert?” he asked as he reached for her hands. His were on fire, as was the rest of his body. He was getting uncomfortable sitting so close to her and having to resist groping her.

“No, thanks.” The room began fading away, and Bo knew the time had come for them to leave. The closeness, the absinthe and his desire to look after her were all converging. Raven stood while he pulled out a hundred-dollar bill and left it on the table.

The car ride back to Raven's home was quiet, with the exception of a few indiscriminate moans. They could barely keep their hands still for a single moment. Each caressed the other. Bo couldn't tear his gaze from the woman who'd stolen his heart many years ago. Which made it challenging to drive.

He'd always thought she wanted nothing more than to marry him. But he also worried. How would the clan of shape shifters feel about their coupling? Would Raven question his ability to cope when the wild blood that surged through his veins called out for him and he disappeared, again without a word? Not to mention that Bethany would still be in the pack.

As they entered her house, their urgency grew. Only their desire existed in the dark. In one long stride, Bo moved toward her, his arms outstretched, but Raven backed away.

She tossed her jacket onto the chair nearby, walking backward toward the bedroom. He followed, flicking one button of his shirt after the other. Raven followed suit, taking off her blouse just before releasing her breasts from the lacey bra. Bo watched as she dropped it to the floor. Her breasts shone like polished ivory in the moonlight which glided through the windows.

She seductively bit her full lower lip, wiped the drop of blood that dripped onto her finger and offered it to Bo. He seized her wrist and pulled her close to him. His mouth covered hers and he tasted her blood, causing his craving to overtake them both.

Finally separating, she unbuttoned his jeans and pulled them off. She guided him to the edge of the bed and sat him down as she

slowly removed the rest of his clothes. Then she proceeded, methodically, to strip for his eyes only.

She slithered out of her navy pencil skirt, kicking it over to where he sat. She ran her hands up to her breasts and cupped them, offering a taste. As he leaned forward, she pulled back.

“I’m not finished yet,” she whispered, her voice husky.

Her finger trailed around her nipple, and he gasped as her slender digit slid down to her red lace panty. She took the elastic and ran her hand around her waist, sliding one side down, then the other. Bo’s breath was ragged, his body taut with anticipation.

Bit by bit, she wiggled out and caught the red garment on the edge of her painted toe before flicking it into his face. He smiled and breathed in her essence, moaning with delight. She stood before him in only her open-toed pumps, an ivory goddess.

His sex was hard, and she knelt before him, taking a taste.

“Lose the shoes, my love,” he whispered, moaning with the pleasure she provided between her lips. She kicked them off as she held his penis, kissing the tip then traveling up his chest with hungry lips. She nipped a spot and sucked out a bit of his blood. His hands worked their way from her bottom to her breasts, finally taking one at a time inside his mouth, playfully teasing and tasting. He felt her go limp and grabbed her. With one swift move, Bo had her on her back in bed.

He leaned, poised, ready to enter her. “What do you want from me, my love? Tell me and I’ll do it—whatever it is.”

“Love me, always, *meu dragoste*,” she panted, holding him as close as she possibly could.

“You never called me that before. I do love you. I want you to be mine, always. Marry me, bear my children, be my mate.”

A smile reached across Raven’s face. “I’ve always been yours. Take me. Don’t ever leave me,” she murmured, pushing him deep inside her, pushing herself upward to meet him in rapture and delight. Despite the fact she was half Lamai, he felt her warmth as he joined with her. He couldn’t imagine his life without her in it.

They tussled between the blankets of Raven’s bed, trying desperately to merge with each other completely.

“I want us to work this time, *cante skuye*. Promise me we’ll make it work,” he murmured in her ear as he plunged deeper inside her. Her eyes were taking on the silver hue that indicated she was near orgasm.

“You know I’m yours,” she moaned.

She licked at the spot on his chest where she’d extracted some of his blood. His hunger for Raven surpassed all other feelings.

He took her head gently between his hands and delved into the seat of her soul with his spirit. Their gazes locked onto each other, soul to soul, they united.

“Why did you want to be with that other man, then? At Blood Pool, I felt your emotions.” His heart went cold as he thought about the way she’d acted.

“You felt only my hunger, *meu dragoste*,” she confessed.

“Hunger for me and only me,” he said, half-pleading, half-demanding, and then he kissed her. He covered every part of her with his energy possessing her. His lips traveled across her neck and

down to her breasts. As his tongue flicked at her hardened nipples, she arched backward, her fangs extended onto his exposed neck.

“Do it,” he commanded.

“I’m afraid.” She ground her hips feverishly into his. A tear escaped her eye. Her lips were swollen from the force of passion that raced between them as they nibbled and kissed.

“Now, Raven,” he pleaded.

She bit down into his neck. His body spasmed and his life force poured into her.

“You’ve always been my love, since the beginning,” Bo crooned. “Marry me.”

She swallowed his blood. “I will,” she answered.

Raven merged with him so that there could be no doubt. Her soul entered his heart. At the point of climax, there was only love.

The phone rang, breaking the silence of the early morning.

“I hate to bother you again, Doc. We have another body. Looks to be the same situation as yesterday. No outward sign of trauma, but he *is* dead. Davis picked him up early this morning,” Bianca reported as Raven wiped the sleep from her eyes.

She propped her head in her hand as she lay on her side. “Are you certain he’s dead?”

“Well, Davis pronounced him at the site. By the way, it was at The Bed and Brew this time.”

Shock coursed through her. Someone was trying desperately to send her a message. It had to be—first Blood Pool, and then The

Bed and Brew. Both were places where Raven and Bo had been earlier in the evening.

Raven sat up in bed as Bo's arm encircled her waist, pulling her toward him. She felt his erection hard and ready for her.

"I'll be right there." Raven hung up the phone.

"Where do you think you're going?" he murmured, grasping her bottom.

She grabbed the edge of the bed with one hand and held herself steady with the other as he entered her from behind. His hair tickled her back while he nipped at her neck. The urgency of his lovemaking showed her how he wanted to claim her.

She abandoned all thought, hurtling down the road to ecstasy once more with him.

Davis put the final few stitches into the John Doe as Raven typed up the autopsy report. John had lost approximately four liters of blood. How? Well, that question wouldn't be so easy to answer. Raven noticed a puncture mark by the femoral artery and noted it in the autopsy report. Whatever happened, whoever did it went right for a main artery. It was a single puncture mark, not a bite mark.

Detective Joe Menendez witnessed the autopsy.

"Let's get an I.D.," Raven said. "Fingerprints and dental records, please."

Tracy ordered a full tox screen, and Raven and Davis reviewed the x-rays numerous times. No trauma caused this death—at least, no visible external or internal trauma. It had taken five hours to perform the routine autopsy. Raven had supervised Davis.

“Good night, all,” Raven said as she made her way out into the late afternoon sun. She wanted to stop at the farm stand before heading home. She craved a caramel apple pie, and Nigella’s Herbarry and Farm Stand made the best. Nigella was a dear childhood friend who knew all of Raven’s secrets. Nigella also happened to be Bianca’s sister.

Raven started her car, a cherry-red Nissan Altima, and adjusted the rearview mirror after quickly applying a coat of mascara. Something was off. Making her alterations to seat positioning and mirror placement, Raven suddenly noticed she had company, and he was hungry.

Blue eyes stared her down. “Drive, okay? I’m not going to hurt you.” His voice was scratchy and unsteady.

She chuckled. “Me? You’re not going to hurt me?” Her incisors were sharp and long at this point, the adrenaline rush causing them to extend. Her eyes turned platinum. Raven looked back at him. She realized the identity of the man hunched over in her back seat. Adonis.

“Oh, gods! Derrick! What happened to you?”

“I was hoping you could explain it to me.” He wiped his palms on his pants, but he kept perspiring. “I don’t know. We have to go somewhere safe so I can talk to you. Not your place—your boyfriend will be there.” His eyes darted back and forth, and he kept looking behind himself, as if expecting to see someone following. The handsome man from the other night had disappeared, replaced with this pale and anxious one.

She thought of Bo's schedule for the coming week. "Bo's working tonight," she said, gazing back at him through the mirror. He looked awful. His skin was pasty and discolored. The whites of his eyes were yellowed and bloodshot.

"No, he's *supposed* to be at work, but he's not... That little psychic talent I had has improved vastly since we last saw each other," Derrick said, rubbing his red-rimmed eyes.

Raven drove to the water's edge by Three Maidens Marina and parked at the end of the lot. She shut off the engine and turned. His aura was blotchy and grey. "Okay, here we are. Talk."

He became suddenly still. "Am I...like you now? I thought I was dead. I don't remember much of anything."

Her heart went out to him. She'd witnessed only a few humans transform into Lamai. It did not appear to be a pleasant change.

"What does your spidey sense tell you?" she asked.

He looked at Raven with an odd expression. She'd aimed for humor and missed by a long shot.

"My psychic sense is telling me I'm in deep shit. Evil shit. You're somehow involved, but I don't know any more than that. I wanted to talk to you the other night. I had a dream about you, and it wasn't good. You were in trouble, big trouble, life-and-death trouble," Derrick rambled on. "Now, I can't remember much of anything."

"Me? Life-and-death? That's kinda hard. You see I—I can't die." Raven pursed her lips and shook her head, hoping to convince him she was an immortal.

Shrugging, he said, “You’re only half-vampire. I thought you were still vulnerable.”

“True, but my father is one of the most powerful vampires around and, although he looks perpetually forty, he’s old—hundreds of years old, maybe even older. He won’t tell me. You could say I have all the benefits of being human, without the pesky threat of death.”

Of course, Raven could die, but not many people knew under which circumstances, and she preferred it that way. Most Lamai guarded that secret diligently. They held a great deal of contempt for those night creatures that gave interviews revealing Lamai vulnerabilities to mortals.

Derrick ran his hand across his sweat-soaked brow. “Where is your father?” he asked, his voice strained.

Raven huffed. “I don’t know. It’s better that way. Better for him, and better for me.”

“And your mother? Is she any part vampire, too?”

“No, she’s dead,” she said bluntly.

“Oh. Mine is, too. Sorry.” He leaned back and closed his eyes, wincing from the pain. She knew the transformation was ravaging his insides. “How did your mother and father—h-how were you...?”

Raven was slightly amused. It was a common question, and she’d had it asked of her more times than she could remember.

“I was conceived like any other human. I carry my father’s DNA. Like all species, ours is designed for survival. Usually, the mitochondrial DNA comes from the maternal side, but when a vampire male mates with a human female, the father’s DNA is

passed automatically to the child. It's the opposite of humans. Why all the questions?"

He coughed violently before catching his breath once more. "*Courtier de Sang* is hell-bent on figuring a way to fi— He— blames..." A sudden shortness of breath stopped Derrick from speaking. The mottling on his face turned an intense magenta. He grabbed at his neck as if trying to pry a pair of hands off of his throat. Raven jumped out of the car and joined him in the back, clearing his airway, feeling for a pulse. It was thready and irregular. The changes were well under way within him. Somehow, someone had infected him with vampire blood.

She knew all the resident Lamai on the island, and each had this or her own method of quenching the immortal thirst. A few traveled to the mainland and helped to clean up the neighborhoods, so to speak. Others were past the phase of needing to feed, and still others had concocted a brew that came from animals due for slaughter. Then there was talk of a synthetic blood soon to become available. Raven had Bo, or Tracy's supply from the blood bank.

Raven tried comforting him. "I'm going to get you to the hospital, Derrick." She hopped back into the driver's seat and peeled out of the parking lot, heading straight for Seacrest Memorial Hospital.

"I think I need blood," he whispered.

"Try to relax."

"This feels so weird..."

"I know. Once we get you to the hospital, I can see about getting you some blood," she promised.

“How? How can you get me blood?”

“Harvesting blood has become part of the ritual at our Halloween feast. It’s a sacred act that’s taken place on the local farms for hundreds of years. Have you ever attended the ritual?” she asked, trying to keep his mind off the pain.

“N-no. This was going to be my first time.”

“The ritual also insures a plentiful harvest. All the farmers participate—Lamai, fae, shifters, witches and humans. The surplus of blood is stored at the hospital for local Lamai. Don’t worry.”

His face relaxed a bit.

“None of the Lamai I know drinks from islanders. Besides, the counsel forbids the Lamai to transform humans without express permission and miles of blood red tape.”

Derrick’s face tensed once more. “He’ll...k-kill...me...he knows,” he croaked, still grasping at his throat. “He’s very powerful... I—I...”

“Why would he kill you? You know what, let’s save this talk for later. It’s normal to feel the way you do. You’re not dying. Not in any mortal way.” *How comforting*, she thought.

Derrick gagged. “H-how do you know? What’s going on?”

“You’re changing. This *Sang* guy won’t be able to get to you, don’t worry,” she falsely promised. Raven knew the workings of magick, and there was always a way around things, but she had to keep Derrick calm. She made it to the hospital in record time.

“You still with me, Derrick?”

She heard him grunt an answer as she pulled in front of the ER. The ER doors slid open. Raven’s gaze darted around the room,

searching for someone familiar, but there was no one she recognized. She called out for immediate assistance. A young female resident dropped the chart she was working on, grabbed a wheelchair and followed her outside.

“Dr. Strigoi, what’s wrong?” The woman trailed behind Raven to the back passenger door.

“The patient’s name is Derrick. I don’t have a last name. Pulse is irregular, breathing shallow.” Raven opened the door to allow her access to Derrick.

But he was gone.

Again.

Chapter Four

Nightmares interrupted Raven's sleep that night.

If at all possible, his face appeared whiter than the down feathers of a swan. He possessed all the grace of one, too. That's where the similarities ended, though. Raven had never encountered such power, with a single exception.

Her father.

One would have to know her father to appreciate the significance of what she was thinking. To Raven and her mother, he'd been gentle and kind, but to others, he could be—and often was—ruthless. He was powerful and used to getting his own way, but he had an old world charm about him that enabled him to win many disputes easily. When Raven's father wanted to, he could be the most charismatic man on earth.

Of course, he could kill his adversaries, but there was no sense of accomplishment then. He savored the hunt, as did all Lamai worth their salt. It was part of being born a Lamai, whether by choice or not. But time had worn away some of the rough edges of Raven's sire's personality.

The man in her dream, however, was not her father.

"Soon I will get you, ma beauté. I am close, very close. The time has come..."

Raven writhed in bed, moaning from the nightmares that had been beleaguering her all night.

“I have someone I wish for you to meet. You will be so surprised,” the monster in her dream continued in a singsong voice.

Then this foreign figure diminished and familiar ones immediately replaced him: her mother, Bo, her father, Frank and Solaris. All were telling her something, but the voices sounded like electronic voice phenomena or static on a television set. The images faded, and only the voices remained.

Before she knew it, she was squinting into the morning sun that blazed through her windows. She’d had her worst night’s rest in a while, and it promised to be a grueling day, beginning at the hospital and ending with a meeting at Town Hall.

After an exhausting day at the lab spent going over reams of paperwork, Raven arrived at Frank’s office. The sun settled where low clouds met the horizon. She walked straight in and began recounting the meeting with Julianna at The Bed and Brew.

“Frank, I met with Jules the other night and she advised me to speak with you. I need to know what’s going on.” This time, she took the cognac he offered and settled into the wingback chair opposite him.

He looked uncomfortable and resigned, though she couldn’t discern why.

“You know my threshold for weird is quite vast, but there are things happening that push the boundaries even for me. The man in my autopsy room, Derrick, showed up in my car. My *car*. And he

was going through the transformation.” Raven took a deep breath, watching Frank’s reaction.

Frank emptied his glass, poured another drink for himself and sighed.

Raven continued, hoping to get Frank to open up. “The guy was freaked out and asking a lot of questions, said I’m in trouble. Warned me about some evil that’s around and mentioned a *Courtier de Sang*. He wanted to know about my father. If you know anything, Frank, you’ve got to fill me in. Why would he want to know about my father?”

Frank hitched a shoulder and rubbed a hand across his chin before he spoke. “Your mother loved you and Tobias with all her heart. You know that, don’t you?”

She nodded. “My father made sure I remembered my mother and how much she loved me. We celebrated her birthday, which I thought odd, but my father presumably had his reasons. And he still keeps her pictures in his wallet and all over his homes.”

Frank smirked. “Yes, all half-dozen of them—or is it seven homes now? Anyway, Tobias, although he’s a complete bastard now, was a different...being...when you were younger and your mother was still alive.”

Raven shivered at the thought of her mother dying so young. “I know her death...did something to him.” She pulled her legs up and tucked her skirt around them, then curled them underneath her.

Frank rocked his recliner back and forth, like the ticking of a clock. “I’ve known your parents for a long time. I grew up with your momma. We all lived in New Orleans at one point. She was a

spitfire. I was quiet as a kid, but your mother spoke her mind, no matter what other people thought. The two of us were inseparable as kids, and even into our teenage years.” His face had started to glow with emotion, raw and intense, while he traveled back in time. “I sort of looked after her. Especially when she would talk about the neighbors’ dead relatives who came to her with messages for them. I got into many fights defending your mother’s...sanity.” He laughed to himself.

“You were born down there, in the Garden District. Ah—such a beautiful place to live. I’m thinking of moving back when my term as mayor comes to an end. Your father...” Frank shook his head. “Tobias is an enigma for sure. I’ve seen the maniacal side of him, and then there’s the giving side. Your mother gets most of the credit for that. Did you know how much he’s given to the people of New Orleans since Katrina? All in memory of your mother, and surreptitiously.” He appeared lost in the past. His eyes held a faraway gaze.

He rubbed his hand across his forehead. “Your mom—Nicolette—was gorgeous. A Creole beauty with eyes as green as emeralds, and long, curly hair. She had legs that seemed to go on forever. She could have been a model.”

Raven observed the musings of her friend and mentor carefully. “Sounds like you were in love with her, Frank.”

He arched an eyebrow. “Of course I was—since I was six years old, and she was toddling around with her mop of golden curls and enchanting smile,” he stated matter-of-factly. “Her momma, your grandma, was from Averton, in France—a beautiful blonde with the

same eyes as your momma. And your grandfather,” Frank laughed and slapped his knee, “he was a force to be reckoned with in the Vodou community. In any community, really. Your grandma had him under control, though.”

He sighed. “Then when we got older, I went off to college. Tulane University. Your mother didn’t want to continue with school. She stayed home. I tell you, Raven, there weren’t too many men who met your mother and didn’t fall in love with her. I teased her and said it was magick, that she put a spell on all the men she met.” He became quiet, and his demeanor changed. The muscles in his face were drawn. His lips were set in a tight line.

“Nicki only had eyes for your father, though. She politely turned Southern men away...except there was that one man who unfortunately did not take no for an answer. Laroque. You were only about a year old at the time, maybe two. Your father was in and out of your lives a lot back then. He asked me to watch over you while he was gone, and since I went to school locally, I agreed. Your father wanted to take you both with him, but your mother was hell-bent on staying home to look after her aging parents. He went out to make his fortune—or at least to keep an eye on it, I suppose. I didn’t question your father. He trusted me, and I wouldn’t betray that trust, or Nicki’s.” He poured more cognac into his glass.

“After your grandparents passed, your father bought a shop in the French Quarter, and your mother ran it. They supplied the local Vodou community with herbs, oils and candles, and she gave readings. That’s where she met Philippe Laroque. He practiced Vodou and Santaria, and he was a powerful *bokur*.” He lowered his

voice every time he said *Laroque*. Like a curse, it seemed that just speaking the name held a power all its own. Frank reclined in his chair, closing his eyes for a moment. “*Is* a powerful *bokur*. He’s a charming guy. Handsome, I suppose. He’s had many women, but the one he couldn’t have was the one he wanted most.”

“My mother.”

“Your mother.” He sat forward, leaning toward Raven. “Laroque had just returned from the University of North Carolina at Chapel Hill, where he earned a Ph.D. in epidemiology and microbiology. He knew who your father was and wouldn’t dare let anyone know his true feelings for Nicki. But she was very psychic, and I guess a woman’s intuition knows these things. His magick was powerful, and he used it to shield his growing love for Nicolette.” He stared silently at his hands. Finally, he spoke again, his eyes narrowed as he looked at Raven.

“One day, at Mardi Gras, he went to see your mother. He’d been drinking and...and things got out of hand. He raped Nicki. Your mother was never the same after that.” Frank seemed lost in thought, and he rubbed his forehead as if dreading what he was about to say. “She wanted to kill herself. I-I had to talk her out of it...many times. I never understood why she took the blame. But, nine and a half months later, your mother gave birth to another daughter—Laroque’s child.”

The glass Raven had been holding slipped from her hand and fell to the floor. “She had another child? I have a sister? Where is she?”

He walked over to his desk and reached into the drawer. He handed Raven an old, worn photo.

The girl was a miniature version of Raven's mother. "Your father proved his love for your mother, I must admit. He never blamed her—not that he would—and tried his best to find Laroque, to exact revenge. Your father told Nicki they would raise the little girl as his own, but I guess it proved to be too much for your momma. She told me she couldn't look at her younger daughter without thinking of the way she'd been conceived. Your mother couldn't look at herself, either. Soon after Jade turned two, your mother was dead. The coroner ruled it a suicide." Frank gazed out the window.

To past memories that plague his mind? Raven wondered.

Frank got up from his seat behind the desk and sat next to Raven, taking her hand in his. "Your mother got very depressed after the child's birth. We tried to keep the baby a secret. My sister raised the little girl. I met Deidre when Jade turned three years old, and we married a year later. Laroque was off doing some sort of research in San Francisco. Or so the story went, but eventually, Laroque found out about her. Jade was about four years old then. He took her, and he's raised her ever since.

"After Laroque took Jade, Tobias moved up here with you. I stayed, finished law school. Three years after that, I had the opportunity to join a prestigious law firm in Boston, so we moved. Jade was long gone by then, so...there was no reason to stay." Frank took the photo and carefully placed it back in his desk drawer.

“Jade,” Raven whispered. A million questions raced through her mind. She plucked one. “How did Laroque get Jade? And how do you even know it was Laroque who took her?”

Frank sighed. “We assumed, at the time, he took her from school. She left in the morning and never returned home in the afternoon.”

Raven couldn’t hide the shock in her voice. “That’s it? Did the police look for her? How do you even know she’s still alive?”

“Of course we had the police involved—the New Orleans PD at first, then Tobias’s friends on the Seacrest police force, even some of his friends with the FBI. Your father’s reach is vast, but Laroque managed to stay under the radar. I believed Laroque took Jade to Haiti, and I was proven correct when he eventually sent a message letting me know she was well. Every year a picture was sent,” Frank said, frowning. “Your father did the best he could, Raven.”

“Hmm...yeah. I was raised by nannies until you moved to the island,” she responded bitterly.

“Tobias wanted to keep you girls together, but it wasn’t a realistic plan. I raised you for the most part, when your father was away. You were with the nannies for only a short period.” He smiled. “Just remember, you’re the product of the great love your parents had for each other. That, in and of itself, is very powerful. I’ve seen both sides of Tobias, and I prefer to stay on his good one.” Frank’s face turned emotionless.

She felt disconnected. It was a great deal of information to absorb. “I think his good side died with my mother.” Raven picked up her glass and handed it to Frank.

“I think you may be right,” he agreed.

“Why didn’t anyone ever tell me about my sister?”

“I can only speculate. I think your father wanted to forget that part of his life and telling you would only stir up unwanted memories.”

“But if he wanted to keep us together, as you say, why wouldn’t he tell me?”

Frank arched a brow. “You’ll have to ask him about that.” He shifted in his seat before he revealed another fact. “There’s one more thing, my dear...about the dreams I’ve been having of your mother. She’s telling me that *Courtier de Sang* is Philippe Laroque.”

“And?”

“That’s all she keeps repeating, that and to tell her family she loves them.” A tear fell down the face of the man Raven had come to think of as her foster father. “Talk to Solaris, Raven.”

Her day was apparently still far from over.

A primal, rhythmic cadence echoed off the walls of Blood Pool. Bodies gyrated in a dancing frenzy to the thump of the beating drums. Strobe lights blared in red and gold as the dancers swirled seductively around the dance floor. A couple simulated sex, the male exposing fangs as if ready to sink them into the neck of his partner. Raven’s antennae went up as she wondered whether this

odd behavior could have something to do with the strange happenings on the island.

The woman began to laugh as she playfully slapped her lover. She yelled over the music, “Solaris will never allow us back in the club if you bite me here. What if someone slips on the blood and she gets sued?”

At least they were being practical, Raven thought as she weaved her way to the bar, almost expecting to see Derrick standing there.

Solaris was dressed all in white. Her hazel eyes, starkly contrasting her ebony skin, cautiously scanned Raven’s aura. Raven could feel Sol’s psychic probes. Cuing Raven to follow, both women entered Solaris’s private office. It was a bit quieter back there thanks to the soundproof walls Solaris had installed.

“What a day,” Raven moaned, running her hand through her hair. She admired the wooden carvings hanging on either side of a large window behind Solaris’s desk. “These are new. I like them. Thailand?”

Solaris crossed her arms over her chest. “I know you’re not here to chat about my new art pieces, Raven, and no, they’re from Nigeria. Frank has been in touch with me. He’s very worried for your safety. I am, too. Sit.”

Raven kicked off her ankle boots and sat cross-legged on Solaris’s plush leather sofa. “What’s going on? This has been one freakin’ weird day. I find out today that I have a sister, as part of Frank’s ‘true confession’ about what happened to my mother. She had...what? Postpartum depression? Did they even call it that back

then? Did she experience this after I was born?” She took a deep, cleansing breath, trying to assimilate all that she learned. “Plus, I’m having strange dreams. The man from the other night, Derrick, who allegedly died here, showed up in my car. He seemed very much alive and going through DNA changes from human to...I’m not sure what, but I’d venture to guess a vampire.”

“Seems you had a *very* enlightening day.”

“Shit, did *you* know I have a sister?”

Solaris took some powder out of a silk pouch and sprinkled its contents onto a charcoal briquette. Myrrh and frankincense simmered in the brazier. She took her time, her movements deliberate. Raven took the opportunity to calm down, watching the smoke swirl upward.

“Yes, but only recently was I able to receive that information, which was patchy at best. Frank filled in the blanks. More importantly, did Frank tell you what I confided to him? Those powerful sorcerers are close. I don’t believe they’re here on Mirabelle, but on Hannah’s Vineyard instead. More will die.” She paused. “Raven, there’s a deep hatred connected to Tobias.”

“Not surprising.”

A violent crash sounded, and broken glass flew into the room. Raven jumped up, the adrenaline rush activating her Lamai instincts. With long-reaching fingers, the intruder grabbed for Solaris, but missed his target. Raven lunged toward the trespasser, clutching his shoulders and flinging him back onto the couch. Silver-blue eyes stared back at her.

She muttered, “Derrick.”

As he struggled to reach Solaris, Raven could see his fangs had fully formed and he craved blood. Breaking free from her grip, he attempted to grab Solaris. He jumped and landed on the heavy desk, knocking over the brazier. Solaris prayed in the corner to her *loa* for protection.

With one flip of her wrist, Raven pinned him down. Her knee dug into his chest, her fangs unsheathed and ready to kill.

“No...” he pleaded. “It’s what he wants... Don’t!”

In an instant, an engraved silver blade sliced through the air and lodged in Derrick’s aorta. Enough blood spurted from the wound to indicate he’d already feasted tonight.

Solaris wiped the unknown victim’s blood from her face with the hem of her skirt.

“Are you all right?” Raven asked her trembling friend as she knelt next to Derrick, feeling for a pulse.

“Is he d-dead this time?” she asked.

“Yes. I’d say the combination of the magick infused into your blade and the silver itself killed him. He wasn’t that strong—yet.”

The door of Solaris’s office broke off its hinges as a massive, grimacing beast with golden eyes pounced on the desk, claws digging into the fine wood. The wolf howled into the night. His black fur shimmered in the lamp light. He began to tear at the corpse, ready to rip into its chest, but soon caught the scent of death in the air. In a glimmer, he changed to his mortal form and tossed the body aside like garbage.

“Are you hurt?” Bo asked, taking Raven in his arms, searching for any wounds she might have suffered. “Solaris, are you okay?”

Solaris paced. “I’m fine, Bo, but I’m afraid I’ve killed this man.”

“You had no choice.” Raven walked over to Solaris and gave her a reassuring hug.

“I suppose I’ll have to close early tonight,” she said. Picking up her phone, she hit the speed dial marked Victor, her head of security and a Lamai. “Clear the place, Vic, we’ve had an incident... That’s all right, you acted accordingly. You stayed at your post. I’m fine, but I need to fire Mick. *He* should have been in here.”

Bo surveyed the room. “Mick? Is he new?”

“Yes, he’s been here for a few weeks and is supposed to be at my side at the slightest hint of trouble. He’s Lamai, and,” she glanced at Raven, “well, I don’t have to tell you about your ability to hear sounds beyond a human’s capacity.”

Raven knew this event had taken its toll on Sol. She was a healer, and taking a life went against all her beliefs, even if that life was no longer human and she was acting in self-defense.

Raven nodded, looking sadly at Derrick’s body. He didn’t deserve this. “You should get cleaned up, Sol. I’ll call the office and get the body out of here and down to the morgue.”

“Damn! I can’t remember the last time I was attacked—by anything. I’ll be upstairs if you need me,” she said.

“Maybe you need to rework your charms around the place,” Bo remarked.

Solaris shot him a foul look.

He held his hands up in mock surrender. “I’m just suggesting,” he said.

Raven called out to her friend. “Hey, Sol—thanks.”

The priestess ignored Bo. “Don’t mention it.” She walked to the door, looked back and shook her head. “Mick!” she called as she stood by her office door.

“Yes ma’am,” a low voice grumbled.

“Get your things, you’re no longer needed here. Hey! What’s that crap under your nose? I told you, no drugs!” Solaris reprimanded.

“Miss Sol, I don’t do drugs—you had me tested a week ago. I-I don’t know what happened.” The young Lamai tried to explain his way out of this predicament as he wiped the white powder off his upper lip.

“I have zero tolerance here. I need to be able to depend on my people. Sorry, Mick,” she said as she headed for the stairs. “Get another blood test, and if you come up clean, I’ll give you a better reference. Otherwise, don’t list me as your last employer.”

Raven stared at Bo, unable to fathom what had just happened. “Derrick stopped me from killing him. He said, ‘That’s what he wants.’ This vendetta of his is connected to my father. Solaris was in the middle of explaining what she found out psychically when Derrick came crashing through the window. *Courtier* wanted me to kill Derrick—but why?”

Bo held her tightly. “I don’t know. But we’ll find out.”

“I have a sister,” Raven said, searching his eyes, hoping to find some sanity there.

Bo softly kissed her. “I know, sweetheart. I saw my grandfather this afternoon. He told me. According to him things are not as they appear to be. You and I must be careful.”

“I’m always the last to know,” Raven complained as she leaned into his muscular form.

Flashing lights blinked on and off, lighting up the night as the officers arrived at the scene. A lone partier stood on the corner, wistfully playing his harmonica. More and more, the influences of the south were making their way onto Mirabelle.

What else was in the winds? It had to be powerful magick, without a doubt, and men who knew how to wield it.

Gary Davis rushed in, his hair spiked with what looked like super bionic-strength hair gel. He’d apparently been out partying, though he was still on call. Raven’s young assistant almost plowed right into her.

“Whoa... I’ve got it, Davis. You can go,” Raven said.

His face lost all color as he recognized the victim. “I-it’s the guy—the missing body! H-how did he get here? What the hell happened? Y-you’re full of blood, Dr. Strigoi. Are you hurt?”

“I’m fine, Gary, really. Go. I’ve got this.” She walked over to her co-worker and put her hand on his shoulder. “I’ll explain this to you someday soon. For now, go back to your date and don’t worry about me.”

He looked at one of the officers, shaking his head. “She never calls me by my first name. Shit, this must be bad.”

The officer shrugged, winked at Bo and began snapping pictures of the crime scene. Gary left the scene appearing more

puzzled than when he walked in. Joe Menendez soon arrived, and he and Bo worked in concert, processing the scene and questioning any potential witnesses.

After they were finished, Bo dropped Raven off at her office, where she spent the next six hours performing an autopsy on the man she knew only as Derrick.

In a normal human body, the internal organs are of certain sizes and weights. The heart of an ordinary adult male, for example, would weigh about ten and one-half ounces. The liver, the largest internal organ, can weigh up to three pounds.

The organs in a vampire's body are smaller, though, allowing room for the growth of arteries and veins. The exception is the heart, which has to pump the extra blood. It always doubles in size.

Always—no exception.

Raven and other Lamai born of different magickal or human beings had the same sized organs as a human, with only slightly larger hearts. Their cellular make-up changed due to the combination of human and magickal DNA.

Derrick's organs were much smaller than that of a typical male of his age and size, yet they were normal for a vampire. Nonetheless, his heart remained within the ten-and-a-half-ounce range. It had not grown in size, as his arteries and veins had. Once the DNA had transformed, his organs would follow suit. His DNA changed, but his heart did not. Something was not right.

"That's odd," Raven remarked to herself, looking through the oculars of the electron microscope.

“What is?” Tracy asked as she entered with the two samples of frozen red blood cells Raven had asked her to retrieve, along with the written report of Derrick’s blood work-up. What was left of his blood, which wasn’t much, filled a small vial.

“His red cells have an odd feature, a spaghetti-like shape, which may explain why his heart didn’t enlarge.” Raven took the reports from Tracy and skimmed them. She noted high titers of anti-factor VIII autoantibodies. “He would have bled out at the slightest cut.”

Tracy appeared as perplexed as Raven. “A Lamai who had a bleeding disorder? Now that’s a new one for the journals. Was it pre-existing?”

Raven scratched her head in frustration. “It wouldn’t matter. Once he went through the transformation, he wouldn’t be affected by any immunodeficiency conditions he may have suffered from previously. This has to be purposeful.”

Tracy sighed. “You’re losing me.” Tracy sat next to her, reading the report.

“Either his blood was altered, or whoever turned Derrick somehow made it so that his factor VIII remained elevated... or altered.” Raven shook her head in horror, her eyes widening. She recognized this odd feature in the blood cells, but couldn’t remember where she’d seen it before.

“Whoever is responsible has to have a medical background,” Tracy added, looking at the sample sitting on the scope. “This is the sample of your blood?”

“Yes, taken last year. I also have a sample of Victor’s, Solaris’s head of security, and a fresh sample of my own blood.”

“There’s a severe cellular modification to the victim’s platelets—different from what would be expected in the average change from human to Lamai, if you can cite an average. Both your platelets and Victor’s are dissimilar to those of the victim.” Tracy spun around in her chair, facing Raven. “Have you ever encountered anything like this before?”

Raven looked up at her friend. “No. Never.”

“It looks like the cells have been modified. There was a change beginning to take place in the DNA and RNA. Something was brewing in his blood. Where would we possibly start testing?” Tracy asked. She seemed to be trying to figure out how much blood remained, and if they could even perform the proper testing.

Raven crossed her arms over her chest and exhaled a deep, frustrated sigh. “We can’t rule out molecular changes on the quantum level.” Raven watched for her red-haired assistant’s reaction.

“Magick,” they said in chorus.

“Or something more sinister,” Raven whispered.

Chapter Five

In the evening, approaching the dinner hour, she'd received the news. Raven had just hung up the kitchen phone after a conversation with an old colleague from San Francisco. It was the call she'd been waiting for all day. She had suspicions about Derrick's blood samples and wanted to talk them over with her friend from college. She was worried about what was occurring on the island, and had a dreadful feeling about that night's festivities. The beginning of the Harvest Fair.

She was trying to digest the information she'd just received when she felt a presence.

A familiar presence.

"I hear you and Bo are back together again." The unexpected though recognizable sound of his voice caused Raven to break from her morbid thoughts. She felt the color drain from her face as she whirled to face the man in her kitchen. His silver eyes gauged her reply.

"Tobias."

"How are you, Raven?" He reached out to her with open arms. She wanted to move, but felt rooted to the floor. In one step, he stood in front of her, wrapping his arms around her. "You look beautiful, as always."

“Thank you. What brings you to the island? It’s been about—what, a year?—since I last saw you. Where have you been?” She desperately tried to hide the hurt that seeped into her voice. She couldn’t quite pull it off.

Nearly exhausted from the grueling day, she grabbed some vegetables and began vigorously chopping them. Preparing for an early dinner, she tried to act as if his presence didn’t affect her. She couldn’t pull that off, either.

He smiled. “I’m here to see you, of course, and to join in the festivities. The first of the Nights of the Parades is this evening, is it not?”

“Of course, yes, the harvest parades,” Raven said, absentmindedly nicking her finger with the blade as she tried to slice the fresh carrots from Nigella’s farm. She shoved her finger in her mouth.

“Careful, *dulciuri inimă*,” her father said, taking a seat on a stool at the center island, watching her slice and dice.

Raven eyed him cautiously. He looked like he wanted something.

Tobias was handsome as always. She definitely saw what had drawn her mother to him. Raven resembled Tobias in appearance. His hair was shoulder length and dark as the raven’s wing. That was how she’d received her name. After seeing a mop of jet-colored hair on his newborn daughter’s head, Tobias asked her mother if she liked the name Raven. Raven’s mother never denied anything to Tobias.

His eyes were the same smoky grey. He sported a neatly trimmed Van Dyke, giving him a distinguished and regal demeanor—or satanic, depending on one’s point of view. The genetic connection between Raven and Tobias was undeniable.

“Frank called you, didn’t he?” she asked, sliding a pitcher of raspberry iced tea toward him. She took two slices of lemon and sugar cubes and poured them both a drink. She needed one, her mouth suddenly parched. Seeing her father always made her anxious.

“I speak with Frank often,” he said, sipping the sweetened tea.

“Why don’t you just call *me*?” She stared at him with the same hard gaze she’d received from him so many times. Their relationship was a tug-of-war at best. When she needed to be close to her father, he was absent. When he was ready for her, she was too hurt and erected a wall of protection.

He stroked his beard. “I don’t want to be an overbearing father.”

She tried to stifle the laugh that erupted, but failed miserably. “You needn’t worry about that, Tobias.”

“Would you like a fire?” He didn’t wait for a response as he grabbed a few logs from the ring next to the fireplace. In an instant, he had a fire blazing.

He walked over to her. “*Dulciuri inimă*, your finger is still bleeding. When did you last have anything decent to feast upon?”

Speaking in the manner of a medieval king, he peppered his speech with the language of his native Romania, where he grew up so many hundreds of years ago. He’d always called her

“sweetheart” when she was a little girl and continued to do so even though she was a grown woman.

“You sound like Nigella’s mother now. She’s always trying to feed me,” Raven said, walking to the sink and rinsing her finger. The next thing she knew, Tobias was standing next to her, holding her hand up to his mouth. He kissed his daughter’s cut.

“Nigella’s mother feeds you blood?” he asked, arching an eyebrow.

“No, Nigella does, on occasion.” She looked down at her finger. It had healed. “And no, I don’t feed on my friend, if that’s your next question.”

He returned to his seat. “I know. I have been to a few ceremonies in the past, or have you forgotten? I remember the ritual and the blood. You have good friends. It was a wise decision to move here. That would make two good decisions I’ve made in my life, finding and marrying your mother being the first.”

She played along with her father. “Only two? You’ve lived a long, long time.” She went to the oven and checked on the roast, simmering in a red-wine glaze, and the garlic-herb potatoes. “Having children isn’t on your list of wise choices?”

“Of course, it goes without saying.”

“No, it needs to be said.”

He smiled at Raven, melting her heart with every loving gesture. “All right, an amendment to my previous statement. Three wise choices.”

“Speaking of time, don’t you think you should give up wearing all black? I think you’ve mourned enough.”

Tobias's eyes flashed with a pain that Raven found all too familiar. Her heart broke a little more for him. She changed the subject.

"Black is always in fashion," he said. Raven knew he tried to make light of her remark.

"You'll stay for dinner?" she asked. "I know you don't eat much, but it would be nice. Bo would like to see you." She turned to him, feeling like a little girl again, wanting to make him happy.

"Of course, I'd love it," he agreed.

Raven noted his eyes as they drank in the view outside, at the vast expanse of water that stretched for miles, visible from almost every window of the spacious Victorian house. Waves crashed upon the rocky shore as the sun snuggled into the Atlantic for the night. Blues, magentas, violets and burnished copper-colored clouds grazed the horizon, like ghostly pirate ships searching for lost treasure.

Raven knew it was more than the festival that had brought Tobias to the island. Her lips parted to ask, when she heard the front door open.

"*Kagi Taka*," Bo called out.

"I see he still talks to you in his native language," her father observed, standing to greet Bo.

"Yes, just like you," she said, walking toward the front door, her arms open, ready to embrace her beloved.

Bo lifted Raven gently in his arms and whirled her around, kissing her neck, nipping at her tenderly.

“I missed you. My father’s here,” she whispered into his ear. His gaze probed hers, questioning. Raven shrugged. “Let’s find out.”

Bo hung his suede jacket on the deer antler rack, a gift from his grandfather for Raven, by the entrance. He took a deep breath and accompanied her into the kitchen.

“Tobias. Nice to see you.”

“Bo, you look good. Taking care of my Raven, are you?” Tobias shook Bo’s hand.

“Always,” he replied.

In truth, Bo and Tobias did get along well. He could see into Bo’s soul and he knew the depth of feeling Bo had for his daughter. Tobias also understood the call of the wild. Although he sensed it bothered his daughter, he knew it was not a reflection on Bo’s love for her. Raven argued that they were merely sticking up for each other—an odd sort of male bonding.

“I guess you’ve talked to Frank?” Bo asked, not wasting a moment.

“Yes. He told me about *Sang de Mort*,” Tobias huffed.

“*Sang de Mort*? Are we talking about the same...?” Raven asked.

“He goes by many names, but yes, *Courtier de Sang*—Laroque. I know he’s resurfaced,” Tobias said, watching as Bo took a beer from the refrigerator. “Frank told me that he explained to you what happened all those years ago. I’m sorry, Raven.” The ache in his heart still felt new. “Your mother didn’t want you to know. You

were too little to remember your sister. After she died, I couldn't break the promise I'd made to her."

Tobias observed the interplay between his daughter and Bo. "Apparently, neither could Frank," Raven said, glancing at Bo standing by the sink as he watched the last rays of the sun reach across the water. His long, lean legs were crossed, and he tapped his boot impatiently. Nothing escaped Tobias as he monitored his daughter's actions. He laughed to himself, noting how she studied every muscle visible beneath Bo's faded denim jeans.

Every single muscle.

Tobias felt like an intruder.

Bo took a long pull on his cold beer. "I'm surprised you're not at the office. There's another DB. I just finished the paperwork on it. That's why I'm a bit late."

"Davis is on tonight. He owes me. Tracy is in, too. They'll call if they need me. Was it suspicious circs?" Raven handed Bo three plates. He set the table and checked on the fire in the dining room fireplace.

"It didn't look like it to me—yet—but we'll see what Davis finds. The victim was a fairly young guy, mid-forties, and apparently there's no outward trauma. Could be cardiac arrest."

Tobias had been standing in front of Raven, uncharacteristically quiet. Finally, he spoke. "I don't want you getting involved with Laroque, Raven. He wants nothing more than to kill all those I love." His voice was firm and unyielding. "Promise me."

“I can’t make that promise. This is my job. If Laroque is somehow involved with these deaths, I have no choice.”

He clenched his jaw, frustrated with his daughter’s stubbornness. A trait she inherited from him. “Then quit. You don’t need the money. I won’t lose you. You are susceptible. You’re powerful, but your mother’s blood makes you vulnerable.” He took her hand and rubbed her finger on the spot she’d cut. Raven pulled away.

“I’ll be careful,” she said, taking the roast out of the oven. “Come on, dinner’s ready.”

Bo remained silent during the interplay between father and daughter, a slight smile pulling at his lips. Tobias didn’t inform Raven that Bo had been the one to persuade Frank to get in touch with Tobias and invite him to the festival.

They sat before the roaring fire and dug into the tender roast. “I questioned just about all the Lamai on the island. Emerald’s sister Iris helped with the interrogation,” Bo said as he placed a water pitcher filled with sliced lemons and limes on the table.

“Why did you need a Fae’s help?” Tobias asked, his curiosity piqued.

“She’s a Truth Seeker. You know, a Fae version of a lie detector,” Bo explained. “She might be able to figure out who turned Derrick.”

Tobias asked, “The one who attacked Solaris?”

“You didn’t waste any time finding out the latest, did you?” Raven asked her father.

“My daughter won’t tell me, so yes. I spoke with Solaris earlier. I’ll tell you who *is* responsible: Laroque.”

“Laroque is part Lamai?” Bo asked.

“No,” Tobias spat in indignation. “He is a powerful *bokur*, a sorcerer, and his most dangerous quality is his knowledge. Laroque’s a madman. He also has extensive familiarity with Lamai bloodlines. It’s his life’s work.”

He placed his elbows on the table and leaned forward toward Bo. “He blames me for Raven’s mother’s death. He wants to kill me, but, since that’s impossible, I’m afraid he’ll go after Raven.”

“How did he turn a human?” Raven asked, spooning more of the sautéed vegetables onto Bo’s plate.

“I’m not exactly sure, *dulciuri inimă*, but he has. There’s a reason he has all those degrees in microbiology. He has planned this, I’m certain, for a long time.” Tobias felt his daughter’s penetrating gaze. *Gods she’s so much like me.*

Raven continued. “And Derrick’s DNA was altered. It didn’t look as a normal Lamai’s blood cells would appear. Perhaps Laroque infected him—with what, I haven’t figured out—but he could have done it in one of the same ways that the HIV virus is spread, through a contaminated needle. Only Derrick’s blood was purposely contaminated. That would make sense, especially considering that Derrick wouldn’t let me kill him. He said, ‘That’s what he wants.’” Raven finished her tea.

“What do you think he’s up to?” Tobias asked.

Raven fidgeted with her napkin as she explained. “I think Laroque is trying to genetically alter the Lamai DNA, or something

along those lines. There is something different with the platelets. I need to study the samples and run more tests.” She picked at her vegetables. Tobias got up to stoke the fire. He hated that he made his daughter so uncomfortable.

Bo whispered, “Dinner is delicious, *cante skuye*.”

“Thank you,” Raven said, staring into his eyes.

“Later. You can thank me later,” he whispered.

Tobias sat back down. “You said he’s doing this the same way HIV is spread.” He drummed his fingers on the arm of the chair. “Raven, do you think he could be creating some sort of virus?”

“It’s possible. I’ll have to make a few more calls to some friends in San Francisco. Frank said Laroque was doing research there years ago. I started digging around, and my old college roommate called me back right before I started cooking dinner. It doesn’t sound promising. She said she’s going to get back to me if any more information comes up.”

“What about the girl, Jade?” Bo brought up the subject that made Tobias shift in his seat.

Tobias cut into the juicy meat, slightly nervous. He set down his fork. Tobias made an art form out of seemingly eating a meal. In reality, he’d only taken a bite or two at most. “I would have to assume she is like her father. She hasn’t tried to escape, and from what I’ve heard, he loves her a great deal.”

“How can you be sure she’s like her father? She carries Mom’s genes, too.”

“I hope for her sake she doesn’t,” Tobias said forlornly. He changed the topic. “How are your parents, Bo?”

“Fine. They’re with my sisters in Colorado. They’re all coming in for the big ceremony on the thirty-first.”

Tobias smiled. “It’ll be good to see them again. Your grandfather and I talk quite often.”

That was Lamai speak meaning Bo’s grandfather Matoskah and Raven’s father met in the dreamtime.

No one knew exactly how old Bo’s grandfather was, but he and Tobias had known each other for a long time.

Bo cleaned up after dinner, and a half-hour later they all drove up to Town Hall in Raven’s car. Tobias tried to make idle chatter on the way. He wanted to ignore the feelings of dread, which took root inside. He couldn’t.

In front of Town Hall, a large bonfire burned in a cast iron cauldron that was over one hundred years old. The roads glowed with orange lights, and minstrels played on almost every street corner.

A horse-drawn wagon carried Julianna and Solaris, with Nathaniel—a wizard of sorts—guiding the horses down the street. The wagon overflowed with cornstalks, potatoes, apples and pumpkins. Solaris and Julianna tossed candy to the children walking beside them.

Music filled the air as others followed on foot, playing fiddles and pennywhistles. The parade started at Town Hall and would end at Three Maidens Marina, a five-mile journey across the island. Townspeople dressed in long cloaks with pointed hats, while some painted their faces to resemble skeletons, devils, angels, scarecrows

or mermaids. A few wore sheer fairy wings, and when they caught the light just right, their auras glowed. Those were the real fae.

“Hey, Raven...here’re some beads!” Julianna called, tossing a few necklaces to her.

“Thanks, Jules,” she shouted in reply, winding the beads around her neck.

People draped themselves with gems the colors of autumn and necklaces made of acorns. Some children from Bo’s clan had their faces painted with the images of their alter egos. A few of the little shape shifters appeared as tigers, wolves and bears. Jaguars, hawks and owls represented other clans.

Tobias joined Frank on the front lawn of Town Hall, by the fire. Emerald flirted with Raven’s father. Her blonde hair fell in waves down her back, and her aura pulsed in shades of crimson.

She was in love.

Emerald’s magick helped keep Raven’s father safe—not that he needed it. In his way, he did love the beautiful fae.

Tobias spent a lot of time with Emerald whenever he came to visit. She held a special place in his heart. Still, Raven knew her mother would always haunt his dreams.

Emerald’s sister Iris, on the other hand, had to deal with Emerald after Tobias departed. Iris had confided to Raven a few months earlier how Emerald pined away for hours after each time he left. For weeks after, Emerald would try to come up with something magickal to bring him back and keep Tobias on the island.

Iris had even mentioned to Raven that Emerald wanted to bear his child. Emerald confessed to Iris that she thought it would fill the void left by Nicolette.

She had miscarried twice. It wasn't easy for Lamai to have children with humans or other magical beings.

Tobias had hinted at having other children. Raven assumed throughout his long life he'd had to have fathered more than a few. Some had probably died a long time ago. Born of mortal women, each had his or her Achilles' heel, just as she had. Tobias found her mother's reincarnated soul lifetime after lifetime. She'd often ask her father to talk about when he'd first met her mother. He always promised he would, but never did. And so she wondered when Tobias would tell that story, along with countless others. Raven sensed there were *many* stories to tell. She also suspected there were a few full-blooded Lamai brothers or sisters out there.

Raven was shocked to hear her father had been on the island other times and not visited her. Then again, she was always disappointed in some way with her father. Her mother's death had changed Raven's life in so many respects. She often wondered how her relationship with her father would have been had her mother lived. Would it be the same, better—or maybe worse? There was no magick to mend a broken heart. Only time could do that. And time was something that Tobias never seemed to lack.

Chapter Six

Raven was enjoying the festivities of the first Night of the Parades when she heard a high pitched voice cry out.

“I’m pregnant, Tobias!” Emerald screeched as she flung herself into his arms. “I just found out. Dr. Odin called me on my cell phone with the news.”

Raven turned and caught a glimmer of tears in her father’s eyes.

Tobias spun Emerald around in his gentle embrace.

“Oh, Emmie, that’s wonderful news!” Iris joined in the celebration, literally jumping for joy as Tobias hugged Emerald. This was the first real display of affection Raven had seen between her father and Emerald. It was long overdue, in Raven’s opinion.

“Are you okay? Is the baby healthy?” Tobias asked, stroking Emerald’s cheek.

“Yes! He said the blood tests came back fantastic, and there’s very little chance of miscarriage. My hormone levels are high, and that’s a good sign. Oh, baby... I’m so happy!” Emerald cried as she buried her face in Tobias’s neck. Raven walked over to her father. Emerald opened her arms to gather her into their embrace. The three hugged. “I’m really happy for you...both,” Raven whispered.

Tobias took a velvet box from his pocket, gave Raven a wink and got down on one knee. Emerald's eyes spilled over with more tears of joy.

Raven made a valiant attempt to fight back the tears. Her throat closed and she clenched her hands, shoving them into her jacket pockets. Once more she was an outsider in her father's life. Why hadn't he told her he was planning on proposing?

"I was going to ask you at the festival on the thirty-first, but now seems like the perfect moment. Marry me, Emmie?" Tobias took out a huge, pear-shaped emerald, surrounded by tiny diamonds. It was beautiful. Emerald just stood there, nodding.

Finally, she exclaimed, "Y-yes... I will marry you."

Bo walked up behind Raven and wrapped his arms around her waist as she watched her father hold his bride-to-be. "Talk about stealing our thunder," Raven whispered to Bo.

"We'll be next, my love," Bo murmured in her ear.

"Sparkling cider for all," Iris called out as she hugged her sister once more.

Bo and Raven joined the walk to the marina, sipping some wassail that Solaris supplied along the way.

"Well, that was a big surprise. You're going to have a brother or a sister," Bo stated, looking out at the gibbous moon, his dark hair glimmering in the soft glow of the streetlights. "I mean, another..."

Raven drank in the sight of his chiseled features—his straight, narrow nose, the square jaw and strong chin.

“Yes, I wasn’t expecting Tobias to show up, let alone all of this. A wedding and a baby.” She pointed her gaze at Bo. “I go from being an only child, or so I thought, to having two siblings in the same day. Who knows with my father? I’m certain he has more secrets than the Pentagon. I wonder if Emerald was the only real reason my father came to the island.”

Bo put his arm around her. “I asked him to come. I should have told you, but then you would have tried to talk me out of it. And I think he should be here. You need protection, and I can’t always be around.”

Raven smiled. “It’s weird, but I still feel like I have to watch out for him, and he’s the immortal one.”

She heard the rumble of her cell phone before she felt it vibrate. “Dr. Strigoi,” she answered.

“I’m sorry to bother you, Raven, but we need you and Bo at the morgue,” Tracy said.

“We’ll be right there.” She snapped the phone shut. “Sounds like trouble,” she told Bo as they about-faced and headed back to her car.

She paced the floors, staring at Tracy. “*Where* is the body?”

“I wish I knew. Davis pronounced him at the site. He’s a summer resident—a human resident,” Tracy explained as Raven headed for the autopsy room. “He had no pulse, his pupils were fixed and dilated, and his liver temp was ninety degrees. Raven, what’s going on?”

“This is the DB I did the paperwork on. I guess it wasn’t a heart attack,” Bo said.

Her shadow—Tobias—had appeared in the doorway. “You’ve got a *bokur* that is creating vampires, but first he’s sedating them with *coupe de poudre*. I’m sorry, Raven, I had to follow you here.”

She turned in time to see Tobias’s grey eyes flash to icy silver. “What do you mean? Tetratoxin?”

He nodded. “It’s taken from some species of puffer fish. It’s been used by many a *bokur* for zombification.”

“English, please?” Bo asked, running his hand through his hair—a long-time nervous habit. They all headed out of the autopsy room and toward Raven’s office.

Raven explained, “Tetratoxin, or TTX, is a neurotoxin. It blocks the channels that cause nerve and heart cells to provide necessary electrical impulses. Certain *bokurs* know the right amount of TTX to cause a near-death state. Breathing and heart rate slow to the point that the victim is thought to be dead—and there you have an instant zombie.”

Tracy stood in awe, shaking her head in disbelief.

Raven said, “The victim suffers total paralysis yet the body still functions, at a much slower rate. Scary, right? It gets better. Later, a compound of atropine and scopolamine are administered, putting the person in a permanent state of delirium and disorientation.”

“A zombie?” Tracy asked. “I-I’ve heard Sol talk about them, but we’ve never actually had any on the island... Have we?”

“In a word, yes—the process produces a zombie. And no, as far as I’m aware, there haven’t been any here on Mirabelle Island,” Raven said.

“No, you’re right. We haven’t had any problems with zombies,” Tobias responded.

“There’s more bad news,” Tracy said, followed by a heavy sigh. “Derrick’s blood vial is missing.”

Bo’s cell phone chirped out the Charlie Daniels’ tune, *The Devil Went Down to Georgia*.

“*Wasake*,” he said walking down the hall. “You gotta be shittin’ me!” Raven heard the clap of his cell phone shutting followed by his footsteps as he neared the door of her office.

Bo reported to Raven, “Jules just called from The Bed and Brew. Mordred’s been bitten. From her account, it looks like our DB is on the prowl. And Raven...a woman fitting Jade’s description was seen dining at the restaurant...where the alleged dead body was also seen.”

“You said you got an I.D. on the so-called corpse?” Raven asked, searching for his file on her desk. “Wait...what? Did you say Jade?”

Bo removed his notepad from his jacket pocket. “Yeah, Jade. Tim Donnelly’s the vic. He was here for the festival, a summer resident back for a long weekend. His girlfriend was supposed to meet him here tonight. The girlfriend checked into The Bed and Brew. Bridget saw the DB—Tim—in the back alley, right after Mordred got hit. Or, rather, bit. During the commotion the girlfriend went out back and that’s when she I.D.’d Tim. Both women are

nervous wrecks. Mordred's at the hospital. The doctor's monitoring him carefully, doing blood work. Jet wanted to know if you could go down there. No doubt there'll be inconsistencies in his blood."

"You're sure he was bitten?" Tobias asked.

Bo double-checked his notes. "That's what Jules reported. Two puncture marks on his neck. Oh, and by the way, your other victim's name is Bly—Derrick Bly."

Raven nodded. "How did Jules know about Jade?" she asked, taking her jacket off the hook on the back of the office door.

"I made a few stops before I came to your home. I saw Julianna, Solaris and a couple of other friends. I'd left photos of Jade with them and asked them to call Bo if she surfaced in town," her father answered.

"Where did you get a photo?" Raven asked, heading toward the exit with Bo and Tobias on either side of her.

"It's a photo-enhanced picture. Between photos of your mother and Jade's childhood pictures, a friend of mine was able to digitally print an approximation of what she would look like now. I'm leaving to meet with Jules."

Tobias stopped before they reached Raven's car and took her by the hand. "Be careful, Raven. You can be certain that if Jade is here, so is Laroque. He'll try to get you any way he can."

She wished her father would for once speak of how he truly felt. That he would someday say, "I love you, Raven." It was just one of her fantasies, along with regular holiday and birthday visits. Most times she could safely tuck away these tender emotions, but with Tobias here, they clawed their way into her consciousness.

“I’ll keep my eyes on her, Tobias. I don’t want anything to happen to her, either,” Bo reassured her father.

“I’m counting on you, Bo.”

Emerald pulled up in her green Eclipse, which ran on solar power with a fairy dust booster. “I just dropped Iris off at the hospital,” she said as Tobias entered the car. “We’re driving back to The Bed and Brew to keep an eye on the place for Julianna.”

Bo and Raven headed to the hospital.

“Is there any way a transfusion could alter the outcome? Is it inevitable that he become Lamai?” Bo asked, rubbing Raven’s hand with his as they walked arm-in-arm.

Raven furrowed her brows. “I hope so. This is all new. I’ve never come up against anything like this.”

They entered Seacrest Hospital. Heading toward the ICU, Raven could feel the energy in the air. Julianna had been administering Reiki to Mordred, and the healing combination of Iris the fae and Julianna’s treatments was potent. Vibrations surrounded everyone there, especially Julianna’s daughter Bridget. Jet performed reflexology to try to stimulate the organs to maintain their natural size.

The on-call doctor approached Raven and Bo. “We’ve given him a transfusion. As a matter of fact, this is his second. We’ll draw more blood. I’d like you to look at what we have, Raven,” Dr. Sanjay said. “I value your opinion. There are some oddities to his platelets, and his clotting factor was abnormal.” She led Raven into the lab. Bo remained with Jules in the ICU.

Raven instructed, “Have Iris donate some blood for Mordred. Perhaps his fae blood is fighting the infection.”

Dr. Sanjay smiled. “I’m one step ahead. Iris is donating her blood now.”

Raven peered into the scope. “I’ll need a sample in order to compare it to what I have in my lab. From what I recall, this blood doesn’t seem to have quite the same characteristics as the sample from Derrick Bly. He was our most recent fledgling vampire.”

Raven, having finished her analysis, walked out to find Bo. Dr. Sanjay prepared a blood sample for Raven to bring back to her lab for further comparison.

Julianna entered the hall outside of Mordred’s room. “Bo told me to let you know he had to leave. His partner was waiting for him outside to pick him up. He said something about Jade showing up at the festival.”

“Tell Jet we’re doing all we can for Mordred,” Raven said as she headed for the exit. Soon she was in her car, racing toward town. Her bad feelings about this night were growing in intensity. By the time she reached Town Hall, her suspicions that the evening would end in disaster were no longer simmering beneath the surface, but were quickly approaching a boil.

Chapter Seven

Raven got out of her car and raced to the park next to Town Hall. There had been no mistaking her. All the photos Raven had seen, including the computer-enhanced picture, indicated that the young woman at the center of the commotion was Jade Laroque. Amidst the clamor, Jade was calm. That was just before Raven observed the sea of people gawking at Bo who lay on the ground unconscious.

Raven's stomach clenched then threatened to expel its contents. Her head swam as all the sights and sounds pulsed around her, threatening to pull her into darkness. "Bo!" His name tore out of her in a rush of adrenaline. Her incisors lengthened and she knew her eyes changed to silver ice.

Pushing her way through the crowd, Raven knelt beside him and felt for his pulse. She noticed her hands were shaking and moist with perspiration. She blinked back the tears that blurred her vision. *Get it together, Strigoi.*

He had a fairly strong rhythm, but he didn't respond to her verbal or psychic requests. "Boo, please...open your eyes. Squeeze my hand if you can hear me." She caressed his cheek and forehead pushing his hair off his face. A white, powdery substance stuck to

her fingertips, and she wiped it on the moist grass beside her. The film covered the skin around his nose.

“Raven, what happened?” Joe Menendez asked as he ran over, out of breath. “Did anyone call 911?”

“I did,” Jade said, waving her cell phone. From the memories Raven had of watching old family movies, Jade even sounded like their mother.

“What happened here?” Raven’s gaze never left Jade. Her hand clutched Bo’s.

The two sisters stared at each other. Jade glared at the Raven with resolve—while Raven overflowed with anger.

Jade placed her cell phone into her jacket pocket. Leaves crunched under her feet as she started to approach Raven. “I was returning from the parade and some lunatic jumped out at me from the bushes.” Jade pointed to a thicket of bittersweet behind her. “The next thing I know this man here pushed me out of the way. I didn’t see anything after that.”

Raven felt her skin growing colder. That was not how things had transpired and Raven knew it, somehow she could scent the lies. She looked around, tuning in psychically to see if there was anyone who fit Laroque’s description, but no one felt unfamiliar.

Screeching sirens filled the night air while wisps of clouds blocked the moon’s light.

“Can I go now?” the young woman impatiently asked.

“No, you can’t go now. This man’s a cop, and we need a statement from you,” Joe tersely responded.

“Coming through!” the EMTs warned as the crowd parted.

“What happened?” Solaris’s familiar voice called from behind the crowd. “Oh. My. Gods. Raven. What happened to Bo?”

Raven moved away on unsteady legs to make room for the medics. “I don’t know, Sol. When I got here, Bo was unconscious. According to this young woman, he saved her from an unknown assailant.” She was barely holding her emotions at bay as she looked at her beloved.

Solaris placed a strong, reassuring arm around Raven’s shoulder. Sol’s body stiffened as she recognized that it was Raven’s half-sister standing in the midst of the crowd. As the EMTs lifted Bo onto the stretcher, Raven broke away from Sol and stormed over to Jade.

She inhaled deeply. “I know who you are, and if I find out you had anything to do with this man’s condition, you’ll be sorry you ever set foot on this island.” Raven finished with a crooked smile, revealing her extended incisors. “Do we understand each other?”

Jade swallowed hard. “Yes.”

“Sister or not, I’ll find you.”

The young woman just nodded in silence.

Raven spun around. “I want a sample of whatever this substance is around the nose and mouth,” she directed the paramedics.

“Come with me, miss,” Joe interrupted.

“It’s Laroque, Jade Laroque,” Jade answered.

“Let’s go, Raven. You ride in the ambulance with Bo,” Sol instructed. “Give me your keys. I’ll drive your car and leave it at the hospital.”

Raven followed, quickly handing Sol her keys. She looked over her shoulder and noticed Jade's eyes were downcast, a frown tugging at her mouth.

Raven sat next to Bo in the ambulance. "His pressure is dropping," she frantically called to Steve, one of the EMTs. "Can you push those fluids faster?"

"Dr. Strigoi, we're doing all we can. His temperature's up. Is he allergic to any medications?"

Raven felt the ambulance swerve around the corner. "Not as far as I know. He has always been healthy. I-I've never seen him ill."

Steve lifted Bo's sleeve to take another blood pressure reading. Raven noticed a red mark on his bicep.

It was a tiny puncture, just like the one on Derrick's arm.

The ambulance careened to the ER entrance, finally coming to a halt. Raven jumped out of the ambulance as soon as the doors opened. She was in doctor mode now. She had to be. It took all the willpower she had to suppress the emotions that kept bubbling to the surface. Fear and anger meshed together, becoming a symbiotic energy that threatened to fully transform her from human to Lamai. She couldn't allow that to happen. Not until she knew Bo was out of danger.

"I want a full blood work-up, tox included—and check for Tetradoxin!" she barked to the staff as they wheeled Bo into an exam room. "Get me an EKG, CAT scan and an ultrasound, stat!"

The EMTs had already checked his pupils, but Raven checked them again. They were slightly dilated, the iris a golden color. It

was as if his wolf counterpart was trying to emerge to facilitate his healing.

Raven whispered into his ear, “Can you hear me, Boo?”

There was no response. The nurses worked quickly, getting Bo undressed and into a hospital gown.

The entire ER staff at Seacrest Hospital was familiar with the magickal community. A majority of the staff were some variation of supernatural being.

The doors swung open and Tracy rushed in, throwing her bag onto an empty chair. “I came as soon as I heard. What exactly happened?”

“I’m afraid he’s somehow become infected,” Raven said, walking over to reveal the puncture mark on his arm. “There was news of a woman fitting my sister’s description seen at the festival, and Bo went to check it out.” Raven ran her hands up and down her arms. Tracy looked confused. “It’s a long story. Jade’s got to be involved. My sister had to be the bait. Bo was protecting her from an unknown assailant, and he was stuck. I bet the blood of one of the missing DBs has infected him.”

Tracy stepped closer to Raven. “Infected him? How? With what?”

Raven tried to mask the fear she bottled up inside. “I’m not a hundred percent certain. Some type of virus.”

“Raven, in the twelve years I’ve known you, you’ve never had this look of unmitigated fear. Until now.”

“I’m scared, Tracy. This is serious shit.” Raven paced as her mind raced, thinking of different scenarios that might possibly be

playing out. “It’s some kind of virus. I don’t even want to say what it might be, but if it is what I think it is...let’s just say we’re royally screwed. Bo needs to be quarantined until we know for certain.”

“What? Tell me what you think it is.”

“Some altered strain of Ebola,” Raven answered in a whisper.

One of the nurses abruptly backed away from the IV in Bo’s arm. She reported to Raven, “Dr. Odin is on tonight. He should be in here any second. I saw him looking over Bo’s chart.”

“Thanks, Maureen. You’ll be staying with him?”

Maureen nodded. “Yes, I won’t leave unless the doctor or another nurse arrives. Not to worry. Should I gear up, Dr. Strigoi?”

Raven gave her a weak smile. “I don’t think that will be necessary.”

Maureen was visibly nervous. “B-but I thought I heard you say...”

“Believe it or not, this strain of Ebola has been genetically altered. It’s a recombinant virus, which means it’s been genetically changed in a lab. The preliminary reports show it doesn’t affect humans. You are still human, right?” Raven tried to soften her tone. Maureen was married to a Lamai.

“Of course. Jack wouldn’t...”

Tracy’s voice was quiet yet confident. “Don’t worry. You’ll be okay.” She kept moving out of the way of the nurses.

Raven placed her hand reassuringly on Maureen’s shoulder. “I’m sorry. That was a poor attempt at humor.”

Maureen gave a slight smile. “I’ll get Dr. Odin.”

Raven understood the implications. Bo could not be under her care, at least not on paper. She had privileges at the hospital, but only in her capacity as the M.E. For the sake of appearances and hospital protocol, Dr. Ian Odin would look after Bo. But Raven would have a say in his treatment as well.

“Has anyone notified Bo’s family?” Dr. Odin bellowed, bursting through the doors of the exam room. His white, shoulder-length hair flew in all directions, in direct opposition to his meticulously trimmed beard. “I want blood matches from his whole family. I know his grandfather shares his blood type. Let’s get Mat in here. I want a tox work-up on this white substance that’s covering his face.”

“I already had the EMTs get a sample,” Raven said, double-checking with Tracy.

“Yes, we have it.”

Ian motioned with his hands for things to speed up. “Maureen, get that powder off his face now.”

“Bo’s partner should be on his way with Matoskah. Bo’s parents are out west visiting his sisters. Joe is calling them as well,” Raven said, gently stroking Bo’s cheek. He felt warmer than before.

Raven moved out of Maureen’s way so the nurse could clean off Bo’s face. “Is he getting a broad spectrum antibiotic?” she asked, knowing deep down it wouldn’t matter in the least.

Dr. Odin came over and took Bo’s vitals again. “Yes. Why don’t you go down to the lab and check on his results?”

Raven stalled, not wanting to leave. “Do you know how Mordred is doing? Are the transfusions helping him?”

“I don’t know. Last I heard, he was stable,” Ian said, updating the chart. “His temp’s one-oh-two. Bo usually runs a temp of one-hundred, correct, Raven?”

Tracy offered, “I’ll stay with him.”

Raven kissed Bo’s face. It was warm. “Yes, Ian, usually. I’ll be in the lab. Page me immediately if there are any changes.” Raven wanted to be sure before she confided to Dr. Odin her suspicions concerning the virus.

“Of course, of course,” the white-haired doctor chided.

She walked out into the hall, directly into Tobias. “Raven, how is he? What happened?”

For some reason, at the sound of her father’s voice, she broke down. A profusion of tears fell from her eyes. Floodgates opened and fear nestled within her heart. “I don’t exactly know. I-I think Jade had something to do with this. She w-was there. He must have been infected. There’s the identical puncture m-mark on his arm, same as the others, and h-he’s unconscious. There was white powder on his face.”

Tobias hugged her, and she melted in the safety of his arms. “I’ve been doing some research of my own while I’ve been in town. I think I have someone who may be able to help.” He held her at arms length for a moment. “You must be strong now, *dulciuri inimă*. Who is Bo’s doctor?”

Raven wiped the tears from her face, forcing them to cease. As much as she wanted to curl up into a tight ball and become a little girl again, her father was right. There would be plenty of time for crying later. “Master Wizard and Chief of Staff Ian Odin.”

Tobias gave Raven another hug before releasing her. “Good. He knows almost all there is to know about what we’re up against.”

“I’m not so certain about that. I received another call from my colleague, Dr. Kronberg, in San Francisco. It seems that Laroque’s been experimenting with viruses, particularly Ebola.” Raven knew she had to focus. Bo’s life depended on her ability to solve this medical mystery.

Her father smirked. “I would ask how he was able to get his hands on Ebola, but, knowing Laroque, it must have involved magick.”

“Stay with Bo until I get back?” she asked.

He brushed his hand across her cheek, wiping away a rogue tear. “Of course. Emerald is upstairs checking on Mordred. When you get back, I’m going to call in a few favors.”

Raven nodded and turned toward the lab.

“Tell me again why we have to do this?” Jade asked the man in the shadows. The only light came from the flames in the hearth that created streams of shadows and illumination.

He stepped into the light. His chestnut hair was streaked with white at the temples, his eyes the color of brandy. Not overtly handsome, he was attractive in a rugged and dangerous way. His aura hinted of both as did his manner and appearance.

“Because you made me promise not to hurt her,” Laroque said to his daughter. Purposely his voice remained level, void of any trace of anger.

“I don’t want things to be this way, *père*,” she pleaded as she stood before him, the warmth of the fire at her back.

“Now that you’ve seen her, you have a change of heart?” He spoke softly to his daughter. Taking a cigar out of his humidor, he lit it.

He, to this day, could not get over the striking resemblance she bore to her mother. At some moments, when his guard was down, he could almost feel Nicolette’s presence. The tone of Jade’s voice, the color of her hair and the glint in her eyes all echoed Nicolette.

Jade fanned the smoky air in front of her. “Raven’s my family. No matter how much you hate Tobias, she is still my sister.”

He reined in his frustration. “I explained all of this to you. I can’t touch Tobias. The only way to get to him is through his family. You begged me not to harm Raven. What else can I do but go after the man she loves?” He poured a cup of tea from an antique china pot.

Jade frowned. “Yes, I remember all that.” She turned away and stared into the flames.

Laroque walked over to his daughter. “Tobias took your mother away from us. He made her feel incredibly guilty over what happened, he never let up on her and he drove her to suicide.” He felt the muscles in his neck strain as he tried to keep his voice in check. He put his hand on her shoulder, but she moved away, toward the sofa opposite the fireplace.

Jade sat. “How do you know that?”

“Because I know Tobias!” Laroque slammed the delicate china cup against the desktop, causing it to splinter into tiny fragments.

Jade pushed him too far. Every conversation that included mention of her mother and Tobias ended the same way. Laroque stormed over to the opposite end of the room in a fury. An archway separated him from his daughter. He stood in his office.

He sensed Jade's apprehension. Ever since she'd seen her sister, she'd had mixed emotions about everything. Laroque could read his daughter and knew Jade began to question the whole situation after observing Raven and Tobias together at the festival. The ancient Lamai appeared to care deeply about his daughter. Laroque was aware of Jade's propensity to empathize with others.

Why would Tobias take Raven's mother away from her? Jade had asked her father that question numerous times. And he patiently explained that was exactly what happened. It did not make sense to her, though. Jade pointed out that the dark-haired vampire loved Nicolette as much as her own father did. That enraged him, but he hid his emotions well.

She followed her father into his private office.

"The police know you're here."

"So?" Laroque had calmed down. "I had no intention of keeping my presence here a secret." He tried to keep an aura of power and strength around him. But in his daughter's company, he softened. Jade, as her mother before her, had that effect on him. It was as if they had the secret code to his heart and knew exactly how to open it.

Not only did Jade inherit her mother's good looks, she also had her gift of psychic intuition. "It's a matter of time before they piece this all together. I don't want to lose you, too!" she cried.

“You won’t lose me, *ma précieuse*,” he reassured her.

Jade walked to her father and settled into his arms. He hugged her tightly.

“I just wish you could let this go,” she said.

“I know you do, but I cannot... He not only took your mother from me, he took you for the first four years of your life and let that lawyer’s sister raise you. If I hadn’t found you, you would never have known the truth. You would never have known about me. That I cannot forgive.” He guided his daughter to his leather chair and sat her down. Silently, he walked to the fireplace and stoked the fire back to roaring flames.

“You promise you’re not going to hurt them—not Frank and Deidre?” She looked plaintively at him.

“I promise. I have some business I have to attend to. I’ll be back in a little while.”

“His blood work is back. He’s unconscious due to the Tetradoxin.” Raven stood next to Bo once more as she shared the results from the blood panel with Tracy.

“Due to the fact that Bo is a shape shifter, his blood differs from Derrick’s. He is infected, though. Something is going on. I may have to wait a while until this new strain of virus incubates. I don’t know how this is going to affect him. He’s not like the others. He’s consumed my blood. That will either help him, or kill him.”

“His temperature is the same. I suppose it’s a good sign that it hasn’t elevated,” Tracy remarked. “I can do some more lab work, if

you like. If there's anything to be found I'll find it. I'll start ELISA testing and PCR."

"Already on it. You could try virus isolation."

"You got it."

Raven pulled a chair over to Bo's bedside. "That would be great, thanks, Trace. I saw Mat and Joe arrive. Mat's going to give blood and we'll start the transfusions. Where is Dr. Odin?"

"Your father came by with Nathaniel, Dr. Odin's brother. I think they're brainstorming. I didn't know Nat is an M.D., with extensive experience in hematology and immunology...of both the magickal and medical persuasions." Tracy winked and headed to the door trying somehow to put her boss's mind at ease.

"That must be the favor my father was calling in—Nathaniel."

Sitting next to Bo, Raven tried desperately to reach him. They were always able to communicate without words, but this time he wasn't responding. For the first time she feared she might lose him. Forever.

She knew of only one way to help him and that was to find Jade. She was the key to this whole mystery, and if Raven could enlist her aid, then maybe he would have a fighting chance.

"I'll be back as soon as I'm able, *meu dragoste*." She leaned over and kissed his lips. He lay there unmoving. Her heart fractured into tiny pieces. She couldn't lose him.

"Maureen, they know how to get in touch with me. I've got to try to find whoever did this to Bo and the others."

Maureen nodded with a sad smile. "Be careful," was all she said.

The festivities had ended for the night. It was approaching two a.m. Raven stood at the Three Maidens Marina dock waiting for Caleb Gosling, an old family friend. Uncle Caleb, as she called him, used to take her fishing when she was a little girl. So when Raven called and asked him to borrow a boat, he simply asked, “Where and when do you want to meet?”

Raven knew she could count on him.

“You headed far?” Caleb asked, wiping the sleep from his denim blue eyes as he walked toward her.

He handed a set of keys to Raven. Caleb was one of the few humans on the island whom she trusted.

“No, not very far. Thanks, Uncle Caleb.”

Untying the line around the cleat, he asked, “You’re going alone? That detective going with you?”

“No, I’m going alone.” She hopped into the twenty-five-foot Boston Whaler, tossing her bag onto the passenger seat.

He hurled the rope to her. “I don’t suppose you’d tell me what you’re up to?”

Raven laughed. “You know me too well. No, Uncle, I wouldn’t tell, but I’ll be all right.” Despite her laughter, worry lines creased around her eyes.

He let out a hopeless sigh. “You remember how this all works, missy?” He winked in the moonlight.

She saluted. “Aye, captain. I do.”

“Just leave the keys in the boathouse when you return...and be careful. The waters should be calm tonight. But then again, even if

they weren't, you'd convince them to settle down." He turned with a wave and walked back to his waterfront home.

Raven smiled and turned the motor on, then headed out to the open waters.

As the boat sliced through the ocean, Raven honed in to her newfound sister's energies. Like the depth finder that aided her in the journey across the waters, her preternatural abilities acted as an echolocation device. Rather than sending out a sound, Raven sent out an energy vibration on the same frequency as her sister's.

Hannah's Vineyard was approximately four nautical miles from the island of Mirabelle Cove, and Raven started to pick up on Jade's energy at two miles out. It came from the southwest corner of the smaller island. Steering the boat in that direction, she pushed the throttle down.

The closer she got to her destination, the stronger the signal she received. Against the night sky's landscape, Laroque's home glowed an eerie neon green. A protective shield, no doubt, constructed by the *bokur*. She cut the engine and let the vessel drift to the docks.

Raven quickly tied the boat to the pylon, took her bag and crouched as she made her way to the house. A light shone through the windows of a room located on the northwest side of the house. Steadily she slipped through the vegetation and peered through the window.

A fire blazed in the fireplace. On the mantle were a dozen photos. Raven could see with her preternatural sight all the pictures

looked like Jade at various stages of her life. A cat lay sleeping next to a wingback chair where Jade sat staring into the fire.

There was neither a sign of Laroque, nor a boat docked. *Maybe he's out*, Raven thought.

Walking around toward the back of the house she tried to sense if there were any guard dogs lurking in the shadows. There were none. Laroque must have relied on his magick for protection. Locked doors stood between her and Jade as she tried to slip inside the house undetected. Continuing her search for a way in, she noticed a stairwell leading to a cellar entrance at the rear of the house. She tiptoed down and gave the door a nudge. It opened with a creak.

Her eyes adjusted automatically to the dark like a feline's. Boxes stood all around the perimeter of the room. Some were marked Nicki's Personal Items. At the far end was a staircase. Carefully, she placed her foot on the bottom step. She listened for any voices coming from the upstairs, but all was silent. She proceeded up the stairs, almost floating.

Raven pushed open the door at the top of the stairs and headed into a kitchen area. She stealthily walked through a small mudroom and into the kitchen. There were no lights on except for in the den. Raven followed the sound of the crackling fire. Standing against a china closet in what seemed to be the dining room, she reached into her bag and took out a syringe of morphine.

She stood behind the chair where Jade relaxed, the syringe ready to plunge into her arm. Her arm moved with such speed, it

was a blur. Raven would have surprised her sister if it were not for that damned cat.

Chapter Eight

“Shit!” Jade screamed. The feline jumped, all four claws extended, lunging toward Raven, hissing and spitting. With one swift move, Raven grabbed Jade by the arm and shoved in the needle, emptying its contents.

Jade went limp within a few moments. Raven caught her before she fell. Raven’s form shimmered somewhere between human and Lamai. Her strength had tripled. She backtracked down the stairs and out into the night.

Gingerly placing Jade on the floor of the boat, Raven untied the lines and pushed off. She turned on the ignition while the boat drifted into the open sea. Jade would be out for a few hours, which was more than enough time to get her back to town. As Raven hurried back, she could see in the distance another boat heading toward Hannah’s Vineyard. A Porsche Fearless.

Laroque.

“Tracy...” Raven said into her cell phone against the wind. She prayed her phone reception was strong enough.

Tracy sounded as if she were talking into a tin can. “Raven, where are you?”

“How’s Bo?” she yelled above the wind.

“We’ve given him the transfusion, but thus far, no change. No results back from the tests yet, either. His temp’s up a bit and he’s still unconscious—plus we’ve got another patient in with the same symptoms. Another shifter—one of Solaris’s employees.”

Raven’s head began to throb. “Damn. I’ll be there in half an hour.”

“Your father is out looking for you, Raven.”

“I’ll see you soon.” She signed off.

After mooring the boat and leaving the keys for Caleb in the boathouse, Raven carried Jade to her car. She rushed to the hospital, knowing it was only a matter of time before Laroque made his way back to Mirabelle Cove. He would be furious. Raven made two quick calls from her car, first to Solaris then to Julianna, asking them to use their magick to create shields for hiding Jade’s whereabouts. Her next call was to Tracy.

“Don’t ask why, but can you bring a hospital bed to autopsy room one? I’m going to need restraints, too.”

Tracy was silent on the other end. Finally she muttered, “Ah, yeah. Sure thing.”

Raven pulled into the parking lot, entering the hospital through the rear entrance. She brought Jade to the M.E.’s office. She kicked open her office door and plopped her sister onto the couch.

Jade was the only hope for helping Bo and the others. Raven wasn’t too thrilled with having to threaten her, but her options were limited. For Bo, she would do whatever she had to in order to save his life.

A sudden chill filled the air. Raven sensed that her father was there. He burst through the doorway. His gaze went directly to the couch where Jade lay unconscious.

His silver eyes widened. Fury enveloped him. “What did you do?” he yelled.

Raven was just as fierce in her reply. “I’m trying to save Bo. I saw no other way. Laroque will have to give me the antidote, or else...”

Tobias towered over her. His eyes bore into her. “What? You’re going to kill her?”

Suddenly, inner peace filled her. “No, I’m going to infect her. It’s called karma.”

Tobias’s expression was stern. “I guess you are your father’s daughter after all.”

She stared at him. “I suppose I am.”

“What are you going to infect her with?”

“Lamai blood.”

Tracy walked in. “The gurney’s in the exam room,” she said, stopping as soon as she caught sight of handsome Tobias Strigoi.

Raven’s father lifted Jade and carried her into the exam room. He placed her on the bed as Tracy strapped her in the arm and leg restraints.

“She’ll be out for another hour or so. Can you stay here while I go check on Bo?” Raven asked her father. He was staring at the young woman, no doubt amazed at her likeness to Nicolette.

“Of course,” he answered.

His guard was down and Raven could read him. He secretly wished Laroque would show up, and then they could settle this score once and for all. He did not have to keep his word to Nicolette any longer. And to protect his daughter, he would do anything. Raven smiled to herself. It figured her father could feel certain emotions, but was unable to verbalize them.

Raven walked down the hall and through the double doors into the quarantine critical care unit. Her throat tightened as she caught sight of her beloved lying in the bed, hooked up to monitors. His once bronzed skin appeared chalky white. Mat, Bo's grandfather, sat next to him on one side, and Frank stood on the other side.

"Raven." Frank approached and embraced her. "I'm so sorry."

Raven swore to herself she would *not* start to cry again. "He's going to be fine, Frank. I'm not going to let anything happen to him. We've come too far. How are you, Mat?" Raven asked as she approached Bo's grandfather. She gave him a tender hug.

She sensed the magick in the room. The smell of sage and the power of the stones and feathers that Mat had placed around Bo's bed for healing filled the air.

Dr. Odin entered. "There you are. I'm afraid the transfusion's not working as we'd hoped. Tracy's been working with Nat trying to come up with the antidote to what this is. Something that can reverse the effects of this...virus. The other carrier is dead. They found him in an alley a little while ago. But he's already infected more than a few in our community. A siren washed up on the shore, dead. Davis did the autopsies. I assisted. The cause was an unknown virus, different from your original sample. I assume it's mutated."

He updated Bo's chart as he spoke. "Mordred is responding to the treatments. He's had three transfusions, his temperature's normal and the original symptoms are gradually disappearing. Perhaps Bo will show some improvement after another transfusion."

Raven decided it was time to tell Ian Odin what she feared the virus was, and who created it. She began by explaining the spaghetti-like strand found in Derrick Bly's cells.

"That's why the fae are less affected by this virus—plus Mordred is half-human. The virus is thought to be zoonotic and therefore deadly to shifters, sirens, or other animals. Ian, have you tried giving Bo type O negative blood from a human? Perhaps if we flood his system with human blood..."

Ian reassuringly placed his hand on Raven's shoulder. "That's our next step. After that, I don't know what else we can do. Nat is working on a few things. We'll come up with an alternative."

Tracy rushed over to the window of Bo's room, holding up a piece of paper. On it was written: *You were right. It's a recombinant virus, altered Ebola.*

Raven's world came crashing down.

Raven stood by the foot of Bo's bed, thinking back to the first time she'd laid eyes on him. It was over ten years ago. *Gosh, time flies*, she thought as threads of hope unraveled.

Raven was eighteen and had finished her first year of college. It was time for the celebration of spring's arrival on Mirabelle Cove.

It was May Day Eve: April thirtieth.

She'd completed all her tests early, and she had the entire summer off.

Tobias had purchased for Raven a small cottage for her summers on the island as a birthday gift. That tiny cottage was now her two-storey Victorian-style home, complete with wrap-around porch and four bedrooms—a home she insisted on paying to renovate herself.

And she did.

She settled into her cozy new home and even started a part-time job at Nigella's parents' farm. Raven was ready to celebrate May eve with the rest of the town.

As twilight fell on that balmy spring night, the bonfires blazed and the minstrels played. That year it was exceptionally warm. The stars were brighter than usual. At least that was how Raven remembered it.

She was such a young, innocent Lamai back then. She stood in the moonlight wearing a sheer cotton camisole dress and sandals with laces that snaked up her calves. Eyeing those who danced around the fire, she spied Bo, but not before he caught sight of her. The excitement caused her skin to prickle. It was instantaneous. The magick that sparked between them swirled, causing the flames to leap higher into the night sky.

He was tall and brawny. His bronze skin glistened in the firelight. As he moved closer to her she barely noticed that she'd already begun to move toward him. His eyes glowed golden for a moment, then flashed back to black.

All she heard was his voice as he spoke. "My name's Bo."

His seductive, full lips mesmerized her.

A mild breeze blew a lock of hair across her cheek, and his hand grazed her soft skin as he pushed it out of her eyes. His touch sent waves of heat through her body. Raven felt a hunger building that wasn't for blood.

"Raven...Raven Strigoi," she said, finding her voice, lost in his eyes.

"I haven't seen you around, Raven Strigoi. Where have you been hiding?" He smiled and his face lit up, putting the fire to shame.

Raven became uncharacteristically shy. "College. I'm attending Harvard and just finished up for the year."

"Harvard. Not too shabby. I went to the University of Colorado."

They walked under the stars and into a copse secluded from the rest of the celebrants. Pines, hemlocks and junipers scented the air with heady fragrances. Daffodils of many varieties dotted the landscape with punches of vivid yellows, ochre and bright whites. A row of forsythia hid the couple from those still dancing and singing around the bonfire.

A crunchy, brown pile of the previous autumn's leaves lay scattered underneath the pines, creating an inviting palette for the two to rest upon.

Raven hadn't noticed until then that Bo was carrying a blanket in his muscular arms. He spread it on the ground and sat upon it, patting a spot next to him. She joined him, not knowing what to say next.

Should I just blurt out that I'm a virgin? she wondered. *No, that would send him running for the hills.*

"I've heard the name Strigoi. Your father is a powerful Lamai," he finally said. "One of the oldest, too."

"Yes, he is. I don't get to see him often, though. He travels a lot. And what's your last name?" she asked, noticing the easy way he acted with her. She liked that he seemed quite comfortable in his own skin.

"Wasake," he answered.

"Ah, yes, the shape shifter clan. Have you lived on the island long? I-I never noticed you before, either."

When he smiled, two delightful dimples appeared on either side of his tempting mouth as if poised for a kiss. "No. I'm fairly new to the island. I received an offer to join the police force. Technically I was transferred here."

"Oh. Where did you live before moving here?" She couldn't take her eyes off him. *He is the most beautiful man I've ever seen.*

Bo picked at a blade of grass. "Colorado."

"That makes sense since you attended the University of Colorado. Was it a mutual switch in locations?" Feeling her skin radiating heat at the nearness of him, she was a bundle of nerves. It being the holiday for making love, she had preplanned to lose her status as a virgin that night.

At eighteen, she had waited long enough, and her body agreed. It hungered constantly for either blood or lust. If she didn't find the right mate she would wait, but that seemed to be a moot point now. He was supremely delectable. She licked her lips in anticipation of

his kiss. The feeling seemed to be mutual as Bo obviously struggled to focus on the subject of their conversation. He was a vision, an Aztec god come to life. Her marble-like skin contrasted with his deep copper color and shimmered with an opalescent glow. The sight of him caused her body to react on a most basic level. Desire. She wanted desperately for him to press his lips to hers.

The line of his neck was strong, and his rapid pulse beat erratically. Her dress slid over her shoulder, revealing more skin. His gaze traveled down to her ample bosom. He gently touched the locket nestled between her breasts. She could feel his hunger—to possess her—and her desire grew by the minute. Raven wanted to be possessed by him.

His gaze fell to her tiny waist, then to her hips, all visible through her sheer dress, leading to long, slender thighs. He appeared lost in the thought of her secret garden. Beads of sweat dotted his upper lip. Bo leaned in to kiss her, but pulled away. Taking a deep breath, he nervously sighed.

Raven thought he was bored already with her company. *Think of something intriguing to say*, she berated herself.

He found his tongue. “Yes, it was a mutual move. Someone here wanted to transfer to Colorado. My grandfather has lived on the island for over twenty years. He asked me to see if I could transfer here.” He inched nearer to her. “I moved to be closer to him.”

Thank the Gods she didn’t have to be witty. “Do you like it here?”

His finger traced the pattern on the blanket as he seemingly tried to make a clever remark.

“Yeah, very much,” was all he said.

He wasn’t making this easy. “I’m glad you like it here.” She smiled. *Oh, what a conversationalist.*

“Me, too.” He leaned over to her and gently kissed her lips. When he met no resistance, his kisses became more urgent. She couldn’t explain it, but she felt that this man belonged with her—to her. Was it the heat between them, or the energy of May Day?

Raven wasn’t sure. The sounds of other couples making love in the dark certainly added to the seductive ambiance. It was the holiday of fertility.

She focused her energy on him. His thoughts were identical to hers. She psychically knew it. Bo wanted to possess her in a way he’d never experienced before. She smiled inwardly, happy to find she wasn’t alone in her feelings.

Raven balked when she read his memories of past lovers. At twenty-six, he’d bedded many women, but she was different to him. With many of them, he had to control his desires in bed, unless he was with another shape shifter. Even the fae he’d been with feared what his true passions could unleash. Her gift was a blessing and a curse as she was presented with a visual montage of his sexual adventures.

Still, he instinctively knew he had to be gentle with Raven. *Uh oh, he knows I’m a virgin.* She cut the psychic bond.

“Did that answer most of your questions?” he asked.

For a Lamai, Raven turned an admirable shade of apple red.

She answered him with a kiss. Her arms wrapped around him as she pressed closer, her breasts rubbing against his chest. The fabric's sheer quality left nothing to his imagination. He cupped her breast, and she let out a lusty moan. Her eyes, icy silver now, gazed into his golden ones. Her hunger was taking control.

Kneeling before him, she pulled down the top of her dress. His eyes drank in her innocence, and in an instant he kissed her throat. She held his neck close, feeling the pulsing of his arteries. The nearness of him sent her reeling with desire.

He laid her down upon the blanket, raised her skirt and removed her panties. His strong hands caressed her. If she didn't know better, she'd swear he had bewitched her. Bo had a magick all his own. Sex appeal.

All magickal species enjoyed sex. Bo was no exception, but Raven psychically felt new emotions flooding his mind and heart. He seemed to want to protect her. As if he wanted her to be his mate—he was easy for her to read—something he had never before considered about another woman.

She radiated freshness and purity, though at that moment her thoughts were filled with many things, none of which were pure.

Raven writhed underneath him.

He leaned over her. The weight of his body sent sparks of heat through hers. "The desire between blood and lust is strong," he whispered. Her hands stroked across his back, igniting a fierce fire.

"I don't...I mean...I'm not like this, really. There's something about you—like I've known you forever," she whispered.

"Shh...it's okay, I feel it, too."

She reached for the waistband of his pants, unsnapping them, freeing him of the hindrance of the material. Raising her hips, she attempted to guide him inside her. He murmured words in a foreign language as he entered her warmth. A groan of satisfaction passed his lips.

He suddenly stopped. “You...you’ve never...you *are* a virgin.”

Bo must have seen the pain on her face. He was a large man, and she looked at him with wonder. He smiled as if to calm her for fear she’d run off into the woods and live out her days as a spinster Lamai.

She held onto him when he tried to pull out. “No, please. I want you... Don’t stop,” she whispered.

“Are you certain? I-I don’t want to hurt you, physically or emotionally.” He buried his head in her hair and kissed her neck. “Hmm, but I do want you so very much...” By the end of this night, he was going to have her. And she was going to let him.

“I want you, too,” she murmured.

He took his time as he gently eased his way inside of her. “Tell me if I’m hurting you...”

Then the world around them dimmed, and they were lost in each other’s energy. Her moans of slight pain turned to pleasure and filled the night air as they made love. Although she’d just met Bo, she felt she had known him for eons.

He nipped at her breasts and neck, gently breaking the skin and drinking her blood. She let him. She would let him do whatever he pleased. She wanted him to explore her.

As he rocked within her, he held back his long black hair, exposing his neck. “Taste,” he offered. His eyes flashed to golden orbs.

“Are you sure?” Raven wondered if he knew that for her kind this was an act of marking a mate.

“Oh, yeah,” he groaned.

She moaned in the throes of an orgasm.

The moment her teeth dug into his flesh, he let out an ear-piercing howl as he came inside of her. Worlds collided between shifter and Lamai, man and woman, and neither would ever be the same.

They lay in each other’s arms, staring at the stars, catching their breath.

“I’d say we did our part to welcome spring and celebrate the season of mating,” he mused then sighed with the sheer contentment of satisfaction.

Talk about a dose of reality. “Yes. I suppose we did. I-I’d better go,” she said, beginning to dress while pulling the dried grass out of her hair. She cursed herself for thinking this was anything more to him than a ritual. That he felt the same emotions she did. *How stupid could I be?*

Bo’s eyes widened as he noticed the blood on her thigh. He gently touched between her legs. There on his fingers was her blood. He wiped it on newly sprouting wildflowers.

“A gift to the Earth Mother,” he said with a wink.

She could feel her ire growing. “Yes. It was my pleasure to give up my virginity to...the Earth Mother,” she said between gritted teeth.

Raven slid into her bra and panties and pulled on her wrinkled dress. *Any idiot could see this man was trouble. Too good looking, with a body to shame the gods and enough confidence for ten men. Oh, Raven, you fool.*

“Nice to meet you, Bo. Good night,” she curtly said. She couldn’t help but feel insulted by his casual reaction to her lost virginity. The thought that she may have simply been one of many he’d had sex with that night turned her frosty cold. To imagine she gave him her most precious gift. What was she thinking? Obviously, she wasn’t thinking, in the throes of passion.

His jaw dropped open. “Wait...don’t go. The night’s still young.”

This man was at a loss for words. *Okay, confidence level dropped to five men.* His eyes betrayed his disbelief that the night would end so quickly.

He reached for her. “Please don’t go. There’s so much more I want to know about you. We’ve only just begun...”

Raven cut him off. “I’m sure there are many other young maidens who would love to share your blanket.” She turned and walked away, leaving Bo speechless and fumbling to dress.

What she would not know, until years later, was that he would spend the rest of that night—and the weeks that followed—looking for her.

Chapter Nine

Philippe Laroque sensed the Lamai's energy in the air as he tied his boat to the dock. He silently cursed the day he promised his daughter he wouldn't hurt Raven Strigoi. It was too late; he'd given his daughter his word.

He feared the half-breed had come for his daughter. If she did, all bets were off. He would do whatever was necessary to get Jade back.

He rushed to the back of the house, past the sliding doors, punching in the code for the alarm before it sounded. It was disarmed. Checking each room, he called out to his daughter, but there was only silence.

Stepping toward the bookcase in his den, he reached for the thick black leather-bound grimoire. Inside the book was a cut-out of pages measuring three inches by five inches, and in it he kept three small vials. He closed the book, satisfied his virus was still safe, and replaced it on the shelf. Before doing so, he removed one of the vials and slipped it into his pocket.

There were a few more hours until dawn. Tobias Strigoi would soon relive the pain that Laroque had suffered: the loss of a loved one.

“What do you want from me?” Jade struggled against the restraints. The room was dark and her eyes had trouble focusing, but she sensed someone was in the room with her.

“Where does he keep the virus?” Her icy voice cracked through the blackness. Raven had to keep her temper in check. If it took over, she could not be responsible for her actions. She remained connected to Bo’s aura and could feel his life force slipping away along with her self-control.

“There are things I could do to you that would make you beg for death. Or worse, I could turn you into a Lamai, and you would live long past all those you love. And your father would despise you, of course, knowing that you have the blood of Tobias Strigoi coursing through your veins. That would be an added bonus.”

Jade was panicking and she began to hyperventilate. “I don’t know what virus you’re talking about. He keeps his work private. I know nothing about what he’s done. All I know is that he blames *your* father for *our* mother’s death.” Hearing her say *our mother* sounded strange. She imagined it was odd for Jade as well. “I made him promise not to hurt you.”

Raven huffed. “How sweet.”

“Bitch,” Jade muttered.

“I make bitches look angelic.”

“My father’s a scientist. He’s always working on a project.”

“Then you knew he was up to something.” Raven paced the floor. Her mind raced. Time was running out.

Jade gasped in the gloom of the cold autopsy room, squirming. Raven smelled her fear. “All I know is that he wants to hurt your father.”

In an instant, Raven was at the side of the bed once more. “Were you in on that little scheme in the park?” She leaned over, inches away from her sister, baring her white fangs enough for Jade to see in the limited light.

Jade was silent.

A ripple passed through Raven. A menacing source of energy had entered the hospital grounds. Time was up.

“Answer me,” she growled, moving closer to the young woman’s neck.

“No.”

Raven swore back. “Liar!”

She thrust her head forward and sank her teeth into the flesh of her younger sister’s neck, grateful for the dark. If Raven had to see her face, she wasn’t sure she would be able to follow through.

“No...” Jade moaned as her blood pulsed into the Lamai’s mouth. The fingers of Raven’s left hand circled around and caressed Jade’s cheek then slowly wound around the soft brown curls of her hair.

It had been years since Raven had fed from a human. The emotions of the blood throbbed through her body. Jade arched against her sister and she shuddered from the ecstasy of it. Raven knew that intense ecstasy.

The joining of one being to another.

The sensations of flesh against flesh.

The scent of her sister filled her being.

Life experiences of her younger sibling flashed before her inner mind. Raven felt the impact of their mother's death on Jade. Her years as a little girl and what it was like for her living with Frank Dubois's sister, and then Laroque.

What was Laroque like? What had drawn her mother to him—and why? All these thoughts ran through Raven's mind, lost in the auspices of the blood.

At once, Raven pulled away.

Her face flushed. Blood dripped from the corners of her mouth. She reached for a cloth that rested on a nearby sink and wiped her lips.

Laroque was coming for her.

Ingesting Jade's blood gave her psychic antennae a boost and a direct link to Laroque. He was too close.

Jade grabbed her arm in fear.

Raven psychically observed as both the auras of her father and Laroque intertwined. Moments passed before she collected her wits. Then she realized what she had done and what she now had to do.

There was little time to think. With locks, charms and spells, she sealed the door to Jade's room. Raul, a member of Bo's tribe and a Jaguar shape shifter guarded the door.

Raven headed to Bo's room.

A voice echoed down the hall. "Raven!"

She spun around to face Tobias.

He was livid. "What is going on? Do you *want* to die?"

“I’m trying to save Bo.” She tried to pass her father, but his energy was too forceful.

“By bringing Laroque here? You know he’ll come for her.” His eyes flashed, full of rage.

“If he loves her, he’ll leave her right where she is. She’ll need a blood transfusion. If he doesn’t give me the antidote, he’ll have to deal with the consequences.” As an afterthought, she added, “And I don’t care what the Counsel has to say.”

Tobias lowered his head. “That’s the least of your troubles right now, Raven. You need to get to Bo’s room—now.”

Raven raced through the halls and into the ICU. Ian had added something to Bo’s IV. She couldn’t see what it was.

Tracy paced the floor.

Raven tilted her head toward her friend. “Trace, please give our friend a pint of O negative.”

Tracy dropped her gaze to the floor and walked out quietly.

“What’s that, Ian?” Raven asked as she approached Bo’s bedside. He looked so vulnerable, so weak—not like the strong warrior with the heart of a wolf that she knew him to be.

“Ian?” Raven asked again.

“Human antibodies.”

She knew they’d reached at the end of the line as far as treatment options were concerned. “Ian, I want you to take blood from me. We’ve fed from each other. Maybe I have some antibodies that could help him.”

Ian Odin shook his head. “Raven, he may bleed out. We don’t know how this will affect him.”

“Ian, please, try,” Raven begged. She was a doctor, and in her mind there had to be an answer to this medical puzzle. Ian Odin was a Master Wizard and a doctor. Together there was no way—no excuse—for them to lose Bo.

Ian nodded in agreement.

The nurse on duty set up a gurney for Raven and prepared the needle.

“We’re going to give him some of Mordred’s antibodies and see if that has a positive effect. I’m afraid the virus has mutated again,” Ian reported to his crestfallen co-worker.

Raven closed her eyes as the needle went into her arm. She was weak and worn out. The past few hours were taking their toll on her.

“What about Tobias? If he turned Bo to a Lamai? My father’s blood is powerful...” A knot formed in her throat when she heard the desperation in her voice. Mat, Bo’s grandfather, got up and walked over to Raven. He took her hand in his. She felt enormous strength from the elder.

He was soft-spoken and kind. “That would surely kill him, dear one. It is the wolf-magick in his blood that the virus is attacking. The spirits have warned me that Bo needs his human side to stay strong—to fight. You must pray to your mother’s spirit and to Hekate to help Bo. That your mother’s blood, which courses through your veins, strengthens him.”

For the first time all day, Raven smiled. *Everything happens for a reason*, she mused, and Jade being at the hospital might turn out to be a blessing in disguise.

Laroque knew his daughter was near. She was weak, but alive. His senses remained open as he targeted her location. Before he could rescue her, though, he had work to do. He needed just a few more victims to help spread his virus, and then he would get Jade and take her home.

He wandered the streets looking for leftover partiers and found a sleeping Lamai sprawled on a park bench. With the trick of a practiced *bokur*, Laroque stuck the young man with a needle full of the deadly virus. Laroque deftly sprinkled the white powder under the man's nose. The enchanted crystalline powder entranced his fledgling, giving Laroque complete control.

"Go and feed, my friend," Laroque whispered. "Feed as much as you can tonight. You need your strength."

The fledgling abruptly awoke and stared at Laroque. Although he looked confused, he obeyed Laroque and began searching for his own victims. In spite of it being close to dawn, there were still plenty of people around to feast on. The *bokur* watched as the new recruit disappeared into the crowds.

Before the sun rose, Laroque had his minion infect a dozen islanders, including two more shape shifters.

Chapter Ten

Jade felt the needle enter her vein and she jolted, forgetting about the heavy leather restraints that held down her arms. They dug into her tender flesh.

Tracy looked at the young woman lying in the hospital bed.

“I’m administering blood. Your sister ordered this. Contrary to what you must think, she is not a monster. Your sister is a woman in love, trying everything she knows to save the life of the man *she* cannot live without. The man your father is trying to kill.” Jade watched the woman finger a pendant that hung around her neck.

Jade was too weak to answer. She silently watched the older woman exit the room. Her eyes closed as sleep took over.

In an instant, she was on a beach looking at her own reflection, only older.

“Maman.”

She was back in New Orleans.

Her mother held her close as a cool breeze passed around them, bringing the scents of honeysuckle and orange blossom. “Jade, my sweet, beautiful Jade. You will be fine. Your sister would never kill you. She is just hurting so badly,” Nicolette said.

“Am I dead?”

Nicolette hugged her tighter. “No, you’re dreaming.”

Jade held on, unyielding. She frowned. “You haven’t come to me in my dreams in so long, *Maman*. I miss you. What’s happening?”

Nicolette took her daughter’s hand in hers. “Your father has done a terrible thing. He is trying to hurt your sister and all those she loves.”

Jade’s astral form stood, feeling the sand between her toes. It was all so real, being here with her mother.

But that couldn’t be.

Her mother was dead. Jade’s analytical mind fought with her psychic side. She pushed those questions from her mind. *Focus on getting answers*, she thought.

“Listen to me, *chéri*, there’s not a lot of time. You know how in your dreams you always ask why I haven’t explained things to you? I wanted to wait. Honestly, I never wanted to tell you at all, but things have gotten out of control. You need to know the truth, and not your father’s version of it.”

Jade sat back down next to her mother. “Go on...”

“First of all, when I knew your father, he was a good man, no matter what people say about him now. It was my fault that all this happened. I don’t want you to ever believe that it was your fault in any way.” Nicolette gently stroked her daughter’s cheek.

“*Père* always blamed Tobias,” Jade explained.

“I know. And Tobias blamed Philippe, but it was me. I’d been angry at Tobias for always leaving us, your sister and me. Your father had been a good friend until he fell in love with me. I did love him, in my own way.” Nicolette stood and turned away from Jade.

“One day at Mardi Gras, I gave in to Philippe, and you were conceived. I was so confused and very angry for being left alone all those times. I thought I was falling out of love with Tobias and in love with Philippe. It is all so clear now. But back then I didn’t know.”

“Didn’t know what?”

“Your father had enlisted the help of a fae. A fledgling with a reputation in casting love spells. That was the real reason I gave in so easily, though your father is quite charming when he wishes to be. I wasn’t falling out of love with Tobias, I was enchanted by the fae’s magick. I know that now. I didn’t know it at the time.

“As soon as I saw Tobias and realized what I’d done, I knew I loved him still. He was my husband, and I had deceived him. The man I’ve loved for lifetimes. Your Uncle Frank convinced me to tell Tobias that Philippe raped me.”

“Uncle Frank?”

Nicolette turned to her daughter once more. “It was wrong to say such a thing about your father, but Frank was so convincing that this was the best way to handle the situation. He told me Tobias would never forgive me if he knew the truth, and I was naïve and so wracked with guilt. I didn’t know where to turn, *chéri*. When the heart is involved, people do things they wouldn’t normally.”

“Like Raven.”

Nicolette smiled. “Yes, and like me—and your father. To Tobias’s credit, he did not kill Philippe, though he wanted to. Believe me, I would have told him the truth if it had come to that. Remember, there will always be people ready to take advantage of

others. I hope my daughters inherited their fathers' sense of guile, and not my naïveté."

Jade's eyes filled with tears. "You didn't love me enough to live?"

Nicolette was silent for a long while. She seemed perplexed as to what she should reveal to her daughter and what secrets were best kept hidden.

"I did—I do love you, *ma bébé*—always. Don't ever think that I didn't...that I don't love you. I love you more than you'll ever know. But Jade, you must try to convince your father to stop this. I have tried to reach him, but he won't listen." Nicolette looked like there was more to tell, but she told her daughter as much as Jade was prepared to hear.

Jade begged. "Why? *Père* knows what really happened between you."

"I don't have much more time with you here. Just know that I have to make right what I messed up so miserably. Somehow, I have to fix this. I'm so sorry I hurt you. I love you with all my heart."

"I love you, too, *Maman*." Jade grasped her mother's hand, not wanting to let go.

Jade's surroundings took on a pixilated quality.

Images faded in and out.

"I don't want you and your sister to be enemies. I never wanted that." Tears filled the older woman's eyes.

The two women stood and embraced. Nicolette stood back and looked deeply into the green eyes whose shade was identical to her own.

“You are so beautiful. I’m so sorry, *ma petite*. I have to go.”

Raul watched as Tracy left Jade’s room. She had brought him a sandwich earlier, and now that her task of administering blood was underway, Tracy headed back to the lab. There was a discernible ripple in the energy of the hall where Raul sat, but he could not put his finger on it. By the time he realized what was happening, the needle was plunged into his arm, while white powder flew in his face.

Laroque used a torsion wrench to unlock the door to his daughter’s room. The bag of blood that replenished her body was empty. Carefully, he removed the IV, his anger flaring while he unhooked the leather restraints. Gathering Jade into his arms, he whispered a charm to create a diversion, making it possible for them to exit the hospital without notice. He rushed to the parking lot carrying his daughter, whispering words of reassurance to her.

“*Maman...*”

“*Il est moi, papa.*”

“*Père...*I’m so sleepy. I saw *maman*,” Jade muttered as he placed her in the backseat of the borrowed sedan. The shape shifter he had just infected would not need his vehicle for a long time, if ever.

“Rest, Jade. We will be home in a little while.”

“Don’t say it! Please, don’t say it!” Raven cried to her father.

“You are lucky he came solely for Jade and not to get revenge, although he’ll be back,” Tobias countered.

Raven slumped against the wall outside of Bo’s room. Her whole world was crumbling around her. She was terrified that she’d taken too much blood from Jade. Everything she tried to improve became worse. She was grateful to her father. Though angry, he kept the depth of his rage at bay.

Nothing turned out like she had imagined.

Laroque was supposed to return and beg for his daughter’s safe return. The way it played out in Raven’s mind, he should be handing over the vaccines. Then she would unlock the door to where she had Jade hidden.

“How’s Raul?” she asked.

“Missing. I think it’s time Laroque and I have a meeting,” Tobias said. “I have kept this inside long enough. He is a monster. The things he did to my sweet Nicolette—to your mother. He’s the worst kind of animal, and I let Frank convince me for your sake to let it go. I will not let it go any longer.”

Raven grabbed her father’s arm. “No! You’re more vulnerable than any of us. This virus is mutating, and if Bo’s grandfather is correct, it is the magickal aspect of our make-up that makes us susceptible. There has to be another way.”

Both daughters of Nicolette were fearful of losing the only parent they had left, and both would do anything to protect them. Their loyalty to family was unwavering, and they were more alike than Raven realized.

“Raven, I am going to see him, no matter what you say. Bo is not getting better. We have to do something. I will finally have my revenge.”

Raven clenched her jaw in frustration. “And what if you can’t get him to give you the antidote? What if he infects you? You’re going to have another child. Think of Emmie! You cannot go, and you can’t kill him. Then we’ll really be screwed.”

Tobias flashed his lethal fangs as he swore at his daughter. At a time like this, when Tobias was enraged, he appeared massive. “I’ll get the answers we need from him. I have had many years to plan a slow and painful torture for *Courtier de Sang*.”

Joe Menendez came barreling down the hall with Bianca on his heels. “Raven, you’ve got another siren washed up on the shore and two more people with bite marks in the ER, and ...”

“What, Joe?”

Bianca answered. “An Empusa is dead and there’s word of a Lykan’s death. Nat is doing the autopsy on the Empusa with Davis. The Lykan, as I’m sure you know, evaporated to dust upon death. This is becoming some kind of a mystical-being murder spree.”

“A Lykan? I didn’t know they came to the island,” Raven said.

“Seems some Lykans and shifters have mated. There aren’t many around. Joe, how do you know for certain it was a Lykan?” Tobias asked.

“Solaris saw him, the Lykan. Tracy is running some tests on the...remains.” Joe looked helplessly at Raven, then at Tobias. “And they’re bringing in Emerald as we speak. She passed out in the hospital parking lot. They think she’s infected.”

“The baby!” Tobias lunged toward the ER’s dented green double doors. “If Hekate is awakened, we’ll have more to worry about than Laroque,” he said before the doors swished closed behind him.

“Hekate?” Joe asked Raven as she headed toward the lab.

The lab was in the newer section of the building. Celery green paint covered half the walls, and oak wainscoting adorned the rest. Beautiful watercolors donated by local artists added a soothing quality to the room. Raven felt anything but soothed.

Lush greenery of Swedish ivy hung in corners from macramé holders and Norfolk pines added life-giving energy to the space. *Everything should be dead. Bo is dying. Everything should die with him.*

Despite the homey quality of the lab, Raven was anxious. She needed to do something to try to help Tracy come up with an answer—and fast. She mentally gave herself a slap, commanding herself to snap out of it.

“Rav...who’s Hekate?” Joe asked.

Bianca attempted to fill in the blanks. Raven’s thoughts were light years away. “Yeah, Hekate—don’t ask,” Bianca said. “You mean you’ve lived here your entire life and you don’t know the folklore of the island? Shame on you,” she teased.

Joe eyed the pretty young woman.

Raven could see he enjoyed flirting with her. *How can he flirt when his partner is fighting for his life?*

“Then why don’t you fill me in? Take pity on an ignorant native and teach him a thing or two,” he said with a sly smile.

“You want to learn?”

“Guys?” Raven tried to get their attention.

“Honey, anything you want to teach me, I’ll be more than willing to learn. How about we start with a dinner date? Then, over drinks, you can teach me the history of Mirabelle. I’ve heard you have ancestors who helped establish the island.”

“Are you asking me out?” Bianca asked.

Raven’s ire was building. “Guys.”

“Yes, I am.”

Bianca smiled. “I accept,” she said, and headed for the ER.

“Sorry,” Joe said contritely.

Joe and Raven walked through the morgue and into Raven’s lab. Joe’s face was engraved with worry and confusion.

“I guess I’ll give you the short version of island lore,” Raven said.

Raven inhaled deeply and attempted to explain the history of the Lamai in as few words as possible.

“The Lamai originated in ancient Greece. Queen Rhia of Libya literally went insane after the brutal murder of her husband and children. She headed to Greece, blaming Hera for her children’s death, but it wasn’t Hera’s fault. It was an Empusa.” Joe looked more confused. Raven tried to elucidate. “Empusas are demons that take on human form from time to time. They are affiliated with Hekate. Rhia went on a rampage and took to traveling the earth, starting in Greece. She drank the blood of humans and, like the succubus, would manifest as a beautiful woman, only to devour her

lovers. She fed on the blood and was therefore considered the Mother of the Lamai. Not a very pleasant history.

Raven walked to the table where Tracy was working on Bo's latest blood samples. Tracy's affect was solemn. "What many people don't know is that Rhia and Hekate are sisters, though Rhia chose to live as a mortal. The Empusas were once beautiful creatures. After Hekate learned what they did to her sister's family, she cursed them with hideous looks."

Joe was curious now. "Is she still around, this Rhia? And what does this have to do with Hekate?"

"Yes, Queen Rhia is still walking the earth, though she doesn't feed anymore. She doesn't have to. Hekate is the Goddess who watches over the island and is in charge of the Empusas. I suppose it's a guilt thing over Rhia's losses. Hekate wanted to activate Rhia's goddess powers, but Rhia refused. They have a kind of alliance. Hekate has the power to grant mortals anything they wish. If Laroque is trying to awaken her, who knows what he may try to get from her."

"What could he possibly get?" Joe asked, jingling his pocketful of change.

"Immortality..." Raven stood and suddenly threw herself into Joe's arms, hugging him and kissing his cheek. "You're brilliant!"

In a flash, she was gone.

Chapter Eleven

Solaris tried in vain to convince her friend that contacting Hekate was not one of her better ideas, but she had no luck in changing Raven's mind. If you can't beat 'em, join 'em was Sol's motto. Dressed in lightweight hiking boots and khaki pants with a matching jacket, she packed her duffle bag.

The smaller barrier island was located a few miles south of Mirabelle Cove, hidden in the Mists of Magyck, the home of Hekate. A few islanders made the journey through the Mists at the spring and fall equinoxes and left Hekate gifts ranging from gold and jewels to exotic fruits and incense. Solaris and Raven had made the journey together many times.

However, this time Solaris hesitated before she agreed to go. It was one thing to leave gifts for the Goddess, and another to try to awaken her. Time was the one thing they had in their favor. With All Hallows Eve approaching, Hekate's attention was on the outer world.

"Hekate's my only hope to save Bo. I have to convince her to spare him," Raven said after hanging up the phone with Uncle Caleb, who agreed to let her use his boat, again without question.

Sol smirked. “Wait a minute, you don’t convince Hekate to do anything. No one does. Either she does it for her own reasons or she doesn’t. You’d better pray we’re getting her on a good day.”

“All I’ve been doing is praying since Bo was infected,” Raven admitted.

“You know she’ll want something in return, and this time fruit or gold won’t suffice,” Solaris said, adding a handful of protein bars and bottled water to her bag.

The tension in the room was thick. Both women knew what was at stake. “I know. Whatever it is...I’ll give it to her.”

Solaris took Raven’s hands in her own. “Does your father know what you’re up to?”

Raven gripped Sol’s hands tighter. “No, and you can’t tell him. Promise me. He would try to stop me. Besides, he’ll be with Emerald at the hospital.”

Solaris turned, her eyes wide. “Emerald? What happened? Is she all right?”

“Yes, she’ll be all right. I checked on her before I left. It was just exhaustion that caused her to pass out—that and stress, but she and the baby are fine. Dr. Odin is certain she’ll carry to term, and Jules assured Emerald that she’ll have a healthy baby boy.”

“Emerald wanted to know the sex of the baby?”

Raven smiled. “Yeah, they both wanted to know. My father is over the moon.” She paused a moment. “Mordred is cured.”

Sol’s brows pinched together. “I’m worried about what would happen should the humans fall prey to this disease.”

“Me too,” Raven admitted.

Solaris glanced at Raven. “And how’s Bo?”

Raven’s throat tightened and her eyes threatened to spill oceans of tears. “He’s running out of time, Sol. The only thing that’s keeping him here is his sheer will and the constant blood transfusions, but if his organs start to bleed—” She couldn’t finish the thought. Wiping the tears away, she reached for her jacket. Sol hugged her.

“Then we won’t let that happen.” Solaris grabbed her shawl and headed toward the door, tossing Raven another duffle bag. “I heard Bo’s family arrived.”

The two women walked out into the afternoon sun. Blue skies betrayed the darkness that was about to descend upon the island.

“Yes, they’re supplying the blood—his human sisters. Luckily, two out of his three sisters share his type.” They approached Solaris’s car.

“Frank has been MIA lately. I wonder why.”

Solaris hit the automatic lock opener, opened the doors and threw the bags in the back. “He probably feels guilty.” Solaris got into the driver’s side.

Raven sat next to her friend. “Why would he feel guilty?”

Solaris shook her head. “That’s something he has to tell you. It’s not my place.” She started the engine and drove toward the marina.

“Oh, come on.” Raven huffed. “I understand your sense of honor, but this is serious shit!”

“Are you saying you want a reading? Because if you are saying you want a reading, I can do that. But if you’re asking me to betray

a confidence—well, that’s a bit different. Do you want a reading?” Sol asked coaxingly.

Raven remained quiet until they reached the marina. Caleb had left the keys in the ignition of the boat.

As Solaris and Raven tossed their gear into the boat, Raven finally answered. “Yes, I want a reading.”

Solaris untied the ropes from the cleats and climbed into the thirty-foot Grady White. Raven guided the boat out of the inlet and into the open waters.

Solaris entered a deep meditative state as Raven quietly navigated her way toward the Mists of Magyck.

The force of Solaris’s words hit Raven directly in her heart. “Your mother wasn’t raped. She gave herself willingly to Philippe Laroque. Your father doesn’t even know this.” Solaris gave Raven a little time to absorb the news. “But she was under the spell of a fae’s magick.”

Information that Frank had tried to keep from everyone—especially Raven. “Your mother was angry at Tobias for leaving so often. She was content with the money they had, but Tobias had business concerning both the Lamai and his financial dealings all over the world. He also had to make his yearly pilgrimage to Queen Rhia.”

Raven was indignant. “So my mother had an affair?”

“An affair, no. Technically a one night—afternoon—stand. But her willingness to give in to Laroque was ignited by magick. The fae’s magick. And that’s how your sister was conceived. Not by

rape.” Solaris softened her tone. She psychically knew this could not be easy news for her friend to accept.

Solaris continued. “She was human, with faults and all, and she had intense difficulty with the fact that she had betrayed your father. Neither your mother nor your father knew about the fae’s involvement. Nicolette tried to forgive herself, and your father was...for lack of a better phrase...an angel about the whole situation. For the sake of the baby—for Jade—and your mother, he didn’t kill Laroque. He loved Nicolette more than he loved any other woman. This I know. She was his destined mate. Fated to be together lifetime after lifetime.”

The air around the boat felt thicker as each minute passed. They were nearing the Mists, and Raven was unusually quiet.

“Are you all right?” Solaris asked.

“Just shocked—this is a bit much to absorb in one day. Learning about my mother’s indiscretion, a sister...my fiancé is on death’s doorstep and my father is going to get married and have a baby...”

“Hold on, girlfriend—your *fiancé*? When were you going to tell me?”

Raven conjured a weak smile. “It all happened so fast. Bo proposed... just before.” Raven was quiet for a moment. “So all along this was an act about my mother’s rape, to preserve her honor?” Raven blinked away tears.

“Yes. To a certain degree, Frank thought this was the best way to handle the situation. Your mom couldn’t bear for Tobias to know

she'd given herself willingly to another man. Frank concocted this story, and that was that."

Solaris hugged her forlorn friend and momentarily changed the subject. "You'll make a beautiful bride, and Bo will be a gorgeous groom. It'll be all right." Solaris gave Raven a squeeze.

Solaris continued with Raven's family tale/reading. "Frank wanted to protect your mother at any cost. That's why he did what he did."

Raven corrected her. "You mean 'lied'. He lied."

She nodded in agreement. "Yes, he lied. Frank was very much in love with Nicolette. He's a powerful wizard, too. Did you know that? He used his power to conceal his feelings from your father. From us all, really." She took in a deep breath. "I don't know if it was out of fear, or for another reason. Anyway, no one believed Laroque when he went around boasting he'd had an affair with Tobias's wife and that she loved him—certainly not Tobias. They dealt with the situation as best they could up until the point when your mother's pregnancy couldn't be hidden anymore, and then people began to spread rumors. It left questions in everyone's minds."

"What about her death?" Raven asked, staring into the darkening sky.

"That part is very cloudy. The details are still hidden, and I'm not sure why. Laroque blamed Tobias, and he blamed Laroque. Philippe claimed that Tobias had killed her, but he didn't. I have an uneasy feeling that Frank told Laroque that Tobias had killed her. She couldn't bear the fact she was unfaithful to Tobias and gave

birth to Laroque's child... I guess she just couldn't live with herself. For a long period, she struggled with her emotions. It seemed as though things were settling down...and then...she was dead."

"Why? Why would Frank do that, lie like that? Why did she do that to herself? Why did she go along with it? That was selfish of her. To rob both of her daughters of knowing their mother. That was cruel, not to mention how it devastated my father."

Sol tried again to comfort her friend. "I have my suspicions about what may have happened, but that's all they are for now—suppositions and theories. She loved you so much, Raven. I remember how she was with you years ago, when you were little."

"I remember the stories, and I've seen the pictures of all of us together, but we'll have to travel down memory lane another time. We're getting closer. I have to focus," Raven said.

The thoughts of the past that plagued her would have to remain at bay. More immediate issues were facing her now. Her future was at stake. Bo's life was hanging in the balance.

And her life was dangling right there with his.

The mists were so thick that they dimmed the setting sun's rays. The moisture in the air around them licked at their skin like a slithering snake.

"Did you remember to bring the silver coins? It's approaching Samhain. As goddess of the underworld, she'll want her pound of silver," Solaris whispered.

Raven felt the fire of purpose burn within her heart. "Yes, I have the silver." She cut the engine and allowed the current to guide them through the mists to the island.

Solaris turned toward Raven, fear etching her face. “Are you ready for this? To sacrifice whatever it is she asks of you?”

Raven’s expression said it all. She would do whatever it took to save Bo. Without him, she wouldn’t want to live another day—and with that thought, the lessons of her mother’s life slid together to fit more cohesively in her mind. A shadow of understanding took root within her.

Solaris hurriedly warned Raven, “Let Hekate tell you what she wants. Don’t offer anything.”

Suddenly, the boat bumped against the sandy shore. They grabbed their bags and climbed over the side of the boat. There was a discernible wrinkle in the air.

Hekate knew she had visitors.

“This way.” Raven pointed, and they silently headed to the forested womb of the Island of Magyck.

The night-blooming jasmine and moonflowers gently opened, scenting the air with their sultry fragrances. Ahead, they noticed a large formation made of stone representing the goddess, and just a few feet beyond lay the opening to Hekate’s crystal cave.

Solaris took out her ritual herbs of sage, sweet grass and lavender. At the foot of the stone goddess was a small fire pit in which Solaris placed the aromatic herbs. Raven lit the bundle, and the two sat facing each other, ready to enter the netherworld.

“Here goes. Deep breaths,” Solaris instructed.

From the north, the winds picked up in intensity and swirled around them, lifting Raven’s hair and whipping it around her face.

The diameter of the whirlwind extended six feet across, leaving Solaris and Raven in the stillness of its center.

Words formed out of the mist. “What is it, my daughters? Why do you seek my counsel?” The voice was breathy, like a thousand butterfly wings fanning the air.

“I need your assistance, Great Mother, and I am willing to pay any price,” Raven responded.

Solaris’s eyes flew open at her friend’s bold statement. She did not make a sound, though Raven knew instinctively that Sol was screaming at her for such stupidity. *“Let Hekate tell you what she wants. Don’t offer anything,” Sol had warned.*

It would be a steep price.

The wind moaned and carried the ancient voice. “What is it, my child? What could a Lamai need from me?”

“Bo, my love, is near death, and I need you to help him recover.” Raven picked up the bag of silver coins and placed them at the foot of the statue. Her eyes remained cast downward as she revealed more jewels in a sheer bag.

“You want me to give up a soul that is ready for its transition?” Hekate asked.

Raven’s gaze locked on the statue. “He’s not ready. He was infected. We have a life to live together. He can’t leave me now.”

The silent moment that fell upon them moved at a snail’s pace. In her mind, Raven begged the goddess for her assistance. This was her final hope—her only hope.

She played over and over what else she possibly could have done: additional medical procedures, magickal ritual, anything that could snatch Bo from the jaws of death and return him safely to her.

Finally, she received her answer.

“You must give up your status as a Lamai. If you do this, I will grant your request. But, from that point on, you will be fully human. You will live as a mortal, and you will eventually die. Do not answer in haste, my child.”

“I accept. Do it,” Raven responded immediately.

Solaris leaned forward when Raven shot her an emotional stare. “Don’t,” she silently pleaded.

Hekate spoke. “Daughter Solaris, please leave this circle.”

Solaris bowed her head, leaving behind her offerings of citrine, sapphire and pearls. A worried smile crossed her face as she receded from Raven into the swirling winds. Raven gave her friend a long look before bowing down with her knees bent in a position of compliance to the goddess.

Solaris watched as the winds shifted, leaving Raven amidst the whirling dervish and her in stillness. The air surrounding Raven crackled, and from out from the vapor, the image of an older woman covered in layers of black silk appeared at Raven’s side. She had hair the color of a storm cloud, deep grey with flecks of silver. A thunderous boom sounded from the core of the swirling winds, and flashes of lightning sparked.

Raven’s body contorted. Her arms stretched outward while the tempest raged within. Pain sailed through her blood and bones as she arched forward like a puppet flailing in a turbulent squall. Veins

appeared from beneath her skin, taking on a tissue-like appearance. They deepened in color from red to purplish-black.

The bones in her hands stiffened as they suddenly reached for her throat. Her nails tore at her skin. Her head thrashed back and forth. Raven's eyes opened wide. Solaris could see that the whites had turned red. Raven's irises flashed from silver to black, then all red. Blood red tears streamed out of her eyes, now a purple color.

The rest of her body was stiffening, and her arms seemed unable to move from their position, dangling at her sides.

Solaris saw Raven's mouth open, but no sound came forth. Raven heaved, her arms steadying her as dark crimson blood spewed out. Blood soaked her white lips, blood that seemed to flow like a fountain. Hekate stood silent as she watched the transformation take place at her feet.

She will die if she loses any more blood, Solaris thought, and in that moment, she heard the Crone speak. "It is the Lamai blood she is purging."

"Raven!" Tobias appeared from the haze as mysteriously as Hekate had. "Stop now, Kate," he demanded.

The goddess turned and looked at Raven's frantic father before casting her gaze back to the young woman writhing on the grass.

Solaris whispered, "Tobias, don't. It's her choice. She's not a little girl anymore."

Solaris didn't have to ask how Tobias had found them. The connection between this father and daughter was exceptionally strong, and when Lamai were involved, the bond tripled.

Blood red sweat poured out of every pore as Raven bucked and heaved more and more blood, leaving her energy level vastly depleted. Raven collapsed on her side while Solaris watched helplessly. Raven's spasms wracked her fragile form. The veins in her face and neck began to fade from dark crimson to pale pink.

Eventually, her skin took on a slightly healthier tone as the blood settled into the normal channels. Periodically, she would cough up bits of blood.

For an hour Raven lay in the blood-soaked grass, as still as the statue of the goddess. The winds had calmed, both inside the circle and out. Solaris studied Raven's skin. It was of a deeper tone—not at all like the ivory complexion she had only a few hours earlier.

Raven's eyelids fluttered open, and Solaris saw that they, too, had changed from icy grey to blue-green. Solaris stared as Hekate placed her hand on Raven's bloodstained shoulder.

Tobias dropped his head and clenched his hands into tight fists. Pure anger filled him, wrath flooding his very being. Why had his daughter acted so irrationally?

"Your love will be recovering. Go to him. You've paid a great price," Hekate whispered to Raven. The old woman looked over to where Tobias stood, hunched over as if in physical pain. "Tobias, do not try to change her back, or you'll surely kill her. She must love this man more than life itself. She's just like her father in matters of the heart."

Raven, finally relieved, sighed deeply and lost consciousness.

“His pressure is normal?” Ian asked for the second time. Maureen, the night nurse, watched the blips on the monitors surrounding Bo.

“We just triple-checked, and his blood count is normal, too. Look at him. His pallor is healthy, and his temperature is one-hundred. It’s...”

“Magick. Do another blood panel,” Ian ordered, scratching his head in wonder. He had attempted to conjure a spell to relieve Bo of his symptoms, and Nat, his brother, brewed an infusion. Neither was successful. They only temporarily relieved his symptoms.

So what form of magick was this?

Bo’s grandfather smiled as he stood to inform the rest of the family, but there was also deep concern hidden behind his eyes.

At what price did Bo’s health return, and would his grandson be able to live with the sacrifices made on his behalf?

“*Kagi Taka...*” Bo whispered.

“He’s awake. Check his vitals again,” Ian said. “Maureen, find Dr. Strigoi.”

Courtier de Sang made certain that his daughter was resting comfortably back in New Orleans before he returned to Hannah’s Vineyard. Indignation invaded his every thought. His heart beat only for revenge.

How could that heathen bitch hurt his precious baby that way? They were sisters. His hatred for Tobias was intensified by the horrendous act perpetrated by the ancient vampire’s offspring.

Laroque wanted retribution more than ever, and he would extract his pound of flesh, but not the way he originally had intended.

The hour-long ferry ride from the mainland to Hannah's Vineyard gave Laroque plenty of time to think about what had transpired. It also allowed him to psychically summon his latest victim, the shape shifter Raul. The tall, newly infected shifter had been waiting in the shadows for Laroque to arrive home.

Both men gave each other a nod as they headed inside.

"How many have you infected?" Laroque asked, placing his luggage on the tile floor in the foyer.

"I managed to get a half-dozen. The festivities are postponed until the thirty-first. No more Nights of the Parades. Also, a curfew has been imposed."

"Excellent." Laroque smiled as he poured himself a brandy. He sensed there was more that the shape shifter had to report. It annoyed him to have to quiz this fledgling. "What is it? Speak up!"

"The word out there is that some other magickal beings are getting sick—Sirens, plus the fae and Empusas."

Laroque spun around, studying Raul's aura. He would be showing signs of the virus soon. It took only a few days at most before the symptoms were evident. He wondered why the disease was affecting other beings. He'd been very specific when encoding the DNA of the virus. It was to attack only shifters and Lamai.

Laroque snapped, "And Tobias?"

Raul caught the fury in Laroque's eyes. "He dropped off the radar. No one knows where he is."

The *bokur's* eyes continued to burn with a hateful fire. "Find him and his bitch daughter."

"Yes, sir."

Solaris started her car as Tobias carefully took his daughter out of the boat and placed her in the backseat of the car. A cool breeze blew off the water, and the sun had begun its descent into the early evening sky. Solaris turned on the heat in an attempt to get some of the chill out of the air.

Tobias had cleaned as much of the blood from his daughter's body as he could. All he could do was pray to his gods that the change did not kill her. He knew of only one other person in his hundreds of years of existence who withstood the transformation—only to die a few hours later.

"Let's get her to the hospital," Solaris said, watching Tobias cradle his daughter's head on his lap in the back of the car.

"Where is she?" Bo demanded, struggling to get out of bed. "She's in trouble, I know it. I can feel it. Tell me...is she...dead?" His voice choked up at the thought of his beloved, gone forever. Throwing off the covers, he tried to stand.

"Bo, don't make me sedate you. You've already been through a lot. We're trying to locate her. Relax," Ian said, nudging his patient back onto the pillows.

"I feel fine. Really," Bo said as he grabbed his faded jeans draped over the back of chair in the corner of his room. "I have to see her."

"And you will. Soon enough."

His eyes flashed to gold. Words pounded in his mind, reaching out to Raven's. *Mine. I must get to what's mine. My mate.* "I'm good, believe me."

The old man smiled. "I'm sure you are, but you're still staying right there." Ian's beeper began to sound as he had the technician draw more blood from Bo's arm.

"You were near death, young man. Just hold still and I'll be back," the doctor called over his shoulder as he headed toward the ER. Bumping into Bo's grandfather on the way, he warned, "Keep that stubborn grandson of yours in bed."

The ER was especially busy this morning. Dr. Odin's pale blue eyes scanned the area. He spotted his co-worker limp in the arms of her distraught father.

"Take her to exam room one, Jennifer." He barked out the orders as he headed for the room, his white hair like a cloud atop his head.

Tobias was in the room before Ian, using his preternatural abilities to move faster than human eyes—or wizards—could see. After Tobias placed her on the bed, Jennifer stood beside them with gloves and mask on. She held cotton cloths, ready to wipe Raven down.

Ian's thin fingers grasped his stethoscope. "What happened?" he asked, listening to her heart and respiration. "No, let me guess. She saw Kate, the goddess of the island."

Tobias confirmed Ian's suspicion. His voice was tinged with ire. "She certainly did."

“You’d have done the same,” Ian snapped back. “Or worse.”

Jennifer looked wide-eyed at Ian. She read the chart again.

“She’s got a totally human heart rate,” Ian exclaimed in astonishment. “Do these tests over. It can’t be. I want a CAT scan of her chest area.”

Jennifer added, “And her temperature is ninety-eight point six. That’s not her normal temperature, and I took it twice.”

“Take it again,” Ian said.

“Yes, sir.”

He continued to check Raven’s vitals. “This would explain Bo’s miraculous recovery,” Ian stated. “It’s the only logical explanation, the only thing left for her to do. We did everything within our power medicinally.”

Through a haze of disbelief, Tobias tried to explain. “You’re correct. She made a deal with Hekate. She traded her Lamai immortality for Bo’s life.”

“That would mean she lost a lot of blood,” Jennifer surmised. She undressed Raven and cleaned her quickly. Ian inserted an IV with glucose.

“Her blood pressure is a little low,” Jennifer said as she removed the cuff of the sphygmomanometer, “by human standards.”

Maureen hurried into the room. “I heard Raven was admitted. Why is she unconscious and where’d the blood come from?”

“If you had seen what she went through... She’s exhausted,” Tobias said with a sigh.

“What *did* happen? She’s full of dried blood. I don’t understand.”

“Hekate,” Jennifer whispered to Maureen.

“Oh, you mean she...”

Jennifer nodded. “Yeah, she made a deal with Hekate to save Bo.”

The curtain separating the area where Raven was located from the rest of the ER flew open. Bo rushed to Raven’s side and gently gathered her into his strong embrace.

“My love, what happened?” he whispered in her ear. A tear escaped his soft brown eyes. “What did you do, *Kagi Taka*?”

“She saved your life,” Tobias answered, watching a slow smile pull at his daughter’s lips.

Bo nestled his face in the crook of Raven’s neck. “I know, my grandfather told me, but how? How did she do it?”

Tobias rested a strong hand on Bo’s back. “She went to see Hekate and made a deal with her to save you.”

“Bo... You’re alive... B-bo...you’re here.” Raven tried to raise her arm to rub his back, as if wanting to make certain he was really there and not a dream, but she was too weak.

He kissed her cheeks and lips. “I’ll always be here.”

Chapter Twelve

Remarkably, by the following morning, Ian Odin had discharged both Bo and Raven. The doctor had repeated all tests numerous times. With MRIs showing everything within the normal range, he saw no reason to keep the two apart another night.

At Bo's unrelenting insistence, naturally.

Solaris drove them to Raven's home and made sure her friend was snuggled into bed before heading off to the grocery store to fill Raven's empty refrigerator. She checked Raven's temperature four times before she left for the store. By that time, the sun had darted behind afternoon clouds.

The shades shut out the light in Raven's bedroom. The only illumination in the house came from the hallway skylight and a few candles Solaris had lit. Raven's canopy bed provided a safe cocoon as she laid under homemade quilts the colors of autumn. Outside, the October winds blew menacing clouds across the sky.

Bo hadn't left Raven's side since he'd charged into the ER the day before.

"Bo..."

The tough, strapping shape shifter looked up. "Tobias. How long have you been standing there?"

Tobias walked over to watch his daughter sleep. She looked as she had when she was four years old and still afraid of the dark. “Not long. I wanted you to know something.”

“What is it?”

“It’s about Raven. She is in more danger now than ever before.” The ancient vampire sounded desperate.

“What do you mean?” Bo absentmindedly stroked Raven’s hair while she slept. He was just grateful to have her alive and home with him again. He wanted to start his life with Raven. No more delays, no more setbacks—this was to be their time. Bo would be unwavering in his effort to do whatever it would take to keep his mate safe.

Tobias let out a long sigh before he answered. “You can be certain that Laroque will be back, and Raven is no longer protected by Lamai blood. In fact, if she is bitten in an attempt to change her back, she *will* die.”

Bo stood and strode toward the doorway, motioning for Tobias to follow. Other than losing a few pounds, Bo felt fine. The only thing that was abnormal was the evident fear in his wolf’s soul.

“She’ll need constant protection, and you know that’s not going to sit well with her. My daughter has a stubborn streak.” Tobias smiled slightly.

“I’m not leaving her side, whether she likes it or not.” Bo sat on the living room couch, leaning his head on his broad hands. “I feel so responsible. She gave up who she is to save me.”

Tobias shrugged his wide shoulders. “She loves you. You can’t be with her every minute of every day. You have a job to do, and so

does she.” He tugged at his neatly trimmed beard nervously, as if he expected Laroque and his minions to swoop down upon them at any moment and steal Raven out from under their noses.

Bo looked hard at Tobias, knowing he was right. “I can take time off until...”

Tobias interrupted. “Time off isn’t going to solve anything, and you know it. The only way to ensure her safety is to stop Laroque permanently.”

Though it was a truth both knew, up until that point, neither had wanted to voice it. Going after a powerful *bokur* such as Laroque would not be an easy task, especially knowing he had an arsenal of deadly viruses at his disposal.

Resolutely, Bo replied, “Then that’s what I’ll do. I’ll get Laroque.”

“How? You’ll need my help.”

“No. Raven would never go for that.”

Tobias patted the young man’s back. “Then we won’t tell her.”

In the early morning light, Raven nuzzled closer to Bo, needing the heat of his body to keep the chill away. His arms enveloped her while he kissed her neck. Her soft flesh beckoned to him, no longer the pale white of a Lamai, but an olive complexion.

Her skin alone was a constant reminder that he must be gentle with her. She lifted her face to his and kissed him with a hunger that mingled with fear—fear from almost having lost him, fear that she was a vulnerable, mortal being.

The thrill of his touch on her flesh was like tiny flames, teasing her as his hands caressed every inch. There was no outward manifestation of the desire that screamed inside her—no ice-colored irises gazing back at him, no extended incisors ready to playfully bite his inner thigh. The sensations of her desire were all normal, for a human.

All mortal.

“I would die without you, my love...” he whispered. His hands continued their blazing dance across her skin. Her lips grazed his soft skin, igniting each touch with her unbridled passion while she yearned to feel him inside.

“I want you,” she whispered.

She waited for the familiar signals within her. The need for him was still there, the aching to feel his teeth tear at her skin and to take in her lustful blood.

But it was mortal blood.

A gentle heat began to radiate from every cell in her body. And as he entered her the heat became a raging inferno. She clung to him as he plunged deeper inside and she nipped at his neck. Only this time, there was no blood.

“Mine,” he muttered.

“All yours,” she answered.

She could feel Bo getting lost in every part of her—her scent, her feel, the taste of her. His eyes began to take on the golden glow of his counterpart. Old habits between them were to die a slow and agonizing death.

A mortal death.

Raven was no match for Bo's strength, and although she tried to keep her expressions of pain concealed, he soon would see the bruises his body was leaving on hers. She didn't care, though. She begged him to merge with her, but the magick was gone.

"Love me..." she whispered.

"Always," he moaned as his body rocked with a powerful orgasm. He rolled off of her. She knew he sensed she was not the same Raven as before and that he was trying to be extra careful.

"No... I want more...I want it to be like it always was..." she begged.

"But..."

Raven gently guided Bo onto his back, taking him inside her. She straddled him, her hands holding his wrists above his head. She felt him grow harder. She wanted to possess him. Fear welled in her heart as she realized that in trying to save him, she may have ended up losing him.

The only thing left that was savage about her was her passion for Bo. Slowly she sensed her aching for him increase in intensity while she moved with him, rising and falling over his prone body. He freed his hands from her grip and began caressing her waist, creeping up her back and around cupping her breasts.

Raven could feel herself cresting to orgasm and she slowed the pace, ebbing and flowing, wanting the feeling to last forever. Her knees dug into his ribs as she ground her hips frantically, taking him deeper inside, riding the waves of pleasure.

Bo's hands clasped her buttocks as she felt him hurtle toward his own destiny with ecstasy. The world went away, and Raven felt

the need to reach out to Bo with her soul. But things were different. A soft moan escaped her lips and grew louder as the full magnitude of her climax hit her. Bo's body arched up to meet her as he, too, gave into the excruciating pleasure. He pulled her down to him, moaning with a longing that remained unfilled.

Raven pulled open the curtains and let the sunlight into her den. "I feel fine, Ian. I want to go back to work," she protested the following afternoon.

"Raven, as your friend, and with the complete agreement of Dr. Cole...y-your..." He stuttered before he could get out his complete response.

She was startled when she realized what he was trying to communicate. "My what? New human doctor?"

Ian looked at Raven with an odd expression. It would be quite a while before she would be used to the new way of life she was embarking upon.

It was not an enviable path.

"I'm human now, so I assume I'll have a doctor who—well—deals with human physiology."

Ian crossed his arms over his chest, his gaze narrowed. "Yes, you will, and we both—Dr. Cole and I—feel you need time to recover. This is something I've never dealt with. I don't know what side effects you may experience, short-term or long-term." Dr. Odin explained the reason for Raven's sabbatical.

Tobias, too, was adamant about her staying away from the hospital. Her father called in quite a few more favors to have Raven

watched twenty-four hours a day, and keeping her home was a crucial part of the plan.

Ian plopped himself on a recliner. “I must say, though, you look great.” He changed the subject, but Raven saw right through the tactic.

She continued her questioning, trying a different approach. “What’s going on with the epidemic? How many more people have been infected? Any humans come down with symptoms?”

“You don’t need to concern yourself with that right now. Davis is taking care of the autopsies, along with Nat. We’ve got everything running smoothly.”

Raven occasionally glanced outside at the approaching clouds. “When can I return to work? Davis is still a newbie, and I don’t want him to become overwhelmed. Can you get someone from the mainland to help out?”

He smiled his finest “doctor knows best” smile. “Don’t worry. We’ll take it a day at a time. So far you seem to be coping with this abrupt change rather well, but I want to monitor you. Dr. Sanjay is helping out, too. We have everything under control.” Ian made his way to the front door. “I know it may be upsetting to realize the morgue can manage without you for a week or two, but it can.” He opened the heavy wooden door. Bo had been outside talking to one of Tobias’s guards. Raven saw they were all big, buff Lamai.

Raven stood next to Ian. He took her hand in his thin, weathered one. “I’ve known you for a very long time, and I’ve known your father longer. You have a bright future. I see you doing great things for both the human and the magickal beings of the

island. Please, just take the time now to recover. You've got your whole life ahead of you."

Raven smirked. "One that's not as long as I'd once thought it would be," she admitted dolefully.

Ian's face hardened. "We all make choices in our lives that we have to live with. Do have any regrets?"

"None."

"Good. I'll see you tomorrow, Raven. Take it easy for the time being," Ian cautioned as he exited her home.

Hmm, Raven thought, looks like a storm is brewing. They can't keep me inside all day. Wearing a pair of velour lounge pants and one of Bo's sweatshirts, she wrapped a Navaho print blanket around her shoulders and went outside through the rear sliding glass doors.

Raven loved days such as this. The low clouds skittered across the sky in shades of angry bluish grey. Had the temperature been lower, they would experience their first snowfall of the season. Instead, it was unseasonably warm.

The seas were churning like an old witch's cauldron as Raven made her way closer to the rocky shore. A friend of Bo's and fellow shifter, Seth, greeted her. His alter ego was a jaguar, fierce and quick on his feet—or paws, as the case may be.

"I'm just taking a walk down to the water. Maybe I'll sit on the rocks and meditate for a while," Raven called out over the rising winds.

Seth just nodded.

Raven's favorite formation of jetty was one that jutted into the sea with perfect steps leading to a large, flat stone. The wind carried Bo's laughter from the front of the house to the back. A familiar ache settled within her, and she longed to be in his arms again.

She thought about how Bo held back yesterday in bed. He must have been afraid of what their lovemaking might do to her. She was a human, and he could not totally lose himself in her anymore. Not as he had in the past. They had no boundaries in the past. It had been part of the way they made love—uninhibited. But that was then, and things were different. That saddened her.

She stepped on the first stone. It also frightened her that he would somehow stop loving her as a result. She knew it was unreasonable to think that way, but the passion they'd shared was unlike anything either had ever experienced. And, in a way, she felt cheated. She walked farther out on the jetty, like she used to. She felt cheated. She was sure Bo would eventually feel it, too.

These thoughts tormented her as she lifted her leg to step onto the last stone.

Something grabbed at her leg.

A small dinghy hid among the rocks. Hands latched onto her pants and pulled her down. She fell into the boat. A sweet-smelling cloth covered her mouth before she had a chance to scream.

Shit! was Raven's last thought before she entered pitch blackness.

Chapter Thirteen

A humming echoed in the back of Raven's head as she fought to reach the light of consciousness. *Where am I? Is Bo asleep next to me?*

The memory of walking out into the yard came back to her. She had wanted to go and sit by the rocks. Seth was outside with her.

She tried to move her arms and legs, but something kept them from responding to her mental cues. Her eyes fluttered open, but darkness enveloped her once again.

"What do you mean you don't know where she is?" Bo growled as he searched the backyard and headed toward the rocks. "Seth, I told you not to take your eyes off her. She might have slipped and fallen into the ocean." Bo worked the muscles in his jaw furiously. He threw off his shirt and dove into the turbulent Atlantic. The water was murky, but Bo's altered state of awareness allowed his sight to hone in on the shapes under the water. None were human.

The young man, Seth, couldn't really remember much of what had happened in the minutes prior to Bo asking him where Raven was. This wasn't the first experience he'd had of being unable to

account for certain blocks of time. In fact, it was happening often recently.

“Bo!” Seth called out to his heartsick friend before tossing off his shirt and following him into the water, washing away any remnants of the *bokur*’s powder.

“What’s going on?” Kyle, in charge of guarding the north side of the property, called to his friends before they dove down below the water’s surface. The winds strengthened and the water churned.

When Bo resurfaced, he told his friend to call 911. “Raven may have fallen into the water.”

Kyle flipped his cell phone open and immediately dialed, requesting assistance for Detective Wasake.

Seth resurfaced from the rolling seas. He wiped the salt water out of his eyes and turned to look all around him. There was no sign of Raven. “I’m sorry, Bo. She said she wanted to sit by the rocks and meditate. I turned away for a split second.”

Bo pulled himself out of the water and onto the rocks. The wind caused goose flesh to spread across his body and whipped his hair behind him. He reached for Kyle’s cell phone. He punched in Solaris’s number at Blood Pool, striding anxiously up and down the backyard, waiting for her to pick up the phone.

Bo rubbed the back of his neck, kneading out the knots of building tension. “Sol, Raven is missing,” he blurted. “I need you to come to the house and see what you pick up psychically about what might have happened to her, please.”

Silence filled the other end. “What? Oh, no! I had an eerie feeling all morning, and could not get thoughts of Raven out of my

mind.” Bo heard Sol take a sharp intake of breath. “Bo... I don’t need to come over. He’s got her. Laroque’s somehow gotten to her. I was just about to call you and see if she was all right. I’ve been worried about her. Shit! I knew I should have stopped by.”

Bo knew enough not to ask if she was sure, even though the words were on the tip of his tongue. His whole body stiffened. His nightmare became reality. Fear gripped its stone cold fingers around his heart and squeezed mercilessly.

This simply could not be happening.

His voice had a cold edge to it. “Is there anything else I should know?”

“I knew I shouldn’t have disregarded my inner prompts. All my thoughts revolved around Raven. It was as if I was walking through sludge. I was about to call you as soon as I realized I was under the influence of powerful magick.” Solaris’s voice was childlike on the other end. “Whoever conspired with Laroque has no memory of it. He was coerced into it.”

“Terrific.” Bo clicked the phone shut.

Tobias reined in his temper while trying to convince his friend to make certain changes in the itinerary of the island’s celebration.

“The Festival must take place, Tobias. Our success in the coming year depends on it,” Frank Dubois argued, seemingly unaffected by the recent happenings. Lately, Tobias noticed an air of detachment around the mayor. He seemed to be distracted, by what exactly, Tobias didn’t know.

He slammed his fist onto the maple desk separating them “He is going to try and destroy our island and my daughter in the process, and he’ll use the Festival to do it.”

Frank shook his head in denial. “No. We’ll find her. We have search and rescue looking for her. If she’s out there, we will find her.”

Tobias exploded, his anger spilling over, and for one second he bared his fangs, threatening Frank. What had come over his friend? This was not the same man who claimed to love Raven as if she were his own flesh and blood.

“Damn you, Frank—what is wrong with you? Solaris has already informed me that Raven is in the clutches of that lunatic. Raul and Seth are infected and in the ICU. I need to find out where Laroque is holding my daughter. Solaris is trying to find out, as is the rest of the community, but his magick is powerful. He has many charms and glamours to keep Raven’s whereabouts hidden.”

Frank leaned back in his chair, seemingly phrasing in his head what to say. “This is a delicate situation, Tobias.” Apparently he chose blunt and to the point as the best way to handle Tobias. “I can’t cancel the celebration. You know that. It’s only a few days away, and the people of the island expect it. It’s bad enough that we’ve shortened it to one day. Folks are threatening to move off Mirabelle. There are others I must consider—people’s livelihoods are on the line. You know this is the time when everyone makes up for the country’s failing economy. I can’t have people threatening to move. I do love Raven, too, you know.”

Tobias felt the burn in his eyes as they flashed to platinum, and hundreds of years of resentment flared. Resentment of what he'd become, simultaneously powerful and powerless. "Then show it," he growled. He stormed out of Frank's office, slamming the door behind him without having to lay a finger upon it.

And strode right into Jade Laroque.

The temptation to grab the young girl was unbearable, and for a moment, he gave in. He took her by the arm, wanting nothing more than to sink his teeth into her tender flesh, but he couldn't. She looked too much like his Nicolette.

"I want to help. I heard what my father has done, and this has to stop," she whispered, trembling. She seemed to be summoning all her strength to stand up to the infamous Tobias Strigoi. Squaring her shoulders, she said, "My mother would have wanted us to get along."

The anger seeped out of his body at the sound of her words. "Thank the gods you *do* have your mother's genes."

Frank was obviously shocked when Tobias returned so quickly to his office. He looked even more stunned to see who accompanied him. Seeing Jade standing in his office caught him off guard. His face flushed, and perspiration seeped onto his skin.

For a moment, it was as if Nicolette were standing there.

He reached out to her then pulled his hand back. "It can't be... What's going on? Jade... Is that you?"

She expressed no emotion whatsoever. "Yes, it's me," she answered, a chill emanating from her.

The mayor's mouth became dry as the desert. His lips stuck together as if he'd eaten a peanut butter sandwich. "Is this some sort of joke? Did your father send you? Tobias, what's going on?"

Tobias turned toward Jade. "She claims she wants to help."

Frank looked from Tobias to Jade and back again. "H-how? I don't understand. Why did you return? Why didn't you come to see me sooner?"

She played her arms. "I'm here now, Frank. You seem very nervous. Does my being here upset you?" Jade even sounded like Nicolette.

A slow smile dragged across his face. "No! Of course not, I'm thrilled to see you." He stepped forward to embrace the young woman, but she moved away.

Tobias spoke sternly. "Frank, there will be time enough for questions later. We have to find Raven before Laroque kills her."

"Tobias," Jade interrupted, "I think it's important we take the time to get reacquainted. Don't you, Frank?"

Visibly shaken, Frank turned to get a drink from his liquor cabinet. "I think *Tobias* is right."

"Yes, I thought you would." Jade moved over to sit in one of the chairs opposite Frank. "You may want to sit for this, Tobias." She patted the arm of a chair next to hers. He declined the offer.

"I-I don't understand," Frank stuttered, pouring a glass of bourbon. He clearly struggled to regain his composure.

Jade was livid, could feel rage's heat and see angry red spots flaring throughout her aura. Her porcelain expression was hard, as if

just baked. “Yes, you do, Frank. You see, Tobias, Frank here has been working with my father all along.”

Instantly, Tobias had his hand around Frank’s throat. “Don’t listen to her. She is Laroque’s daughter. She’ll say anything to save him.” He was straining to get the words out. Tobias’s fingers pressed firmly on his windpipe.

Jade rose and stood before the shaking man as he dropped his glass. She placed a hand tenderly on Tobias’s shoulder. “Then how did my father know when and where he could stage the attack on Bo? Do you think I’m *that* stupid? I was supposed to meet *you* in the park. That’s why I was there. I heard my father on the phone with you. You were to call the Lamai—Mick—when Bo arrived here at Town Hall. Mick was coming toward me, and while Bo thought he was coming to my rescue, my father stuck him with the virus.”

Frank struggled to get free of Tobias’s grip, but could not budge an inch. “No, that wasn’t me!”

“Well, then I must look up the other ‘Dubois’ who works at Town Hall.” She paused for a moment. “Actually, I have a better idea, Frank. Why don’t you tell Tobias what *really* happened all those years ago? I’m sure he’d be *very* curious to hear the story.”

Silence filled the room like a dense fog. Frank was having trouble breathing, even though Tobias had loosened his stranglehold.

She waited a moment. “Okay, I’ll tell him. You must realize by now that Frank has been in love with my mother—your wife—since...well, since forever. Did you ever notice how over time

Deidre has come to look amazingly like Nicolette? That's no accident of nature—it was on purpose.”

“No. It can't be true. You said Nicki was like a sister to you!” He paused. “I denied the truth, not wanting to believe I could still be betrayed. I was wrong.”

“All the years of your odd behavior suddenly makes perfect sense.” Tobias let out a pained sigh. “Even though I've become hardened over the years, it still cuts deeply when a supposed friend betrays me. In my hundreds of years as a Lamai, it never ceases to devastate me when I realize I've been duped.”

Jade snapped, her emotions boiling. “Yes. He lied. Just like he lied when he told you my father raped my mother. Right, Frank? I was *not* conceived that way. My mother *gave* herself to my father, to Philippe. Frank couldn't stand the fact that she would be with another man and not with him. Tell him, Frank—be a man! Go ahead and tell Tobias the truth for once in your miserable life!”

Frank tried to turn away, but he could not—not with Jade in the room. “You're insane—like your father.”

Jade's eyes narrowed as she glared at the mayor. “And my mother, right? That's what you'd like everyone to believe, anyway, that she was mad with guilt over what she did to Tobias. And from what the powerful sorceress in the French Quarter told me, she *was* guilt-ridden over her betrayal of Tobias. But her love for her family was stronger—her love for *Tobias*—and his love for her kept her sane.” Jade sat again across from Frank, staring him down, wanting to melt his very soul with her blazing gaze.

Tobias tossed Frank into his desk chair as if discarding rotting garbage. “What are you saying, Jade? And why should I believe you? How can I be certain you’re not lying, too?”

Frank coughed. “That’s right, Tobias. Don’t believe her.”

Jade shifted in her seat, getting more comfortable and settling back. No one knew that she had become a force to be reckoned with. Her father had taught her well. She removed a velvet bag from her jacket pocket.

“I could take this concoction and administer it to you, Frank, and you would be compelled to tell the truth. Shall I?” She addressed her question to Tobias.

Turning toward Frank she continued. “It’s very similar to the powder that accompanied the spell. You remember the spell. The one you bought from the innocent fae. The spell that would make my mother fall in love with him?”

“Go on,” Tobias instructed.

“I finally put the pieces together when I was recently brought back home. I visited Charlene Sabin. You remember her, Frank. She was my mother’s best friend and High Priestess, knowledgeable in Vodou, Santaria and other occult arts. She’s also a natural bruja. Frank has powerful magick of his own, Tobias. Were you aware of that?”

“Of course he wouldn’t know that!” Frank raged in indignation. “He only acknowledged my presence when he needed something from me. He was so wrapped up in his life that he never noticed...”

“Never noticed what?” Tobias bellowed.

Frank's face contorted with disdain. He paced himself as he slowly turned to his nemesis. "I wanted your pain to match what I felt whenever I thought of Nicolette in your arms. You're a monster. You never knew how I really felt about Nicki."

Tobias laughed at the crazed man. "And that was—what? You *loved* her? Everyone loved her. You were like a brother to her, nothing more."

"Laroque was more, though, wasn't he?"

Jade's tone was softer as she spoke. "Tobias, it went deeper than that. Frank was obsessed with her. And part of that obsession involved pitting you against Philippe. My father is a powerful *bokur*, but his magick couldn't make my mother love him. Frank appeared with a spell from a novice fae and some powder. According to Charlene, my father preformed the incantation. Only you never told him it wasn't permanent, did you, Frank? The spell magnified my mother's feelings toward my father. It took the smallest bit of attraction she had for my father and amplified it. At Mardi Gras they conceived me. Frank convinced *Maman* to tell you she was raped because he hated you both—my father and you—the only two men my mother ever gave herself to freely, more or less. Isn't *that* correct?"

Frank's face turned pale. "Yes," he spat.

"Frank would report to my father how happy she was and that she had told you, Tobias, it was your baby she was carrying. But you knew the truth. Frank needed for you to know the truth so that your hatred would grow, and it did. As my mother's belly grew with me inside, your hatred took over. That is, until her love for you

assuaged the hurt. You two were expecting another child soon after I was born. She wanted to have many children with you, Tobias. She promised to bear you many offspring. She wanted a part of you always inside of her. Her love for you was immeasurable.”

“Unfortunately, people break their promises all the time,” Tobias muttered.

“She didn’t break her promise. She was pregnant with your baby when she was killed.”

Tobias’s world was rocked, and the mighty vampire was brought to his knees. He steadied himself against the armchair next to where Jade sat. She took her leather bag and pulled out a document, handing it to Tobias while eyeing Frank with a malevolent stare.

Tobias noticed a change in her. However, he could not fully focus as he read the autopsy report over and over. *Decedent approximately six weeks pregnant.* Tobias went limp as he fought back the tears that threatened to overtake him.

Jade went on. Her voice cut through the air like a machete. “There was a conspiracy between Frank and the M.E. in New Orleans to keep that and other information secret. Who was that M.E., Frank?”

Frank remained quiet.

“You forgot your own brother, Darryl?” Her voice echoed malignantly throughout the room. “Different last names—different fathers, same mother? I hate to be the one to tell you, Tobias, but your ‘friend’ here—the man who helped raise me and Raven—

killed our mother! But not before *he* raped her. And that time, she really *was* abused.”

Time seemed to stand still. What happened next slowly drew Tobias’s attention. Jade moved with such speed no one had time to react until it was too late. Still, he remained in his seat, weak, as if someone had drained him of all his blood. Tobias gradually focused on what was materializing on the other side of the maple desk in Frank’s office.

Tobias thought he was seeing things.

“Nicolette...” he whispered.

Jade’s eyes grew paler until they were the color of her precious namesake, and her mouth bore fangs. “You’re going to wish Tobias had killed you,” she muttered as she sank her teeth into Frank’s flesh. She grabbed a handful of cottony hair and wrenched his head back.

As she drank, she saw it all.

Chapter Fourteen

Her mother was so happy, bouncing Jade on her lap as Raven played in the backyard, when she noticed Frank walking through the gate.

Tobias had just purchased their new house, which rested on a cliff and was recently fenced in for the children's safety. The yard was their sanctuary.

"Come on inside, Frank," Nicolette said, taking her daughters in for their naps. She returned from the girls' bedrooms, a smile on her face.

And Jade took in more blood.

Frank and Nicolette sat at the kitchen table. Nicolette poured some iced tea into two glasses.

"You're glowing," Frank said. "Is it because you're happy to see me?"

"I'm always happy to see you, but no...I'm pregnant." Jade's mother was absolutely radiant.

"Whose baby?" Frank coldly asked.

Jade experienced her mother's hurt feelings as she dug her teeth further into his neck. He tried to grab onto her, but she was too angry, too powerful. She worked hard at portraying the weak little

bastard child. In the past, she could not afford for anyone to know the extent of her strength.

"Tobias's baby, you idiot," Nicolette said.

"I'm sorry. That was mean."

Frank got up from the kitchen table. He embraced Nicolette. He held her so close, wrapping his arms around her waist. "Did you tell him?"

"You're the first to know."

Frank held her. He kissed her cheek. "That's great news. Congratulations!"

"Thank you, Frank."

He held her still.

He kissed her neck and slid his hands down to her perfectly rounded butt. He squeezed, and then slipped his hands between her legs. Those long legs.

He was hard, and she felt it.

"Frank! Stop!" She tried to pull away.

Jade sucked harder.

Frank dragged Nicolette to the sofa in the next room. She kicked at his shins, squirming unsuccessfully while he kissed her neck. Ripping her blouse open, he saw she wasn't wearing a bra. A deep moan escaped him as his eyes drank in her beauty. Nicolette slapped him hard across his cheek. He grabbed her wrist and held it forcefully.

"You always look so sexy when you're pregnant," he whispered.

He suckled each breast as she pounded her fist against the side of his head. Frank grasped both hands.

“What are you doing? You’re hurting me!” she cried.

“Sshh, you don’t want to wake up those precious little babies. They’d be traumatized for life seeing their momma...in this position,” he taunted.

She lunged forward attempting to knock her forehead against his nose, but he quickly dodged her.

“Come on, Nicki, you know what I’m doing. You’ve fucked a few men in your day. Why not me? You’ve always denied me.”

He lifted her skirt, tore her panties off and rubbed himself against her, moaning with pleasure. He was finally going to have her, and nothing was going to stop him. She scratched at his face as he pulled down his trousers.

“Don’t make me hit you,” he warned, his voice abruptly turning frosty.

She tried to knee him in the groin, but he had her pinned down. She was tall and slender, but no match for Frank’s big, muscular and determined body.

She didn’t have a chance.

“I have loved you for so long, chéri. Now, it’s my turn to have you.”

“Frank, please, no!” she begged, but that only fueled his passion. She squirmed beneath him, trying to break free. Her gaze swept across the room as she looked around for anything she could get her hands on to knock him out.

All Jade heard now was her mother's sobs. All she felt was agony. She didn't need to see her raped.

"Why can't you love me?" Frank moaned, secretly hoping to wipe out Tobias's offspring and impregnate Nicolette with his own seed.

"Get off me!" she cried.

"I've waited too long for this, Nicki. I know Tobias won't be back for another two weeks at least. Remember? I'm to look after you. To make sure all your needs are met. That's what I intend to do, my sweet." He didn't move, except to begin rocking back and forth once more.

Jade pulled away, removing her teeth from his flesh. Nauseated by what she saw, she spewed Frank's blood all over his floor.

Frank was still alive.

Barely.

"You're the fucking monster!" Jade cried out. She felt Tobias standing next to her. He was speechless.

"She felt so good," Frank whispered. His voice was raspy from the gouges in his neck.

Tobias gently pulled Jade away from Frank.

Jade was grateful Frank was dying. She prayed he was suffering, like her mother had. No. Worse.

"She was worth it. So sweet, so—so sweet."

She could see his body was giving out. Next to the set of Jade's puncture marks, Tobias dug his fangs deep into Frank's neck.

"No, Tobias! You don't want to see..." Jade's voice faded away as Tobias witnessed his wife's last moments.

She lay on the floor, weeping uncontrollably. Frank stood over her, wiping the sweat from his brow.

“Leave! Now!” she demanded, curling up and pulling herself over to a kitchen chair. Her legs were wobbly, but she managed to stand. She walked over to the kitchen sink and ran some cool water on a dishtowel.

Frank watched her every movement. She took the cool rag and spread her legs, gently placing the soothing cloth on her raw skin.

She looked over at him, ready to scream for him to leave again. Her gaze rooted onto his growing erection. He took a step forward.

“Mm, mm, but you look so hot standing there with your hair all tussled and those gorgeous legs spread open wide. Want some more? Third time’s the charm.”

Nicolette dropped the cloth and grabbed a filet knife from the sink. “Get away from me. I will kill you.” Her voice was oddly calm and icy cold.

“No, you won’t.”

He strode across the room and walked right into her as she fought to slash at his throat. He grabbed her wrist and clasped his fingers around the handle of the knife.

She missed.

He slammed her hand into the kitchen cabinet and the knife fell. He worked his hands up her skirt, aroused by the energy in the room, the game of cat and mouse. He lifted her onto the counter and slammed inside her again. She felt along the granite counter for something to use as a weapon while he grunted, trying to fill his near life-long desire for this woman.

She grabbed for the can of apple juice she'd left out, and with one swift blow, she connected with Frank's chin. She drew her legs up and used them to push him away. He landed with a thud on the kitchen floor. His head hit the ceramic tile, hard.

Nicolette ran to the phone. She got as far as grasping at the dial. He grabbed her from behind, wielding the tip of the filet knife at her throat. "I can't let you have another one of that demon's children. I can't. And as much as it pains me, there is only one solution. Unless, of course, you have an abortion and marry me."

"I'd rather die," she spat.

He turned her around and slapped her hard across the face then grabbed her by the nape, yanking her toward him. Knife in hand, he moved over to the wall and pushed her back up against it. He jammed himself into her, knocking her against the wall, pounding her with anger, frustration and vengeance.

"Oh, my sweet, sweet Nicki..." he moaned over and over. "I should have taken you so much sooner. You can't hide your desire. I feel you, baby."

She just sobbed, biting her lip and praying it would all end soon. Her fingers ran down the length of his arm, trying to get at the knife, but he took her hand and slapped it on his rear as he rammed deeper into her.

"Oh... Nicki...yeah!" he cried out as he came once more.

He leaned up against her while he caught his breath. When he stood back, she crumpled to the floor.

Frank grabbed her shirt, which he had tossed on the floor. "Put this on."

Taking his trousers off the floor, he slid them on, staring at her all the while.

“Thank God,” she thought, “He’s finally going to leave.”

Instead, he dragged her out back. “Tobias loves this house. So secluded. No neighbors for miles and miles. It’s perfect.” Frank spun Nicolette around, grabbing both of her wrists firmly in one hand. He smoothed the folds of her skirt and tucked in her short-sleeved blouse.

“Nicki, I want you to marry me. When we made love inside just now, I felt your desire for me. We can be together. I’m not afraid of Tobias. You don’t have to hide your feelings anymore, baby.”

“M-made love? You r-raped me! M-my d-desire for you? Y-you disgust me. I never hated anyone, until now. You are the monster, not my Tobias.”

As he reached to slide his hand under her skirt, she cringed. “You were all wet, sweetness, and I felt you.”

She jerked backward, and as he pulled his hand out, she noticed the blood on his fingertips.

“You bastard! My baby...my baby...Tobias!” she cried, trying to wrench her arms free from his vise-like grip. “I hate you, Frank!”

“It didn’t have to be this way. I’ve wanted to be your husband since we were teenagers. I asked you when I was sixteen to marry me, but you just laughed. I asked you again at eighteen, but that’s when you told me about this man you’d met—Tobias.”

She sobbed harder at Frank’s mention of her husband’s name. That set him off.

“I’m so sorry, Tobias,” she repeatedly lamented. “Forgive me, I’m so sorry.”

His face was void of all emotion now as he stared deeply into her eyes—eyes that he knew would never look at him with love.

Eyes that would never look at anything ever again.

One hand pulled at her arms, while the other, which held the knife, sliced deeply into her wrists. “No. I’m the one who’s sorry,” he whispered.

Tobias held her gaze through Frank’s memories that were washing over him. At the precise moment when Nicolette’s eyes glazed over in death, so did Frank’s. Jade pried Tobias off him. “No more, Tobias. You shouldn’t drink anymore.”

Chapter Fifteen

Davis arrived from the hospital in the medical examiner's van to transport Frank's body to the morgue. Joe Menendez handled the paperwork. It would read that Tobias was informing Frank Dubois that he was about to be arrested for the murder of Nicolette Strigoi and Mayor Dubois went wild in response.

As a result, he attempted to kill Jade Laroque during his psychotic break, and Tobias had no option other than to subdue the mayor. By any means possible.

Of course, that paperwork would never be found, kept in a confidential file. And the mayor's certificate of death certainly would never see the light of day.

Deidre Dubois would fill out a missing person report in due time, and they would conduct a cursory search for the missing man. There would be no body to autopsy. If all worked out, even Philippe Laroque would never know what happened.

Unless his daughter told him.

"What the fuck?" Bo yelled as Tobias tried to explain what had happened in Frank's office. Jade stood off to the side, observing the shifter. He fidgeted, barely able to stay still.

“I know it’s a lot to absorb, but I saw for myself.” Tobias turned toward Jade. “Although I still don’t understand how you kept your transformation into Lamai a secret. Who turned you and when?”

Jade’s hurt was reflected in her voice. “Your daughter turned me a week ago.”

“No. She wouldn’t,” Bo snapped. “She would’ve told me.” He ran his hands through his hair, finally resting on a muscled knot between his neck and shoulder. Tension balled up there. Bo had become a walking time bomb. “I can’t believe she and I have come this far, and now Raven’s in danger.”

Mortal danger.

“She would, and she did—though she didn’t mean to. Raven inadvertently took too much blood from me. She was very apologetic.” Jade smiled. “She didn’t tell you because you were unconscious at the time. Raven explained how she doesn’t really feed anymore. She just got caught up in the moment and the memories of our mom. The only way to keep me alive was to change me. It was really strange because she communicated with me telepathically.”

“These past few days, Raven never mentioned what happened,” Bo said in a despondent tone. What other secrets was she keeping from him?

Tobias was reeling. “I don’t understand.”

Jade fingered a strand of her curly hair. “I wanted her to change me. She was going to try a blood transfusion, but she feared it

would be too little, too late. So...I bit her wrist, and she had to let me drink.”

She laughed.

Bo thought it quite odd for this woman to react this way.

Jade pinched the bridge of her nose between her brows. “You don’t understand. I can’t really blame you. When she drank from me, we connected...or rather she connected to our mom and me. Raven was devastated when she realized I could die. She only meant to scare the piss outta me, which she did. I lost total control of my blad—”

“Okay, too much info,” Bo interrupted.

“When I began to drink from her, the connection was complete. It was almost as if the three of us were in that room together. Raven, *Maman* and me.”

“Why didn’t she tell me?” Tobias asked.

Again, Jade laughed. “Maybe because Raven knew you’d be furious and she didn’t want to shift everyone’s focus from saving Bo. In the meantime, she had Tracy give me blood. I promised to play along. I think Raven hoped the transfusion would dilute my blood enough that I wouldn’t change, but it just took a little longer.”

“Now what do we do? Your father still has Raven, and he’ll know you’re not quite the same daughter,” Bo worried aloud.

“Yes, that will only increase his hatred. He has no idea what really went on? For all his power as a *bokur*?” Tobias asked.

“Did *you* know?” Jade countered. “My father taught me everything he knows pertaining to magick. Plus I think the only way he was able to survive my mother’s death initially was to immerse

himself in finding me, then in training and raising me. Remember, Frank told my father I was *your* daughter, Tobias.”

“I never took Nicki’s blood. I should have. I would have known she was in trouble in spite of Frank’s shields if I had.”

Bo went into the kitchen and poured a cup of coffee. “So how did he find out? That you were his, I mean. You wouldn’t have shown signs of being a Lamai until you were around twelve or thirteen.”

Jade rolled up the sleeves of her black cable knit sweater. “The old fashioned way. He had a paternity test done.”

“Of course. He has all those connections in the medical field, so it makes sense he would have a test performed,” Tobias said as he gazed out the window, no doubt wondering where his daughter was. No longer a Lamai, Raven didn’t have the same bond to her father as before.

Jade was lost in thought. “Frank’s magick was strong, but I think that, deep down, my father knew something wasn’t right, which is why he had the paternity test done. He always said to me, ‘You can’t trust anyone.’”

“Speaking of paternity, how is Emerald?” Bo asked Tobias.

“She’s fine, at home resting. I was with her all last night.” Tobias half-heartedly smiled. “She tried working some of her fae magick to see if she could locate Raven, but came up empty.”

Bo got up and dumped his remaining coffee into the sink. He turned and leaned against the counter, eyeing the two Lamai in the living room. “How do we even find Laroque?” Bo asked.

“I’m sure he’s not anywhere we would think to look. He won’t be on Hannah’s Vineyard or Mirabelle. I can’t sense his whereabouts or Raven’s,” Jade confessed.

“I don’t understand why your father put up with Frank after he found out he lied about you,” Bo said, puttering around the kitchen.

Jade wanted to help Bo with the breakfast dishes, taking the sponge from him. “My father never let on to Frank that he knew the truth that he was my real father. Only he and I knew...and of course you, Tobias. He knew he couldn’t trust Frank, so he used him, but he made Frank feel that they were in an alliance.” She rinsed the sponge and placed it back in the soap dish.

Bo asked another question. “How did Frank explain the situation when you never lost your incisors and grew Lamai teeth?”

“I was an anomaly, at first, and then he blamed my mother. Frank said she swore to him I was Tobias’s child. The only use my father had for Frank was that he orchestrated my abduction so my father could raise me. Then Frank played dumb for everyone else’s benefit and sobbed crocodile tears at my disappearance,” Jade said.

“Shit, that still leaves us with the problem of finding Raven,” Bo swore.

Philippe Laroque stood in the corner of his study, opening the windows to let the trade winds inside the room. He held a letter, yellowed from age. Raven Strigoi was in an upstairs bedroom guarded by two Lamai and three shifters. His mind raced as he thought about what had transpired over the past week. He worried

incessantly about Jade. Was she all right? Was she safe? Had Tobias hurt her?

He used his magick in search of answers, but wasn't happy with the outcome. She was safe, but somehow changed. The events that had taken place left an indelible mark on her. To what extent, he wasn't certain.

And that useless mayor wasn't answering his calls anymore. Had they turned Jade against him? Filled her head with lies so she would never want to see him again? Perhaps she finally felt a sense of belonging with the sister she'd lost so many years ago and now she hated him for taking her away from the only other family she had.

But Jade was smarter than that.

She had to realize everything he did was for her—wasn't it? Or, more to the point, it was out of his hatred for Tobias. And his jealousy. That, he was certain, Jade knew.

Jade saw through her father's motives and called him on it repeatedly. She'd asked him to give up this sick game of revenge, and he constantly told her no. Other than Jade, it was his only connection to Nicolette—this vendetta against Tobias. If he let it go, that meant he had to let Nicki go. He couldn't, not this time.

In every other lifetime Philippe had visited through spiritual journeying, he witnessed Nicki choosing Tobias again and again. He'd been in love with other women, but if Nicki's spirit was incarnated at the same time as Philippe's, he was drawn to her, like the typical moth to the flame.

When the price became too high for him to pay and he realized his own daughter was in jeopardy, for the first time in his adult life he entertained the idea of letting go of this war. Nicolette was gone, and nothing he could do, even with all his power, could bring her back.

Perhaps Jade was right after all.

He'd fully intended to make a trade, one daughter for the other. He knew Tobias would agree to that, but what he hadn't planned on, what no one was able to foretell, was the evil that lurked inside Frank Dubois. Like a festering boil, it became rancid inside the once-genteel man. The sins of envy and lust overtook him—the lust for another man's wife, and the lust for power.

Frank fooled Laroque.

And Tobias. Philippe reflected on that time.

Frank was merely puffing up Laroque's ego, asking endless questions about magick and contacting spirits, only to turn around and use everything he'd taught in good faith against him. He'd used the same technique with Laroque as he had to cover his feelings for Nicolette.

Poor Deidre.

She loved Frank, and he took her for granted. She wanted to raise a family with him, but Frank told Philippe he wasn't cut out to be a father. He told Deidre his career came first. The timing wasn't right. The years passed, and no children were born.

Deidre became distant. Though she still loved her husband, she knew that in his heart, Nicki would always come first. Deidre wrote to Philippe, pouring her heart out about her suspicions that her

husband was keeping something from her. She asked whether he knew what it was.

He was so entrenched in his work in the lab—so focused on getting back at Tobias—that he hardly gave Deidre’s letters a second thought.

He should have. He would have had a better insight into the monster that dwelled inside Frank.

He opened one of the letters and read.

Dear Philippe,

I hope you are well. We received the photos of Jade, and I cannot get over how big she’s gotten—how much she looks like Nicki. I wish you would reconsider bringing her back to us. She would have a stable life here. I know how you feel about Tobias, but he agreed to let us raise her.

Frank misses her so much. That’s where the ink became streaky, and Philippe knew instinctively that Deidre had cried when she wrote this part.

He’s not the same, Philippe. I don’t know why I’m telling you this, except that maybe you can get through to him. He looks at Jade’s picture and cries for hours. He locks himself in his study and won’t let me in, won’t let me touch him.

I have tried to comfort him, but he gets so angry sometimes. I swear he called out Nicki’s name the other night in his sleep.

He claims he dreamt of Jade and must have called out her mother’s name, asking for help to get Jade back.

I don't know when you'll get this letter, since you're always on the move, but I hope it finds you well.

Tell our Jade we love her and miss her.

Deidre

The pieces were coming together. Philippe had heard the rumors that Frank insisted Deidre wear green contacts when she decided to shed her glasses. In another letter from Deidre she revealed Frank refused to touch her when she had her hair straightened and made her wear the same perfume that Nicolette wore. These facts sat before him in black and white, in the letters strewn across his desk.

All from Deidre. All written without Frank's knowledge.

Then there was his strange sexual preference of never making love to her face-to-face. Always in the dark, always from behind—and she “even heard him mutter ‘sweet Nicki’ more than a few times” when he did have sex with her.

How had he missed this? On and on, the desperate woman's pleas for help fell upon his deaf ears. *If only*, he thought. If only...

His own deadly virus would not be killing him.

Philippe still wasn't exactly sure how Frank had done it, but he knew it was him. After the night his daughter disappeared, Philippe retrieved the virus from his den and, upon examining it more carefully later, noted that one vial had less virus than the others.

He knew exactly how much should be there. Enough to dose at least three people was missing. Frank was the only person, other than himself, who knew where he hid the virus.

“Excuse me, Mr. Laroque, the—uh—woman wants to have a word with you,” Mick, the treacherous Lamai, former employee at Blood Pool, said.

Philippe gathered the letters and placed them in a locked drawer in his desk. “Good. I want to talk with her as well.”

Raven watched Laroque enter the room, carrying a tray with food. The Lamai stood leaning against the door jamb. Philippe approached her. She felt the sting of the straps that held her onto the bed digging into her skin. He placed the tray on the table at the far end of the room.

Laroque smiled. “You look more like your mother now. Your mouth is the same, your complexion—even your hands are like hers.”

Raven ignored the small talk. “Are you going to kill me?”

Laroque’s expression was stone cold. “Probably. But I do have a deal to offer, if you’re interested. As long as you can help me, I’ll let you live. And depending on how well you do, maybe I’ll even let you go.”

She struggled against the straps. “What is it?”

He stared at her for a few moments before speaking. “What do you know about the virus?”

Raven couldn’t help herself from laughing as she asked him to repeat the question.

He folded his arms defensively over his chest. “Do you think this is funny? Let me remind you, you almost lost your true love to my creation. I wouldn’t laugh too hard, or for too long.”

Raven stared at Laroque, her mouth a thin, straight line. “You see, that’s just it. Why do you need my help? You created this genius virus. What’s the problem now?”

He took deep breaths while he went over to the tray. “Are you hungry?”

“Is it poisoned? Would you even tell me if it was?” she snarled.

Laroque snorted. “You haven’t eaten in two days. If you want to kill yourself, that’s fine by me. I’m asking for your help. Why would I try to kill you? Besides, you know better than anyone that if I wanted you dead, you’d be dead already.”

He had a point. “Why did you do it?” She knew that he, more than likely, would never tell her why, and he didn’t really need to. It was because of her mother.

It always revolved around her mother.

Love. Unrequited love, untamed love, unconditional love, undying love. Could love be the cause of it all? Raven knew she would do anything for love, but would she go to the same lengths as Philippe? But hadn’t she gone further? She gave up her own identity, the very core of who she was. But would she kill another person?

As a Lamai, the answer would be a resounding “Yes!” That was part of her nature as well. The wild blood that had coursed through her veins demanded she protect those she loved at any cost. Things changed, and she was entirely human, so could she still live up to that standard? Perhaps she would. For love.

Love was a fierce emotion.

She watched as Laroque approached the bed. He took a key from his pocket and unlocked the cuffs on her hands.

“Eat.” He handed her the tray with a salad, fresh bread with cheese and what looked like roast pork. “Do you want me to take a bite to prove it’s safe to eat?”

Her gaze narrowed. “Yeah, I would.”

He took a piece of meat, tore off a chunk and popped it into his mouth. “Would you like some wine?” Taking bites of cheese and salad, he seemed to force himself to swallow.

“Fine dining while imprisoned—what a dichotomy! Water is fine. But how am I supposed to eat this meat without a knife?”

He smirked at her. “You’ll have to make do for now. I’ll have your meat cut for you next time.”

She was confused. “What?”

“You sounded like your mother just now.”

Raven speared the fresh tomato in her bowl of salad while examining the dressing. “How can you kill me if you love her so much? I’m still her daughter.” She bit into the tomato savagely.

He wore an eerie smile. “My hatred for your father compensates for that sad fact.”

Not yet accustomed to these insistent hunger pangs, she grabbed a slice of bread and took a bite. Once the aroma of the food reached her nose, Raven realized she was famished and didn’t care if the food was poisoned or not.

“And yet you need my help,” she pondered aloud.

He walked to the window, his hands behind his back. “You are as sarcastic as your father.”

“You don’t look too well,” she observed between bites of bread.

He simply stared at her and smiled.

She shrugged. “Did I say something to amuse you?”

“No, you just stated the obvious. Are you willing to help me or not?”

“I don’t know,” she said, tearing into the slice of meat. “What do you need my help with and why?”

“This virus has jumped species, so we are all at risk. This is no game, Raven. If I die, chances are you will, too. You are human now. Human, Lamai, fae, shifter are all susceptible. Need I go on?”

“Yes, but Ebola isn’t quite as contagious as other viruses, especially this strain. It’s deadly, for certain, but say you used a pox...”

He interrupted her observations. “I will certainly make sure you’re infected before I die. Feel better now?”

“Always the big bad wolf, so to speak.”

He walked over to her, his eyes like stones, emotionless. “You *would* know about big bad wolves, wouldn’t you?” He went to a chest at the foot of the bed and took out a blanket. “As bad as you think I am...I’m worse.”

She swallowed the last piece of bread and cheese. “I know you didn’t rape my mother.”

Philippe spun around so fast she thought she saw smoke as his heels dug into the pine floor.

“What did you say?”

Raven eyed him carefully. He must have been a lady-killer in his day, no pun intended.

He still had the good looks nature had blessed him with—chiseled cheekbones, straight nose, deep-set eyes and a generous smile. That is, when he chose to smile, and she guessed he hadn't done that much lately.

She placed the fork down, her expression somber. "You heard me. I know what happened between you and my mother. I'm guessing that by now, my father knows, too."

"Liar!"

Raven pushed the tray away. "Whatever. You know, Laroque, I really don't care much what happens to me. You should understand *that*. Bo is alive, and that's all that matters to me. I almost lost him. My world just about ended. My life as a Lamai is over. You really can't do much more to me—except kill me, and then I'll be reunited with my mother."

Laroque took the tray and headed out the door, muttering, "Smartass like your mother, too."

Chapter Sixteen

“Raul and Seth are both dead. Word is that the Empusas are coming from Greece to see what the problem is on the island. Tobias, we need to show a unified front. You know Kate will grant them dominion over us if we don’t clean up this mess,” Solaris pleaded. “She always throws in a monkey wrench whenever she can.”

Bo paced while the two squabbled over who should be mayor.

Tobias balked. “Raven was abducted yesterday. I can’t take on the responsibility of mayor. I need to find her. Besides, I’m not here that often.”

“With the baby coming, you’re still going to leave? Don’t make the same mistake...” Solaris cut off her sentence.

Tobias eyed her cautiously.

Sol had a habit of tossing out her opinions, whether people wanted them or not.

“No, you’re right. I have to stay with Emmie, but finding my daughter is a priority. Nevertheless, I still do not want the responsibility. You’ve dealt with the Empusas before. They know you and respect you. I have no patience with those hideous creatures. They give vampires a bad name.”

“I thought the Bathorites did that,” Solaris added. “But I suppose you’re right.”

A look of disgust cloaked Tobias’s face at the mention of Bathorites. A species of vampires with no moral compass.

Bo turned to Solaris. “You take on the job. It’s in the decree, anyway, that if anything happened to Frank, the job would fall to you. You were the mayor before Frank.”

Solaris let out a deep, long sigh. “Damn! Raven tells me you can’t remember where you put your shoes at night—or your keys—but *this* you remember!”

Bo smiled, but not quite. It was more of a smug expression. “I don’t want to waste time squabbling about who should be mayor. I want to find Raven.”

Sol could sense the wolf inside struggled to break free, demanding to use its natural abilities to track Raven. She understood the need to protect Raven overwhelmed Bo. And knowing him as she did, she bet he despised himself for failing to protect her.

Thank the gods they came to an agreement, Sol grew weary of the arguing. “All right, I’ll do it. Temporarily,” Solaris said. “Did they clean up the office? I’d rather not have all that dried blood in there if I can help it. Bad mojo. It’ll require a complete sage ceremony and salt-water cleansing.”

Sol sat at her desk at Blood Pool. She hoped she would transition nicely back into the job of mayor of Mirabelle.

Bo placed his hands on his hips. “Yes, they’ve got painters in there now, and the floor will be sanded and re-stained.”

Tobias rested his fists on the desktop, leaning toward her. “Have you been able to get a fix on Raven?”

Solaris canted her head. “No. I was going to ask you the same thing. The only thing I know for certain is that she’s not in the immediate vicinity. I want to say Haiti, but that’s too obvious. I kept getting pulled in that general direction, though.”

Bo began to pace once more. The wolf was agitated. He flipped open his cell phone and started making some calls. While punching numbers for his automated answering service, he informed them, “No one seems to know where she could be. Jules, Bridget, Iris and Emmie...even Nat and Ian tried to scry for her. Do you think Kate would help?”

“No!” Solaris and Tobias shouted in unison.

“Are you going to call off the Harvest Celebration?” Tobias asked.

“I know how you feel about this, Tobias, but I do think it’s a good idea to keep everything as normal as possible. Plus...” Her voice trailed into the ethers.

“What?”

Solaris sighed. She hated to bring this up. “The people of the island are very superstitious. You know that. If we don’t go ahead with the ceremony, and economically the island does poorly, they’ll say it’s retribution, that the spirits are angry for not being honored. Anything that goes wrong in the coming year will be blamed on the fact that we didn’t conduct the yearly ritual.”

Tobias raised his voice in anger. “I don’t care what the people think or don’t think. We’re talking about my daughter’s life!”

Bo spoke up. “We’re not living in the old times. The townspeople will understand.”

Solaris rose from her seat, hands on hips. “You think so? I’ve been getting phone calls already. Sam Johansson is claiming his apples aren’t doing as well as last season. His reason? We cut the Nights of the Parades down to a week. And he’s not the only one. Sue Graver’s corn has come down with some disease. You want the list?”

Bo’s shocked expression conveyed he couldn’t believe what he was hearing. He let out a low growl as he raked his hand through his hair in frustration. “Corn and apples,” he muttered.

“What’s more important, Solaris, Raven or some bushels of apples and corn?” Tobias snapped.

Solaris shot an angry gaze at the ancient Lamai. “Of course Raven is more important! There’s something else. I think maybe...” She sat back in her seat, suddenly exhausted.

“What?” Tobias prodded.

“It’s just a very strong feeling I have. You’re not going to like what I have to say, either one of you.”

Tobias prodded her to confess what she knew, but was obviously uncomfortable sharing. “If it has to do with Raven, tell us.”

Bo voice was strained. “Please, tell us.”

She leaned forward, folding her hands neatly on the desktop. “Laroque *might* use the ceremony to get your attention.”

Tobias turned away from her. “Sol, I do not want Raven used as bait. I’m going out to look for her. Maybe Rhia knows where she is.”

Solaris stood. “Rhia is an ancient Lamai with severe dementia. She won’t be of any help.” She walked around to the front of her desk.

Tobias’s grey eyes shone brightly, and he shook his head in dismay. “I expected more from you. You’re like an aunt to Raven. At the very least a little understanding would be nice.”

“That’s unfair, Tobias.”

“If that’s what you think of Rhia, then she has done her job well,” Tobias said with a sigh. “That’s what she wants people to think, that she is a feeble, old deity with little sense and even less influence on our lives than we give her credit for.”

“Tobias, she is your deity, not mine,” Solaris griped.

The evening sun was setting. The only reason Raven was able to tell was that the room was plunging into darkness. She hadn’t seen Philippe all day. The Lamai, Mick, brought her breakfast and lunch. Dinner was yet to be served.

She asked repeatedly where Philippe was, but the Lamai refused to answer.

“Come on, Mick, you know me. I’ve seen you every night at Blood Pool. We were *buds*,” she said sarcastically.

For a big man, Mick was soft-spoken. “Mr. Laroque will see you when he’s ready.” He handed her clean clothes—a cotton shirt,

a package of underwear and jeans. “Sorry, Mr. Laroque didn’t know your bra size.”

She grimaced as she tore open the package. “How thoughtful of him. Can I at least get cleaned up?”

He pointed to a washcloth and a bowl of soapy water next to her bed.

She held up the panties, frowning. They looked more like granny bloomers. They would have to do. “Then can you tell me...is he still on the island?”

Mick walked out without answering.

“I have to pee,” she yelled before the door closed.

His voice boomed out from down the hall. “Don’t wet the bed!”

“Damn,” she swore as the door slammed.

At some point during the night, the winds picked up. The slamming of the shutters woke Raven from her restless sleep. The sheer curtains billowed inside and became soaked with rain. Despite Raven’s newly humanized sense of smell, she could still identify the bougainvillea, jasmine and plumeria that scented the air.

Lightning lit the night sky, and thunder rumbled. She heard waves roil in the distance. Her legs were still cuffed to the bed, so she couldn’t move, couldn’t go to the window for a look or to climb out.

She deduced from the bouquet surrounding her that she was somewhere in the south. Jamaica, perhaps, or Haiti. Except Laroque

was smarter than that. Everyone would think to look for her in New Orleans or Haiti first.

Lying in bed, she stared at the ceiling. Light poured in from the hall as her door opened. It was Laroque. He went to the window and closed the shutters.

He was quiet for a long while, staring off into space. "I suppose you figured we're in the middle of a tropical storm," he finally said. "It may turn into a hurricane during the night, if you are to believe the weather forecasters."

"Yes, it being October and all. Hurricane season's a bitch." Raven motioned with her head toward the packages of undergarments and jeans. "I'm a 36 D bra by the way. And tell Mick thanks for the bedpan."

"I'll keep that in mind." He glanced at the nightstand. There sat an empty bedpan. "Are you hungry? I was sleeping, and I assumed you weren't fed." He pulled a chair from the darkened corner and sat.

"I'm not hungry, no. My feet hurt," Raven said as she reached for her ankles and tried to rub beneath the straps that were digging into her flesh. She stole quick glances at the man across the room as she fidgeted.

What a time to become mortal. She thought about Bo and wondered where he was.

Laroque's complexion was drab, and half circles bulged underneath his tired eyes. He seemed to sway in the seat.

"You'll try to escape if I let you go," he said between ragged breaths.

Raven leaned against the headboard. “You really don’t look well. Do you have any medical supplies here?”

He looked at her and opened his mouth to answer, but no words came out. He reached into his pocket and tossed her the keys to the cuffs on her ankles.

“The Lamai have strict orders if you try to escape. Just try, and they will turn you...and you will die.”

Raven had no doubt he would keep his word. She unlocked the cuffs and massaged her feet. Normally the marks would heal within seconds of appearing. This was the new normal, and she wasn’t used to it. She wasn’t used to hunger pangs and she certainly wasn’t used to the thought of dying.

She supposed, in hindsight, that was how she was able to do her job. Death was something that happened to others.

“I have a vaccine that seems to be working on the Lamai. Mick is the longest-running success story. The other two Lamai and the shifters have also been inoculated. I’m afraid I haven’t got one that will work on humans.” He rocked back and forth, almost falling off the chair.

Raven stood and steadied herself. “Supplies. Where are they?”

Laroque wheezed. “Downstairs. Masks, gowns, oxygen, quarantine tent...”

He was visibly weak, barely able to hold himself up on the seat, let alone speak. “Raven, I loved your mother more than life itself. I know she never loved me the way she loved your father, but she did love me, and that was enough. I would take whatever she wanted to give. Jade...is my whole world. You are sisters...”

Her hands fisted at her side, she suddenly lost her self-control. “You almost *killed* the only man I will ever love! Am I supposed to *forgive* you?”

He shook his head. “No...of course not. I promised Jade I wouldn’t hurt you. We all do things we wouldn’t normally do for love—or hate. Your father couldn’t live with the fact that Nicki gave herself to me. He did the unthinkable...” He could hardly catch his breath now.

“Aren’t you leaving out a little tidbit of info? I know about the fae.”

Laroque’s eyes widened. “How did you find out?”

“Not important. What is important is that my father did *not* kill my mother. Be still. I’ll be right back.” *Did I step into the twilight zone?* Everyone had a different version of the past, and Raven was no longer sure which one was reality and which was illusion. For now, her reality wasn’t very promising.

Raven headed out the door and walked right into the wall that was Mick.

“Laroque asked me earlier to show you where the supplies are,” he said, leading her down the stairs. Raven couldn’t believe the low, rumbling quality of this man’s voice. Barry White had nothing on this guy.

They made their way down the semi-circular staircase of the huge mansion. A home that seemed to belong on a plantation. Raven could see the boarded up windows. Battery-operated candles illuminated every room.

The main level was like a walk-in clinic, albeit a stone walled and wood floored one. A fireplace blazed in the center of the south wall, and a hospital bed jutted into the middle of the floor from the opposite wall.

Raven rapidly issued orders to the Lamai. “Put the fire out now and get me an oxygen tank. Can one of your goons lift Mr. Laroque and put him in the bed here? I need surgical masks, a gown—and I don’t mean an evening gown and gloves. Am I talking too fast for ya, Mick?”

“No, ma’am.” He smiled, reluctantly. It seemed to Raven that he liked her.

“Good, because I’m not going near Mr. Laroque until I get those things. Is there an autoclave?”

He nodded. “Yes, ma’am, it’s in the kitchen.”

Mick pointed a long, beefy finger toward the closet. “Mr. Laroque gave strict instructions that I not touch anything you might need. The items you asked for are in that closet, all sterile. You’ll also find IV bags and needles.” His voice registered an octave below the thunder that clapped outside. “There’s also a freezer with the virus in the kitchen, and in the refrigerator are the vaccines. Mr. Laroque has them all labeled. He has his notes in his laptop, which is on the dining room table.”

Raven turned to look around the room, making sure the candles didn’t have combustible flames. “Is there a generator, in case we lose power?”

“Yes, ma’am.”

Raven opened the closet and took out everything she required. Slipping on the scrubs, she turned to look at the hulking Lamai. “You feel all right?”

“Never better.”

“Good. Go get him,” she said, putting on the booties, double gloves and mask.

Chapter Seventeen

Raven peered into the refrigerator at the small vials of vaccinations stored in a Rubbermaid container. On each lid was a label: *Lamai, Fae, Siren, Empusas and Shifter*. On another container, *Human*.

She turned and noticed the short chest-like freezer with the biohazard symbol on it. That was where the virus lay dormant, like a demon frozen in time. She'd never worked with hot agents before. She really had no desire to do so now, either. But the choice was no longer hers. The universe had other plans for her, and what they were she wouldn't even hazard a guess.

What would possess a man to go to such measures? It couldn't be for love. Love was nurturing and caring. Hate, on the other hand, destroyed people and lives, just like the virus in the freezer.

The Lamai called. "Dr. Strigoi."

She headed into the makeshift hospital room. Mick had placed Laroque on the bed and closed the plastic curtain around him.

"I need other supplies... a thermometer, and I need to check his blood pressure, too."

Mick, donned in scrubs and gloves, nodded and went into the kitchen. He soon returned with the required items.

Raven approached Laroque. His skin was pale and he looked feverish. She placed the disposable sheath over the thermometer, slid the plastic tent open and began taking his temperature. While she waited, she instructed Mick to get the IVs ready.

“In a former life, I was an ER nurse,” he said through the mask.

She studied his face. He was a handsome man with caramel-colored skin and deep sable eyes. “Present time or past life?” Raven asked.

Mick’s eyes squinted, indicating a smile. “Two years ago. In Boston General. Before that I was in Atlanta for six years.”

Looking at the thermometer, she frowned. “Well, I suppose that’s why Laroque chose you.”

“Yes, ma’am.”

“Can you stop with the ma’am, please? You’re making me feel old.” She attempted a smile, but it just wasn’t there.

He wore a sheepish expression. “Yes, ma—*Doc*.”

She said with a sigh, “Better. Okay, Mick, let’s get those IV fluids in him. He’s got a temp and is dehydrated. I want you to use a peripheral IV line, eighteen-gauge with a hep-lock. We’re not administering any Heparin, but in case I need to flush the line I want that accessible. Do you know if he tried to administer any of the vaccines to himself?”

“Not as far as I know.” Mick worked swiftly for a man of his immense size. He gently inserted the needle into Laroque’s arm and adjusted the drip.

Laroque opened his eyes and looked at Raven. She knew he was thanking her and perhaps apologizing at the same time. She was still angry with him for what he had done to Bo and would never forgive him for that. Ever.

But seeing him so weak and learning of how circumstances and lies had framed his life, she couldn't help but feel a tiny bit sorry for him. But only the tiniest bit. She attributed this newfound compassion to her recently acquired humanness.

Although Raven was no longer Lamai, she still carried the blood memories of drinking from her sister. Raven saw what a loving father he was and that he cried almost every night over a photo of Nicolette, how torn he was over his love for his daughter and the woman he could never quite possess, and his consuming hatred for the man he thought caused all his grief. All the betrayals he endured throughout his life by his own family, the woman he loved, a man who claimed to be his friend and now his daughter. Raven could see why he mourned.

She refocused on her task ahead. "I'll need a place to work and a microscope, perhaps?"

Mick pointed to the dining room. In the corner was a mini lab. "What else might you need?" he asked above the sudden return of thunder.

She placed an oxygen mask over his nose and mouth, "A telephone."

Laroque shook his head. Lightning flashed.

"I kind of figured. My chances of helping you would be greatly increased at the hospital."

He continued shaking his head. “Jade...” he whispered in a gravelly voice.

Raven checked the drip on the IV. “I won’t let her come anywhere close to you unless she’s geared up.”

The winds began to howl. Raven thought she heard Bo amidst the roars. She wished she could see him again. She missed him terribly, but she couldn’t think of that now. If she ever hoped to see him again, she had to keep this man alive. How ironic.

“No, forget Jade.”

“I have friends who are virologists and epidemiologists. I’d at least have some people to bounce ideas off of. Don’t you watch TV? You know the show *House*?” Raven was desperate to get him to drop his guard.

She could see he was trying to raise his arm. “I have all...the information...you need.” He looked over to his laptop.

“I get it. Dr. House is your idol. Not lacking in the self-confidence department, I see.”

“Smartass...like...Nicolette.” He was obviously in dire pain.

“Yes, so I’ve been told. Suit yourself,” she said to Mick. “I need you to draw some blood so we can see what we’ve got cooking.” Thunder cracked as if to emphasize the point.

“The Empusas delegates are arriving from the mainland in a half-hour,” Solaris told Bo.

He shrugged. “Good luck. I’m out of here. I’ve got a plane taking me to the mainland and then I’m heading to Logan airport.”

She straightened the bar, filling the dishes with nuts and pretzels then took inventory of what she would need for the coming evening. “You’re going to Haiti?” she asked.

“Yes. And no cracks about chasing my tail or any other canine jokes. I’m going to Haiti. I can’t sit here and do nothing. I’ve been going out of my mind. Tobias won’t—or can’t—take me to see Rhia since she’s allergic to dogs, or some bullshit. So I’m going to Haiti to see if I can find Raven myself. The wolf in me is a good tracker. Might as well take advantage of it. I’ve hung around here long enough. I need to do something constructive. I need to find her.”

Solaris could see her friend was in pain. He was hurting and missing the woman he loved. His pride was eating away at him, too. “There’s a tropical storm heading straight for that area, Bo. You may not get a flight.”

Bo grabbed a handful of pretzels. “We’re flying in to Miami first, and if I can’t get to Haiti I’ll deal with it then. I’ll swim if I have to.” He tossed a pretzel in his mouth.

“Be careful. Last I heard the storm was gaining strength. Wait a minute—we?” Solaris’s eyes widening.

Running his hands through his ebony hair, he headed for the door. “I couldn’t talk Jade out of coming. Apparently she wants to make up for her role in this whole mess, even though I tried to explain to her she’s innocent. She claims her mother comes to her a lot in dreams now that she’s Lamai and told her to accompany me. Does that make sense? All I know about is hunting and protecting those I love. I have instincts, not intuition.”

“I haven’t had a vision of Nicolette in a while, either. I guess it’s possible. Tobias is a very private person and he doesn’t share his experiences with anyone. I have to believe, though, that he does at least dream of Nicolette. He told me one aspect of the immortal curse is that he can’t speak with the dead. I don’t know what’s kept him going all this time. He could, after all, give his soul to Hekate and be done with it. There’s got to be more to this whole situation than he’s shared with us.”

“Yeah, he’s pretty tight lipped about a lot of things.” Walking out, he said, “Good luck with the emissaries from Greece.”

Sol noted how sad Bo looked. His heart was breaking, and she guessed he felt helpless to do anything about it. He was right about Rhia, though. Rhia did not like any beings but her own kind. She tolerated some humans, but that was the extent of her graciousness.

Tobias made the trek alone.

He could travel faster transforming into mist. He would be in Rethymno, Greece, by late afternoon.

The city of Rethymno was on the Greek island of Crete. The plethora of charms and beauties that characterized Crete astonished Tobias every time he visited. With its white sandy beaches and magnificent architecture, it had become one of his favorite places. Not to mention the island held special memories for him.

For some odd reason it was comforting to be on the island. He’d thought he might become morose every time he had to make the journey, but it was like coming home. The island of Crete was where he’d first set eyes on Nicolette.

Only she wasn't Nicolette then. She was Helen. And he wasn't Tobias. It had been approximately 1200 BC.

The skies were darkening when Tobias emerged from the mists in Rethymno, on the northern side of Crete. No wonder Rhia chose to live here. It was magnificent.

He breathed in the sea air, which was unlike the air on Mirabelle Cove. It seemed lighter here. Everything appeared more vibrant—the waters bluer, the foliage greener and the beaches whiter.

Tobias headed for the old section of town, the ancient section where he knew he would find Queen Rhia.

She didn't do much these days. She didn't have to. Welcoming a few loyal Lamai each day was the extent of her duties. As the oldest Lamai, she was truly immortal. Her body, like steel covered with pale porcelain, could never be wounded. For thousands of years she'd lived out her vengeance for what her family suffered. These days she chose to simply enjoy her surroundings with her loved ones. Not all of her ancestors survived, but a few nieces and their offspring had, down through the generations.

Tobias walked along stone-paved streets lined with vegetation leading him through his journey to see the primeval Queen. The town still preserved its old aristocratic exterior, which appealed to him. Its ancient buildings with their rustic domed archways and stone staircases, overlooking the Venetian harbor, brought back many memories. Not all were good. Outdoor cafés, stores and

restaurants altered the landscape slightly, but in Tobias's mind, he saw the old city the way it had been: regal.

He walked through a labyrinth of neatly sculpted hedges along with marble statues of Rhia's husband and children strategically placed at the four compass points. He bowed his head as he approached.

"Tobias, come. Have a glass of wine." Her voice was unmistakable. It echoed, giving it the tenor of something hollow. Of course her lips never moved, either, but the sound reverberated outside his mind.

The Lamai smiled, feeling as hollow as Rhia's voice sounded. "Thank you, Rhia." He accepted the glass of wine, for rejecting it would be an insult. One did not insult Rhia, unless you wished for death.

For some unknown reason, Rhia had a soft spot for Tobias. Some family members confided to him it was because he looked so much like her beloved with his dark, smoldering good looks and eyes the color of polished silver. He simply chalked it up to showing her the respect she deserved.

He knew she bestowed him a rare smile, though it was more an etheric one. "You are here because of your daughter?" she asked without speaking.

"For her and another reason..."

Large, cobalt blue eyes stared at him. They changed with her moods. Beware if she stared with black eyes. "Ah, yes, there's that twinkle in your eyes. Every now and then, you come back with the same question. Hekate still refuses to cooperate?"

Tobias handed her a solid gold bracelet. Though she had told Tobias long ago it wasn't required of him to bring her gifts, he did anyway. "She doesn't like to discuss that part of the wheel of life." Tobias sipped the fruity wine.

She took the gift and gave a slight nod in appreciation. "Yes, she was always a little selfish."

Tobias sat next to the queen. "I have asked another woman to marry me."

Rhia looked at him with a golden gaze through auburn lashes, waiting for Tobias to finish.

"And I don't know if that was the right thing to do. I feel as if I'm betraying Nicolette."

"A little late for second thoughts." Rhia smiled tenderly. "What did this woman say?"

"Yes."

"Do you love her?" she asked, leaning toward Tobias. Her body was as hard as marble underneath her satin tunic, yet her movements remained fluid.

"Yes, but not..."

Rhia's face appeared to soften. She could appear twenty years old, or twenty thousand, mummified and skeletal. "I know, my child. It is never as it was with Nicolette, but you proposed. You are a man of your word, yes?"

"Yes, and I do adore Emerald."

"And in the marriage contract it states when your destined love enters the earth plane again you may go to her and the current

marriage is dissolved.” She paused for a moment. “Why did you propose?”

Rhia asked questions though she already knew the answers. It was rare when she didn’t know the information asked of her. But it did happen.

Tobias stared off into the distance, breathing in the salty sea air, remembering another time and place. “Emerald wants it desperately. I am content for things to remain the way they are, but she deserves more.”

Rhia’s voice vibrated through Tobias’s being. “What she deserves, you cannot give her.”

Tobias looked into his queen’s soft green eyes. She was right. He couldn’t give Emerald the love she wanted, and she wasn’t the first woman to want his love. There had been many others in his past, but only one for him. He knew he was only making the situation harder for both him and his partner. It was the loneliness that coaxed him. Like a demon demanding its due, loneliness taunted him to seek companionship. The voice whispered to his mind, reminding him of how the warmth of another’s body could make the days pass more quickly.

Rhia reached out to touch Tobias’s hand. Hers was cold as winter’s snow. “Don’t worry. Your beloved is still waiting to be born again. She has to see things through with her daughters first. Then she will start the wheel of life again, and you will find her. You always find her.”

He looked into her sea foam-green eyes. “Where is Raven?”

“I’m sorry, Tobias, but that information is hidden, even from me. I can tell you, you will find your Nicolette on the other coast of the United States, near the state of Washington. But you have time for that.”

He finished the wine. “Yes. All I have is time.”

“And family. All is not lost.” When Rhia sighed, it sounded like the winds howling through the trees. “Follow the heart, Tobias. The heart knows more than the mind ever could.”

Chapter Eighteen

The plane touched down at Miami International Airport at 6:45 p.m. It was the last plane allowed to land that day. The storm, predicted to develop into a category-one hurricane by nightfall, did not disappoint the local meteorologists.

Jade slept during most of the flight, but Bo was as restless as a caged animal, which was precisely how he felt. The wolf wanted out.

He hated flying. But he had managed to doze off for a little while—at least long enough to dream of Raven.

They were on a secluded island, just the two of them. The sun was languidly settling into the tropical waters. Palm trees swayed in the gentle breeze, and a fire blazed in a hole he had dug out of the ground. A blanket spread out before them on the pristine sand, and a bottle of wine rested in a crystal ice bucket.

Raven's eyes were the blue-green hazel of human irises, her skin a tawny color and her cheeks flushed with youth. She licked her lips before taking a sip and swallowing the wine.

Gods, he loved those lips. Soft and full, they felt luscious wrapped around his sex. And he wanted nothing more than to tear her panties off and show her his lust—and express the love within his heart.

He was patient, though. Despite the discomfort caused by the bulge in his jeans, he waited and sipped his own glass of wine. His gaze rushed over her as she sat on the blanket, wearing almost the identical outfit as she had the first night they'd met so long ago—on May Day Eve.

Only this dress was black as night and it was much more translucent—so much so that he could see her taut nipples through the fabric, begging to be touched.

Raven didn't speak.

She just stared at the water and breathed in the heavily scented air. Her chest rose and fell with each inhalation. He knew those aromas, the jasmine, bougainvillea and the frangipani. Clouds were heading to the east as if a storm had cleared. She turned and looked at him. Her lips seemed to be inviting him to kiss her. She sat on her knees and faced him, placing her hands on his cheeks. The heat between Bo and Raven burned with a palpable ferocity.

"I love you." Her mouth formed the words, but he could not hear.

He kissed her, just to make certain she was still there and not a vision. He felt her as she kissed back. Their lips parted and tongues swirled. She went limp in his arms, and as she leaned back he caught her, cradling her in his embrace.

She pressed her body closer, grasping at his shirt, tugging and pulling, trying to remove it. He sat back and peeled it off, revealing his rippling muscles and slender waist. He took her hand and placed it between his legs, rubbing the center of his longing.

She unfastened his jeans, bringing her arms together as her dress slipped down around her shoulders. Her breasts peeked out of the silky fabric, and Bo reached to taunt, tease and stroke them. She let out a soft moan, and it catapulted him to a still deeper level of yearning.

He guided her down onto the blanket.

His lips followed his hands as he traversed the valley between her bosom, up and around the soft rise of her breasts and down her belly to her sacred mound. Her back arched as his tongue stroked the soft folds of her skin, driving her over the edge. He heard her fight to catch her breath.

Grasping at the blanket beneath her, she let out a whimper as he lifted her to get a better taste of her sweet juices. She was exquisite—he could not get enough of her, and it appeared she could not get her fill of him.

Riding the crest of her climax, she cried out to him, begging him to slip inside her.

“Bo...now,” she moaned.

He leaned over her, his cock throbbing in anticipation. “Raven, my love,” he declared as he entered her, craving the surrender of his aching and obsession. “Oh, Raven.”

“Bo...”

“Huh?”

“Bo, we’re landing,” Jade said, shaking him.

Jade and Bo made their way through the airport in record time. With one bag each, they reached the car rental office within fifteen minutes of disembarking the plane.

Bo rented an SUV. He threw their belongings in the backseat, hopped in the driver's side and started the vehicle. He felt Raven. She was closer. He didn't know how or why he knew. He supposed it was the instinct he'd explained to Solaris. The wolf within him growled. *Have to get to her. Danger. He felt his eyes changing. Must tame the beast.*

Rain pelted down. The sky darkened, as did Bo's mood.

Jade shifted in her seat. "I hate to be a pain, but can I get a little bit of that blood out of the cooler? I'm really not used to this weird feeling—hungry, but not for food."

The rain was coming down harder, but thanks to Bo's keen eyesight, it didn't hinder their travel. "Help yourself. Hey—do you feel Raven? Use some of that Lamai intuition."

Jade closed her eyes. "Nothing. I think I need some blood first. All I feel is..."

"Yeah, weird," Bo finished her sentence.

Jade reached in the back for the cooler. "Aren't you hungry? You should eat."

He answered more harshly than he meant to. "No. I haven't been hungry since..."

"Yeah, I get it. Say no more. I don't want to sound like a broken record, but..." She opened the cooler and took out a packet of blood.

"I know you're sorry. Jade, you don't have to keep apologizing. Really. I just wish Raven had shared with me what she was doing... That she changed you."

Jade sighed. “She wanted to. It was really hard for her to keep it secret. From you. Damn, she scared the shit out of me! She loves you so much. You’re a lucky guy. I got the inside scoop from Raven when she shared her blood. There’s nothing she wouldn’t do for you. It’s really intense, the way she feels about you. And it has a timeless quality, her love for you has no beginning or ending.” She was quiet a minute. “Maybe I shouldn’t have told you all this. Oh, well. Pretend I didn’t say anything.”

Bo clenched his jaw, the nervous energy building inside. The images from his dream still haunted him. Frustration swallowed him. “Look, I know you’re trying to make me feel better, but it truly is *not* working. Drink the blood and see if you can feel her.”

Jade looked perplexed as she fumbled with the pack of blood. “How exactly do I do this?”

“There’s a round cut-out on the top. Pop it out and put the straw in—and drink.”

She followed his directions and began drinking.

“Do you know the only reason she didn’t marry you sooner is because she knew your family wanted you to pair off with Bethany?”

“What?” The carnal lust rose within. Raven was his. It didn’t matter who approved or disapproved.

Jade smacked her lips together. “Yeah, she worried about you and how your family would feel if you got married. Raven knows your grandfather loves her, but your mother...is a different story.”

Bo didn’t answer. He didn’t have to. It was true Bo’s grandfather loved Raven, but his daughter wanted Bethany for a

daughter-in-law. However, her son was stubborn, and he told his mother in no uncertain terms that Raven would be his wife someday, or he would remain a bachelor. Over time, Bo's mother came to accept Raven. Not that it mattered.

"She also worries when you go off with the pack, that you're—how do I say this?—*mating* with Bethany. And that you either don't recall or won't tell her. As secure as Raven is—with you—she is *very* insecure about Bethany." Again she was silent. "You have to not let me talk anymore. I'm revealing all Raven's insecurities. Not good."

"That's ridiculous. She knows I don't get amnesia. Gods. I told her I remember everything that I do when I change, and I don't 'mate' with anyone. Raven is mine." He was going to remind her that wolves mate for life, but that was old news.

Jade took in a deep breath. "Well, apparently, a while back Bethany told Raven she was pregnant with your—cub? Baby? How *does* that work?" she asked between sips. "Hey, is this flavored?"

Bo narrowed his gaze at Jade, smirking. "Shit—very funny, Jade. A baby, not a cub. Gods, I guess your father didn't teach you everything. And yeah, it's flavored. What'd you get—strawberry?"

"Cranberry and...tastes peachy."

"Oh, that's a new one Tracy came up with."

Jade returned to the topic at hand. "So, you never had sex with Bethany?"

Bo looked over at the young woman sipping cranberry-peach type O blood. "I did in the past, but that was a long time ago."

“You two are lucky to have each other. Raven and you, I mean.”

He knew that all too well. Why had he let all those years go by without claiming her? The love he felt for Raven was unlike any other emotion he’d ever experienced. It consumed him like fire. In the beginning he told himself he was still young and had plenty of years to settle down. He always assumed Raven would be there for him. Yes, his mother pushed him incessantly to pursue a relationship with Bethany, but his heart was never truly in it.

It was always Raven he wanted.

“Bo, your hands are white. Relax.” Jade broke the spell he was under. Thoughts of Raven inundated him. He gazed down at his hands. His knuckles were white as he gripped the steering wheel.

Clearly, it was time for a subject change. “We’re not too far from Port-au-Prince—a two hour plane ride.”

Jade watched as the palm trees began swaying in the breeze. The winds were picking up, and the rain was coming down in sheets. “He wouldn’t take her there. If I know my father—and I do—he won’t take her to Haiti. He wouldn’t want to risk infecting the people there.”

Bo shook his head at the irony. “What a humanitarian.”

Jade drank in silence.

He scratched at his head, confusion plaguing him. “I don’t get it. Sol said she’s not on the mainland, yet I feel her.”

Bo pulled over to the side of the road, got out of the vehicle and put his nose up in the air. The winds whipped his hair straight out behind him. He gazed over at Jade who stared at him through

the car window. From the expression on her face, he assumed he must have looked like a crazed native Aztec god. Within no time, he was soaked to his skin from the rain. His felt the burn in his eyes indicating they'd turned golden, and the hairs on the back of his neck stood on end as he tuned in to his mate.

Jade sat back with her eyes closed and concentrated on her sister. Raven had not taught Jade the fine art of using her Lamai senses. Everything had happened too fast with just the basic changes in DNA, although the transformation was a slower process due to the immediate blood transfusion. And Laroque had taken Jade before Raven had a chance to teach her anything.

Bo returned to the car. "Anything?"

Jade said, "This is all new to me. I'll do the best I can. Maybe if I focus on the blood memories of my sister, it will work."

Her main point of concentration became her beating heart. "The thumping in my head is beating out a solitary rhythm. No, wait—it's split into two beats," she whispered. "One loud and persistent, the other farther away."

Jade got out of the vehicle. "I feel her!" she yelled over the winds. "It's faint, but I feel her heart beating." She wiped the rain from her face.

Bo couldn't get past his own racing heartbeat. He got out of the car. "Where is she?"

She looked over at Bo. "Hey, your eyes are changing color. They're gold. Are you going to get all snarly on me?"

"No. Concentrate."

Jade seemed to be listening to the two hearts beating. “I’m turned to the east; no change. Now to the north, it’s faded slightly. Wait, the thumping’s getting louder. What about any islands off the coast, to the south—the Keys? Technically they’re not part of the mainland, so Solaris would be right—and yet they are.” She strained, raising her voice over the growing winds.

“That may be it. Let’s get to a rest stop and find a map.” Bo gazed up at the darkening sky. He had to get to the Keys before the storm hit and the authorities closed down the bridges.

“Shit!” Raven grasped her hair and gave a tug in frustration.

“Ma’am, is everything all right?” Mick asked.

After a few hours, Raven had given up trying to convince Mick to call her Doc, or any other name, for that matter. He was a gentleman, and that was just the way he spoke. His mother raised him to be respectful of women and men. They were ma’am and sir, end of story.

Raven tapped her fingers on the table. Nothing was going right. That was the understatement of the year. She was having a difficult time getting a handle on the virus. This was not her area of expertise. “No! This virus has me baffled. I want to try to introduce some of your blood into this soup. Maybe you built up anti-viruses within your Lamai DNA, and I can add it to the human DNA without somehow changing species.”

Mick cleared his throat. “Wouldn’t it be better to use the blood from the fae? Their DNA is closer to that of a human. I have a little experience with this. I studied pathogens a few years ago. Nothing

beyond a level one.” In the world of bio-safety, level one referred to agents that don’t normally cause diseases in humans.

“Yeah, blood from a fae...” She drifted off thoughtfully. “I suppose it would be more effective.”

Raven got up from her chair and stretched her muscles. She went to look outside and noticed more dark clouds approaching. What a mess her life had become. Just when she thought she and Bo would finally be able to make a life for themselves as a couple, the mother of all curve balls got thrown at them at warp speed.

Where was her father? She’d had this image built up in her mind of the great Tobias Strigoi, so protective of his family yet at the same time so distant, as if he lived only for the time when his destined love incarnated. She knew her father loved her, but she never really experienced it. The man today was not the same man she remembered him being when her mother was alive.

Bo. Gods, how she missed him. She wondered why she hadn’t been able to feel him.

Then the truth of the situation hit her—again. The connection had vanished. She was mortal.

Raven propped her head in her hand. “I’m tired. Do we have any fae blood with anti-bodies?” she asked, taking a sip of hours-old coffee, trying to forget about Bo and whether he was looking for her.

Mick changed the empty IV bag. “Yes. We have some of Mordred’s blood.”

“Interesting. Mordred’s blood? I won’t even ask how you got hold of that. Get it for me, please.” A knot had formed in Raven’s neck and soon spread like wild ivy down her shoulders.

“Raul lifted it for Laroque. Doc?” he asked.

So maybe he is learning, she thought.

Raven vigorously rubbed at her neck. “Yeah?”

Mick walked over to Raven and looked deeply into her eyes. Apparently, the question he’d wanted to ask had finally found its moment. “Why are you doing this? I mean, he’s my boss—he pays me, and that’s why I’m here—but he tried to kill your man. Why are you trying so hard to *save* his ass?”

She didn’t mean to, but she laughed out loud. “I like your honesty. In addition to the fact I have a vested interest in creating an antidote for this virus and in saving my own ass, it’s because chances are I’m infected, too. You mean besides that?”

Mick looked over at Laroque.

His booming voice became a subtle whisper. “You’re not infected. He was very careful about that. The only way to become infected is through blood...a dirty stick or body fluids. It’s a lot more effective through a needle. Frank Dubois stuck him. I found the puncture mark on Laroque’s thigh. The back of his thigh.”

“How do you know it was Frank?”

“I saw him do it. I just shimmered into the room and saw Frank stick Laroque while he was passed out drunk one night.”

The knot in her neck tightened. “Shit! And we’re taking precautions. Why?”

“He wants you to think you can become infected so you’ll do exactly what you’re doing now. Besides, you don’t want to take any risks with this virus.”

He walked into the kitchen and opened the freezer compartment, removing the frozen sample of Mordred’s blood. Raven stood a few feet behind him.

She reached for the sample. “I can’t say I blame him. He’s desperate, Mick.”

He handed it to her with gloved hands and shook his head.

“You’re quite an odd woman,” he commented.

She smiled. “You know, I find I’m less angry now that I don’t have Lamai blood coursing through my veins. Maybe that’s it.” Philippe caught her attention, reminding her of Jade. “I have my reasons for doing this. Let’s just say I made a major error in judgment and someone I know, well, that person’s life will never be the same. I owe them.”

“Luke made fresh coffee,” Mick said. “I’ll get you some.”

Philippe cried out in his sleep. “Jade!”

Outside, the trees slapped against the windows, and for a moment the house went dark. The generator started buzzing, and soon the lights returned.

The home sat high on a hill, but the sound of crashing waves pounding below echoed around the residence. Rain smacked against the windows in a steady stream.

“The bridges are closed,” Luke, the other Lamai, announced. He warmed thick seafood bisque in a kettle and placed a loaf of whole wheat bread in the oven.

The house smelled divine, and Raven's stomach began to grumble. If the circumstances were different, she would almost look forward to dinner—almost. Slowly she became familiar with the feelings of hunger.

“Luke used to be a chef,” Mick said with a smile. “You wouldn’t want to eat if I had to cook.”

“Hmm, I’m not the greatest cook either,” she answered, not even hearing the other remarks made. Her thoughts filled with images of Bo. She’d saved him. It was all that mattered to her. The icy fingers of death that had clawed their way around her heart were gone. She could breathe easier knowing the only man she’d ever loved was safe.

Raven attempted to concentrate on the work in front of her. She buried her head in the notes scattered on the table as she jotted ideas and reworked formulas. *Thank goodness Laroque’s penmanship is legible*, she thought. The pieces of this very odd puzzle were fitting together. This was more than likely the reason Laroque chose Derrick. His background with the CDC and working with hot agents, no doubt, was something that had to interest Laroque. He’d told Raven he experimented with creating vaccines. *Poor Derrick*.

Leaning over the work area where she was attempting to produce the vaccine for humans, Raven added vectors to the growth medium in the petri dish. Vectors were important agents that entered the DNA. To construct a vaccine, she had to duplicate them. She added bacteria and waited.

The final process of creating a vaccine involved harvesting pure vectors only. Taking a biofilter and detergent, she was able to

access the DNA. When she inoculated Laroque, billions of copies of the altered vectors would enter his body. She knew that only about one percent would work their way into the nuclei of the cells.

Hopefully, Laroque's immune system would respond to these proteins once they left the cells. The altered vectors would react to the proteins incorporated into the cells' walls. In this way, the vaccine would act like a live vaccine. The risk of the live pathogen would be eliminated, avoiding the possibility of spreading the virus further. It was time-consuming work and something Raven was not very familiar with, so it took even longer.

After a few hours, Raven took a syringe and filled it. Mick gave his approval with a nod and moved to the opposite side of Laroque's bed.

"Philippe," Raven said, holding the syringe. She could end it all at that moment, just let him watch her dispose of the vaccine and let nature take its course.

A big part of her wanted to, deep down. A very big part of her. She wanted to torture him.

For everything. For putting Bo through all that physical torment and the pain Laroque caused her.

Just for knowing her mother, she wanted to torment him.

Because he fell in love with her...made Nicolette want him, and because that wanting made her mother have sex with him.

And that broke her father's heart, and, in spite of everything, she loved her father fiercely.

Inside she knew that no one had made Nicolette do anything. Well, with exception of perhaps the fae's magick, but Raven wasn't certain the fae was that powerful. Rumors floated around that the fae had been punished for not producing the desired results. She also wasn't ready to blame her mother. Not yet.

But most of all, she wanted him to suffer because he'd almost killed Bo.

She wanted to destroy him.

Because in order to save the man she loved, she had to sacrifice everything they had together. Their life as a couple would never be the same. Her life would never be the same. The characteristic that made Raven who she was, was gone. Forever.

She wanted revenge.

He looked up at her with a weak smile. "I knew you could do it..." He groaned. "I knew you would..."

She averted her eyes, not wanting him to be able to read the truth they betrayed. She wanted him dead. "I hope we got it in time. You're only starting to show symptoms, so I'm hopeful." She tried to manage a smile, but couldn't. Raven was tired down to her soul.

In one swift motion, she plunged the needle into his muscle and released the vaccine into his system. It was all up to his body now. She hoped his immune system wasn't too badly compromised.

"I need some sleep," Raven said as she sat on the couch opposite the bed. She leaned back.

"You want to eat first?" Mick asked, but when he looked over at her, she had already passed out on the sofa. He went to the couch,

covered her with a throw blanket, then tended to the extra vaccine, storing it properly.

All they could do was wait.

Chapter Nineteen

Tobias misted back on Mirabelle Cove after the dust settled from Solaris's visit with the Empusas. The Empusas were an intimidating bunch and, in their natural state, they were rather hideous. The original Nosferatu, with his buck-toothed fangs and long, spindly fingers, would be considered handsome compared to the Empusas. Luckily, they showed themselves as the beautiful creatures used to seduce their prey—handsome GQ men and Playboy bunny-ish women.

He went directly to Blood Pool, where he found Solaris in the basement going over inventory with Vinny, her right-hand Lamai.

Solaris appeared under the spotlight of one of the high-hats tucked into the low ceiling. "Welcome home. I hope it was a satisfactory meeting."

The air was cool. The walls of stone housed a corner fireplace that contained a small but warm fire. She scarcely utilized this hearth, due to the ambient temperature needed to preserve the rare wines, but this day was bitterly cold.

Vinny nodded to Tobias and left the two alone.

Tobias leaned against the wall, rubbing his eyes. "Not really. It seems the location of my daughter is being held secret from Queen Rhia as well as the rest of us. And how was your meeting?"

Solaris stifled a yawn. “I managed to get them to hold back from retaliating when I explained this was not our doing, and that a madman was killing all magickal creatures on the island. We made a trip to the morgue where they viewed not only their own dead, but the dead sirens, Lamai and shifters. I think this proved my point. I...uh...I also had to extend an invitation to them to the celebration this Friday for Samhain.”

“You what?” Tobias took a bottle of Pinot Noir from the rack and opened the bottle. He took long, deep gulps.

Solaris eyed him suspiciously. “I had to. They were pissed. It was the only way, and I promised their dead would be remembered in our ritual.” Solaris handed a paper cup to Tobias and motioned for him to pour her some wine. “I’m not happy about this, either, believe me.”

“You did what you had to do. I’m just glad I’m not leading the ritual.” Tobias used the back of his hand to wipe the residual wine from his lips. Solaris’s eyes bore into his soul, right through to his broken heart.

“What’s really wrong?” Sol asked as she put down her clipboard and sat on a box of Glenfiddich whiskey.

“I...forget it. We have more important things to attend to. Where’s Bo?” Tobias had already downed half the bottle. Not that it would impair him in anyway. What he needed was a bottle of absinthe. Still, the taste pleased him.

Solaris prodded him. “Are you sure you don’t want to talk? It has to do with Nicki, doesn’t it?”

He looked hard at her, her eyes reflecting the firelight that washed shadows across the walls. “It always has something to do with Nicki. Please, Sol, don’t read me.”

“You can be very transparent sometimes, my friend.” Solaris smiled. “You having second thoughts about marrying Emerald?”

“Yes. No. I don’t know. I thought it was the right thing to do. I know Em loves me very much. It seems everything always keeps coming back to Nicki.”

“And it always will.”

“I do care a great deal for Emmie, but somehow, I feel I’m betraying my wife. I cannot become distracted, though. Right now, I have to find Raven.”

“I understand your depth of feelings that you hide beneath the surface of big, tough ancient Lamai.” She got up and approached him. “You’re not betraying her, and you know she’d want you to grab every bit of happiness you can...until you meet again. And you will meet again. You do know that? You’ll always find her.”

A smile played upon his lips. “Yes, I know. You always put things into perspective for me, friend. Thank you.” He turned and looked at the fire, his head bowed. “I just miss her *so* much.”

“I know you do. I can see the pain in your eyes. It seems that the time you’re with her flies by, and the time in between drags on. I understand that—really I do.”

His eyes met hers. “Exactly—and if it weren’t for Raven and my other children, I’d sleep until the time came for us to meet again.” A tear escaped his eye, and he swiftly wiped away any trace of it.

“Can I ask you something, Tobias?”

He turned to face her. “Of course.”

“Why haven’t you ever turned Nicolette? I would think that would solve many of your problems. Then you two could be together...always.”

Tobias was quiet for a while before answering.

“Have you ever been in love, Sol?”

“I have loved, yes. It’s how I understand what you go through. My love is an immortal, but hasn’t found me yet.”

“Then you know what I mean by being madly in love with someone, to the point that you consider their feelings above your own. Only their happiness matters.”

“Yes. I can say I have loved that intensely,” she admitted.

“I love Nicolette in that manner. That’s why I could never change her—and believe me, she’s asked me to do it many times. It wouldn’t be fair to her, though. It’s not her journey. If I were to change her, it would be for selfish reasons, not for her own good.” He softly chuckled. “I envy my daughter and Bo. At least I did. Now I feel terrible for her.”

Solaris stood near Tobias, warming her chilled hands by the fire. “Why?”

“Because they would have had many years together, many more than mere mortals. But Raven sacrificed that, and I understand why she did it. I’m just worried for her. This will change so many aspects of her life.”

“Speaking of your daughter, Bo headed down south with Jade. They’re trying to get a fix on Raven. I think the storm has created an obstacle, though.”

Tobias glanced at Solaris. “What storm?”

“You haven’t heard? There’s reports concerning Florida, Jamaica, Puerto Rico and the Keys. A hurricane...it’s a category-two storm now. The last I heard from Bo, he was stranded on the mainland because the bridges are closed.”

Tobias finished the last of the wine. “I have to go see Emmie.”

And that quickly, he was gone.

Light filtered through the windows in blotches as Raven tried to open her eyes. She was beyond exhausted from the tedious work she’d recently accomplished, and her neck still ached.

The house was quiet. Laroque was gone and she was in the bed he had been lying in.

“What the hell?” she mumbled, trying to focus on the room around her. It seemed as if she was in an entirely different wing of the house—but no, there was the fireplace.

“I have to thank you, and apologize.”

It was Laroque.

“This can’t be good,” she said with a sigh.

His face was still a bit pale and it remained emotionless. “No, I don’t think you’ll be too happy, but it cannot be helped.”

Raven took in the room, which was now clear of all equipment. With the exception of the bed, it looked like a normal living room. At least she wasn’t bound and tied to the bed.

“I see you’re feeling better,” she said, sitting up.

“A little weak, but yes, much improved. And I owe you a debt of gratitude for that. You’re in the wrong profession. You should be saving lives, not dealing with corpses.”

Raven swung her legs over the edge of the bed. “Yeah, well maybe it’s time for a change. Ah, what’s the not-so-good news?”

“We’re leaving. The storm has passed, and we must be on our way. You must come with me.” Laroque was packing a duffle bag with more T-shirts and packages of women’s underwear.

Raven didn’t see any of the others. She wondered why Mick wasn’t there with them.

“I-I don’t understand...”

“The shifters I have in my employ have sensed that your friend, Bo, is getting very close. Luke told me about some ridiculous fantasy that Bo is traveling with another Lamai.” He began to laugh. “He tried to tell me that it’s my daughter Jade.” He continued laughing, except for his eyes. They were not laughing.

They were deadly orbs.

Raven swallowed hard.

“I, of course, had to kill Luke, which is a shame because besides being a loyal employee he was a fantastic chef. Regardless, I cannot tolerate such talk.”

“Of c-course n-not,” Raven stuttered.

Laroque tossed the bag at Raven’s feet. “So, you see, we must get going. I have a boat that just docked at the Marina, and we’ll be heading off to New Orleans. You haven’t been back to your old neighborhood in a long time, *juste?*”

Raven grabbed the bag. “N-no, I haven’t. Not since I was a little girl. How are feeling, by the way?”

Raven sensed Laroque watching her. “Such a dedicated physician. I feel fine. I read your work and I’m amazed I never thought of that idea—a naked DNA vaccine. I mean it, Raven, you should be doing medical research.”

The innocent volley of compliments coming from Laroque did not fool Raven. His eyes betrayed him and behind them lay volumes of anger, rage that was directed at her, and she could see he was doing his level best to hide that fact.

Somehow he believed Luke, but why he’d still killed him, she didn’t know. Perhaps he’d seen signs of a change in Jade when he rescued her and brought her back to New Orleans. He was a smart man, and a simple blood test was all he needed to verify the transformation.

She walked toward the bathroom. “Can I get changed first? Have some coffee, take a shower?”

He motioned with his hand for her to follow him. “No, I’m sorry. We don’t have time. Once we’re on the boat, you can shower.”

Her gaze darted around the room. It was inconceivable that it was just the two of them there. The rest of them must be waiting outside. If by some miracle it was only the two of them, maybe she could make a run for it. He was still too weak to chase her very far. Hey, a girl could hope.

“What about the storm? Won’t we be heading into it?”

His eyes flashed a deadly warning.

“Some thank you,” she muttered under her breath. He dragged her out the back door and into the sunshine. Once there, he pointed to the black Mercedes in the driveway.

All her big plans at escape were dashed as she noticed Mick solemnly standing by the driver’s side. *So much for a getaway.* Raven knew Mick liked Luke. He told her they’d been friends for almost five years. She figured he’d exact revenge for his friend’s death somehow, but for the meantime he would wisely follow orders.

Raven stared blankly when she made eye contact with Mick. He subtly cast his eyes downward, his skin flashing a hint of the blush of embarrassment. His movements were swift as he walked around the car and opened the door for her, never forgetting his manners. She felt his anger toward Laroque, which was not of her imagination. Raven surprisingly discovered that along with her new human frailties came her new human gifts. Without the dominant Lamai DNA, she believed her mother’s psychic talents could shine through. She hoped it was true. She needed some type of advantage.

“He’s such the Southern gentleman—gentle-beast, I should say,” Laroque kidded, but Raven found no humor in anything he said. “Get in.”

How could she have fallen for his puppy dog eyes and sudden remorse? He’d easily convinced her that he’d somehow lost the anger he harbored for Tobias—except when she thought back, he never actually said the words. He merely asked for her help, and she romanticized the rest. If she were still Lamai, she would have realized he was full of shit. Raven silently berated herself for being

so naïve. Being entirely human, she was experiencing naïveté. She fell for it hook, line and sinker. She realized she had a lot to learn, especially in matters of unwarranted trust.

She replayed their exchange in her mind. He talked of his love for Nicki and about how much his daughter meant to him, but he'd never once said he'd given up on his plot for revenge. Raven understood that her once-keen senses had dulled.

Her mind raced as the car pulled onto the main road.

But she still would have helped him, because she owed Jade that much, at least. She'd let her emotions get the better of her when she'd attempted to frighten her little sister in the hospital the day she kidnapped her. Seeing the past through Jade's experience caused her to lock on with such force that she'd drained her almost completely. She'd had to transform her or lose her—and *that* she could not live with. Her mother would never forgive her, and Raven's belief that her mother was still alive in a different form was very real.

She knew her mother had watched what went on. She saw the astral visit Jade had with Nicolette when she drank her blood. "Your sister would never kill you," her mother had said to Jade.

What happened? How did things get so ghastly? Her world was spinning out of control, and she was helpless to stop any of it.

Her mother. It always came full circle and ended where it began, back with her mother. It was the love of three men for one woman that knocked Raven's world off its axis and spun it blindly into chaos. Somehow it all seemed so familiar—as if this drama had played out before, during a different time, but the players were the same.

Her eyes became heavy with the passing miles, and soon she drifted into the dreamtime.

A man wearing armor and holding a shield stood before her. He was beautiful. Standing over six feet tall with black eyes that matched his wavy hair, he looked out over the landscape. Somehow Raven was able to know his thoughts, see what he saw. And what he saw was a fair-haired beauty named Helen.

Menelaus was his name. He was the king of Sparta. Helen was his wife. She was gone. No, not gone—stolen from her king. Visions flashed, and Raven saw that Laroque's soul inhabited the body of King Menelaus, and Nicolette was Helen.

The image of a young girl appeared, and Raven knew it to be herself, incarnated as Hermione, the daughter of Menelaus and Helen. She watched as her father looked to the horizon, undoubtedly wondering how to get his beautiful wife back home.

He would need help—Achilles' help.

He turned to his daughter. "Don't worry, little one. I will bring back your mother, and they will be sorry they ever heard the name Menelaus."

She knew her father meant what he said and would not rest until Helen was back in his bed.

Tobias stood with the gorgeous young woman known as Helen. He looked similar to the way he did now, except that the woman called him by another name: Paris.

They were in bed together, having just made love. Paris vowed never to allow her to return to Menelaus, and she was quite happy in Paris's arms. But she missed her daughter.

Menelaus had other plans, though, and they all involved bringing Helen home. It would not be an easy task, and Menelaus knew he would have to deal with Hector, Paris's brother, in the process.

At the thought of Hector, his image flooded Raven's mind. He was pure muscle, standing just under six feet tall, with hair as black as night and eyes as blue as the sea. He was very protective of Paris and vowed to fight to the death to protect Helen.

Raven knew immediately Hector's soul was that of Frank Dubois.

A swirl of mists wiped away the image of the two lovers in bed and replaced it with another. Lush greenery now surrounded Raven, the air full of moisture, the grounds wet after a spring rain.

Raven made her way through the forest and was transported to a castle on a steep hill. There she saw the walls shining with sand-colored marble and flags flying high above the tower.

Again the silhouette of a lonely man stood stark against the brilliant marble walls. Raven wanted a better look at him, and she soon found herself standing beside him—only he did not see her.

Another man came up behind him. "Arthur," the handsome knight called out. He was blonde and fair—and yet he was Tobias, dark and brooding inside.

"Lancelot, my friend," Arthur said, turning to the fair-haired man.

Arthur's hair was the color of honey and his eyes sparkled like a fine port wine. It was Philippe—once again a king.

"My queen has informed me that you wanted to speak to me," Lancelot said.

"How is she feeling? She has not been well these past few months. Who knew bearing a child could be this trying?"

Lancelot's gaze turned to the landscape that spread out before them. "She's better. I think she'll be all right from now on. Sometimes the first few months are hard on a woman, but she has wanted this baby for a long time. She hasn't complained one bit."

Arthur cringed at the intimacy with which Lancelot spoke about his Guinevere.

Deep down, he knew it was not his child that grew in his wife's belly, but Lancelot's. Morgan le Fay, Arthur's sister, had cursed him. He would never know the pleasure of fatherhood with his wife, but he kept that truth concealed for the sake of Camelot.

Raven also knew she was the child conceived by Lancelot and Guinevere, and Nicolette was her mother once more, embodied in fair Guinevere.

What Arthur didn't know was that his sister had also betrayed him and tricked him into impregnating her before she cursed him. She bore a son, Mordred, and once more, the triad formed as Frank's spirit took the form of Mordred, poised to do battle yet again with his enemies, Tobias and Philippe.

A crack of thunder and flash of lightning brought the dawn of a new day. This time Raven was in the desert. It was dry, and dusk coated the landscape with the glorious colors of a setting sun.

A woman stood looking out into the distance. Her hair hung down her back in waves the color of autumn. The sun caught flecks of gold in her mass of copper-colored tresses. She wore deerskin moccasins and a blanket of animal hide wrapped around her shoulders.

It was Nicolette. She was far from her encampment, and the energy surrounding her was drenched in apprehension. Raven knew her mother waited for two brothers to return from the hunt. One of the brothers was her husband, Running Bear.

“White Dove,” a voice called from up the sloping hillside. “Your daughter wants to be fed.”

Without a thought, Raven knew she was the little girl waiting to eat.

“I’ll be right there,” the young woman answered. Instead of mists filling the air, a cloud of dust whirled, and the pounding of hooves made the earth tremble. As the clouds settled, Raven could see a herd of buffalo racing through a valley. Brightly painted ponies galloped along the perimeter of the herd.

“Chief Running Bear, Storm Cloud has two down, and I’ve got one. Snake took two...” They spoke in a foreign tongue, yet Raven understood every word.

“Good. I have two back by the clearing, and I’ve got my eye on this big male...” With an explosive burst of energy, the man called Running Bear threw his spear into the hide of the massive buffalo, hitting him right in his neck. The beast kept running.

Raven heard words coming from the other man’s mind—evil thoughts.

“I could throw my spear right into the chief’s heart and no one would know it wasn’t an innocent mistake—one of the dangers of the hunt. Then, White Dove would be mine.”

Only Running Bear’s brother, Red Hawk, didn’t know another warrior looking in his direction was thinking similar sinister thoughts. The faces melted into their present incarnations, Running Bear became Tobias and Red Hawk morphed into Frank. The angry warrior turned into Laroque.

Over and over, the scenes played out in Raven’s dreams of the love affairs between Nicolette and Philippe, Frank and Tobias. All three men vied for her affection, and in each lifetime, her heart belonged to Tobias.

The car swerved over a bump in the road and jarred Raven back to consciousness. She opened her eyes, her mind still a jumble of sights and feelings from times long since past. Feelings that were still very much alive in her present.

It was clear this drama would continue to play out in subsequent lifetimes unless there was some kind of resolution.

Could she also be enslaved to her own saga lifetime after lifetime? Was there a similar connection between Bethany, Bo and herself? Did she really want to create more drama in her own life? Maybe it wasn’t such a smart idea to marry him after all. So much of what they had was gone.

She loved Bo and there was still excitement between them, but on a different level. She felt so utterly human, and that disappointed

her. Raven could no longer offer him the passion-filled nights they once shared—that much was evident her first night back from the hospital. She was mortal now, and one bite from him could kill her, or seriously maim her at best.

What could she offer him now? A boring life, one in which he would far outlive her, and she would age while he remained ageless, virile and handsome. Bethany would remain young as well. Her beauty would eat away at Raven.

Bo would notice his wife was old and grey with wrinkled skin, but his ex-lover wouldn't look a day over thirty. Her body would remain lithe, taut and muscular from all the running they would do in the pack.

They would glimmer back into human form, sweaty and lustful from the endorphins coursing through their blood. Her voluptuous body would arouse Bo, her scent would drive him wild, and Bethany would get what she wanted.

Together they could have a decent life and a family. The commonality they shared was something with which Raven could never compete. She would never know what it was like to be a wolf. To shimmer from one form into another must be elating. The feeling of running with the pack, the freedom, the sense of camaraderie... She envied the shifters.

The feeling of having a family was something Raven would sorely miss.

Bethany had a history with Bo. His parents—at least his mother—supported the pairing of the two. Bethany would give the clan many strong children to carry on its lineage.

He would eventually wind up with her anyway. Why put off what was bound to happen? It was inevitable. Bo would be Bethany's mate, and Raven could expect nothing more. They would share the ability to love each other with complete abandon, without the risk to life or limb. It was the best thing for Bo, his freedom.

She decided she would set him free. All in the name of love.

And knowing Bethany as Raven did, she was certain she would take full advantage of every opportunity that came her way to seduce Bo, especially during their times with the pack.

In the end, Raven would surrender the one thing she sought to save: Bo. She would have to let him go for good. She would somehow learn to live with that. At least he would be alive and well. She couldn't survive if something were to happen to him.

He would get over her. Bo would find a way.

Raven would move to another city and practice medicine...perhaps meet a mortal man and have mortal sex, which would produce mortal children, and then she would die a miserable, mortal death.

But Bo would be free.

Chapter Twenty

The rain had stopped long before the sun rose. Bo woke Jade up to coffee and blood, the breakfast of champions.

“The bridges are open. Let’s go,” he ordered.

She wiped the remnants of sleep from her eyes. “Did you eat anything?” she muttered.

Bo stood tall, hands on hips. “Yeah, I chewed on my fingernails half the night and then I had a burger from the joint on the corner while you slept.”

Jade looked quite proud of herself. “You needed to eat. Raven will be very upset with me if you aren’t one-hundred percent when we find her.”

“*If* we find her, you mean.” He felt engulfed in feelings of loss and hopelessness.

“Hey—what d’ya mean *if*? We’re going to find her! Let’s get in the car and get going.”

“Jade, you’re acting too perky. I can’t deal with perky.”

Bo was withdrawn and tired. His usual optimism was gone. Without their connection, it seemed impossible to find Raven. All he had to work with were his tracking skills and a newbie Lamai who was just getting her feet wet with all her recently acquired powers.

And then there was her incessant talking. *How could a woman find so many things to babble about?* Many times he wanted to scream at her to shut up.

“How come I can be outside in the daylight safely? I never could understand that myth,” Jade asked as they headed toward the car.

“Like you said, it’s a myth. Although I hear there is a sect of vampires that can’t tolerate much sunlight, and their young ones can’t handle any,” Bo said. He started the engine, hoping she wouldn’t keep talking.

“So what makes the Lamai so different?”

Damn. No such luck. He sighed deeply. “Time. They’ve been around the longest. Queen Rhia has been walking the earth since—it seems since the beginning of time itself.”

“And Tobias?”

“Not quite as long, but long enough. I’ve heard over three hundred years.”

Which brought a thought to Bo’s mind. *Where is Tobias?*

Tobias had to leave, but his woman was not making it easy. “I’ll be back. Don’t worry, Em.”

Tears rolled down Emmie’s face as she grabbed a tissue and blew her nose. Most fae women did not handle pregnancy well. Emerald loved the fact that she was finally with child—with Tobias’s child—but the emotional rollercoaster ride was horrid.

“I-I don’t want you to go...” she sobbed.

He tried to be patient. “Em, I have to find Raven.”

She pouted. “You’re always leaving me. Now that we’re going to be married and start a family, you still want to go?”

He hugged her reassuringly. “I don’t want to go, I *have* to go.”

Another onslaught of tears barraged him. How could he tell her he was having second thoughts about marriage? He couldn’t.

“You don’t have to go! Bo is looking for her. He’ll find her. Come on, can’t you stay at least another day? You’re gone for weeks, months at a time, and I don’t say a word to you. Now that things have changed, I need you here.”

Fae women also apparently got very frisky when pregnant.

Emerald took his hand and placed it on her belly.

“Our child is growing within me. Please don’t go,” she pleaded as she kissed him. “Not tonight...”

In spite of his anxiety, Tobias found his body responding to Emerald’s brazen touch and fiery kisses.

After making love to his soon-to-be wife for half the night, Tobias became one with the mist and followed the trail that would hopefully lead him to his daughter.

“You’ve become quiet. Deep in thought?” Laroque asked.

“I suppose, and wondering about the future—my future,” Raven said as she stared out the car window. “And the past.”

“Really? I thought your main focus would be to escape from me and return to Mirabelle Cove and your life with Bo.” Laroque reached in his jacket pocket and took a handful of pills.

That statement cut like a knife. “Things change. You know that.”

She had piqued his curiosity once more. “You’re not planning on going back to Mirabelle? That is, once you escape from me.” He took a water bottle from the console and swallowed the pills.

“Actually, I’m thinking of relocating. Once I escape from you, that is,” she said stoically. “What are you taking?”

Laroque laughed. “Oh, Raven, you really had me going there for a moment. And those, my dear, are vitamins.”

Her expression didn’t change. “I’m serious. I can get work at just about any hospital. Maybe I will get involved with research. Who knows?” She shifted in the seat uncomfortably, wanting desperately to be anywhere but in *this* car with *this* man.

“Yes, you definitely could land work anywhere you want in a New York minute. I said it before—research would benefit from your expertise in the field. You’re a caring person and a genius.”

“Other than the genius part, I would agree with you. Besides, Bo is safe and his life is secured. I, on the other hand, well...I have an expiration date.” She sulked.

He stared at her hard and long before he spoke. “Clever girl, do you think I would consider letting you go simply because you’re mortal now?”

Raven didn’t bother to hide the tears that escaped her eyes. After all, he was the reason her life had taken such a drastic turn. Her emotions bubbled over.

She jerked her head around and caught his glare with one of her own. “I have no life in Mirabelle. I’ve changed, and there’s nothing there for me now. Bo is better off without me.” She wiped away the tears. “I don’t really care if you believe me or not,

Laroque—or if you even let me live. My life as I knew it is over. Nothing matters anymore.”

This woman is serious, Laroque thought. He probed with his psychic senses and all signs pointed to her telling the truth. She intended to leave Mirabelle Cove.

He shrugged, dismissing her show of emotions, somehow disappointed by them. Laroque had to remind himself that she was human: utterly, completely, shamefully human.

He absently picked lint from his black slacks. “Do you expect me to talk you out of your plan? To go on about how I didn’t have the opportunity to be with the one I love? You don’t need me to tell you all that. You know it already. If you want to throw everything away, then maybe you deserve to die after all.”

Her sarcasm returned. “How touching, really. I’m moved beyond belief. Your capacity for understanding the human condition is astounding. Did you have to work at being an asshole, or is it just one of your countless natural talents?”

Laroque crossed his arms and tapped his cheek with his index finger. He decided to ignore her little outburst. “What about Bo? What if he doesn’t let you go?”

She choked back tears. “He has no choice. If this is what I want, he’ll let me go. He *owes* me and he knows it.”

“True, he does owe you his life. That was very brave of you, giving up being Lamai to save him. I don’t think I’d give up immortality.”

“Nothing else matters,” Raven whispered, her gaze returning to the landscape outside the car.

A tinge of excitement colored Laroque's voice as he said, "What if you stayed with me? We could work together."

Raven smiled slyly. "And do what—create killer viruses?"

"We could do amazing work. Look at what we did to Ebola! We could work with any virus—HIV, hepatitis..."

She scoffed at his proposal. "And do what with them? Besides, there are a few strains of Ebola. Luckily, you got your hands on the least dangerous one."

"My point is we could do just about anything. Cure cancer, maybe?"

Laroque put his hand on hers. She seemed to have a hard time believing his altruistic attitude. There had to be another motive.

She laughed. "Fool me once, shame on you, fool me twice..."

"Shame on me—I understand. But honestly, we could do research for the greater good. And yes, I do have my motives, but I'm not willing to confess them to you, at least, not at this point in time."

The next sound in the Mercedes was of the engine shifting.

Laroque had thought about taking Tobias's daughter from him and having her become his protégé and he her mentor. That would be a bonus, to let Tobias live with the knowledge that Laroque had more in common with Raven than with her own father—that would be sweet revenge.

"I know you love your father, but I also know you're a realist. And the fact is that you and Tobias never did have a close relationship. Oh, Tobias loves you, in his way. Yet his love must have left you feeling empty, a side effect of his constant travels,

perhaps?” Laroque knew this because it had been one of Nicolette’s constant complaints.

“Your mother would confide in me how she feared Tobias’s absences had affected you. Nicolette confessed to me how it culminated one night. I think she said you were three when you realized that he would return during the night to be with your mother. Only to be gone by morning.” His voice was full of compassion and understanding. “This had to contribute to your feelings of abandonment.” Feelings that Laroque wanted to exploit.

“I don’t need a psych evaluation from you and I’m not looking to punish my father. I’m simply searching for a way to leave my past behind me and move into the future—a future that won’t include Bo or the island of Mirabelle Cove.”

“There is that nasty rumor that Jade is no longer human. We could work to find something that can undo the Lamai changes.”

Raven turned her body and looked directly at Laroque. He was toying with her, manipulating her emotionally, and he was very good at it. He only hoped she didn’t see through him.

“If that rumor proves to be true, why not just go to Hekate and have her change Jade back?”

“Don’t play me for a fool. Hekate doesn’t do favors for anyone without a steep price tag, and I’m the last person she would help.” Anger welled within him. “Maybe I’ll just kill you and put us both out of your misery.”

The car came to a screeching halt.

“Go ahead—see if I care!” she yelled as Laroque exited the vehicle.

Tobias materialized next to the rental car. Bo thrummed his fingers on the steering wheel, and Jade dozed off in the backseat. Due to the combination of the weather and the closed bridges, there was an overabundance of traffic on the mainland.

The door opened, and Tobias got into the front passenger seat.

“How did your meeting go with Rhia?” Bo asked as casually as if Tobias had been sitting there all morning.

“As expected, she doesn’t know anything. Big secret—everything is a big secret. What about you?”

“The rain put a damper on Raven’s scent, but I think I’m headed in the right direction.”

Tobias rolled up the sleeves of his black silk shirt. “Damn vehicles. We could travel so much faster in the mists.”

“You want to take Jade? Feel free,” Bo offered with a sigh.

Adjusting his designer sunglasses, he asked, “She having a tough time with the transition?”

“No, none that I can see. She just likes to talk and talk, and she goes on about Raven and...I-I can’t take it. I miss her something fierce, and if anything has happened to her, I’ll die.”

“Don’t think like that. Raven’s a survivor. Besides, Jade can’t travel in the mists yet. She’s still got a lot to learn.”

Finally, the traffic began moving, and in thirty minutes they were standing in front of Laroque’s home in Key West.

“Most of the windows are still boarded. We must have just missed them,” Bo said as he walked the perimeter of the house. “She was here. I sense her.”

“I feel her, too,” Jade said.

Jade began to walk up to the front door, but abruptly about-faced and headed for the driveway. It appeared as if an invisible string pulled her along. She stood there and slowly turned, eyes closed and hands held out, palms open. Bo joined her. He began shaking his head.

“Yes, she was here. I can smell her scent. She’s not afraid, but she seems... hopeless,” Bo said.

“There’s also someone else—still here. In the shadows,” Jade said softly.

Bo whispered, “You’re right. You’re getting good at this.”

“In the foliage that surrounds the back of the house, another of my father’s employees is hiding. He sees us. He wants to be certain, though. He doesn’t expect to share the same fate as another of Laroque’s men.”

“How do you know all that?” Bo asked.

“I-I’m not sure. I just do.”

“Are you sure...”

“It’s not Raven, yeah, I’m sure. There’s another.” Jade headed to where she sensed the other Lamai hovering half in the ethers. Her eyes became the bright color of shallow tropical waters, her fangs extended.

With a hiss she lurched forward, trying to snatch onto the dissolving Lamai. She grabbed at air.

“Damn!” she cursed aloud.

Bo was right behind her. “What was it?”

“Lamai, but he disappeared as soon as I reached for him.”

Tobias finally spoke. “You can be sure he’s going to report we’re here. I’m worried about Raven. She’s distraught, depressed, feeling lost and...abandoned. I know her emotions as if they were my own.

“For the first time since Raven had been abducted, I feel her signature essence. I’m afraid I’m responsible for much of the way she was feeling. I’m frightened for her. She doesn’t care about what might happen to her. Her aura is full of resignation it’s heavy in the air. You two sense the same thing. I know it.”

Chapter Twenty-one

Laroque's car had stopped at the marina. And it was just in time, as emotions ran high. Raven noticed Laroque talking animatedly to Mick and another man. The brawny Lamai merely nodded in agreement with his boss. It was obvious that with each passing hour, Mick's anger was growing.

She wondered what Laroque had in mind. Through the opened window she heard Laroque barking orders.

"I want the plane fueled and ready to go. There's been a change of plans," Laroque said.

Raven got out of the car, wanting to approach the two men. Laroque's face was devoid of any emotion. She opened her mouth to speak, but after one look at Laroque she closed it.

His eyes burned into her like fire. She literally felt the heat from the *bokur's* immense power. He grabbed her throat, the width of his hand encircled it. His thumb pressed her windpipe. Pain shot through her.

She gagged and instinctively tried to pry his hands off her neck. He was too strong and way too angry.

His face was red with fury and the veins in his forehead bulged. His body shook with emotions. "You did it, didn't you? *You* turned her," From every pore of his body, venomous hate flowed.

“W-what?” Raven croaked.

He pushed her away with such force that she fell back and hit the concrete, scraping her hands and elbows as she tried to break her fall.

His eyes, thin slits, glared at her with a violent force. The searing heat bore into her skin. His magick was at work. “Your fate is sealed now. Get her in the plane. If she so much as flinches, change her to Lamai and we’ll watch her die.” Laroque’s angry aura lingered in the air like a foul stench.

Raven’s mind raced. It was clear he’d somehow found out Jade was indeed a Lamai now, and Raven was responsible. It must have taken even longer than she’d anticipated for Jade to go through the transformation. *The blood transfusion*. Otherwise Laroque would have known already that his daughter was not the same young woman. Raven’s blood had caused Jade’s wounds to heal immediately, so there were no puncture marks on her neck or wrists.

Oddly, Raven experienced a certain feeling of calm. She stood, wiped her hands on her jeans and followed Mick to the seaplane.

“You did it, didn’t you?” Mick asked, his voice a low rumble. “That’s why you saved Laroque, because of what you did to his daughter. Damn, girl, you really pissed him off now. He was seriously considering allowing you to live and work with him. I don’t know what he’s going to do now.” Mick shook his head. “Is there a way to change her back to human? I mean, with all your DNA and RNA experiments, is it possible?” he asked as he led her to her seat.

Raven looked at the hulking man next to her. She was beginning to see why he'd gotten into the healthcare field. He truly cared about people. "No. No way to reverse the effects—at least, not without magick."

"You're fucked, honey," he whispered.

"I know." She paused then started her own inquiry. "How did you become Lamai?"

"I was born a Lamai."

"Really?"

"Yes, really."

The rest of the passengers, which included a few of Laroque's cronies along with the strange man to whom Laroque had been talking, sat in their seats. It was a large amphibious plane, and Raven could still carry on her conversation with Mick without Laroque overhearing—that was, if she spoke softly.

She whispered, "What did you do for blood?"

"Animals, mostly, then, as I got older and went to school for nursing, I had a connection in Hematology—a fellow vampire."

"Love those friends with access to blood," she commented.

"Raven, what are you going to do? He's planning on taking you back to Mirabelle Cove. That's where we're headed now. He hasn't told me anything else."

"What can I do?"

"He's got to be planning something big to take place at the ritual. That can work in your favor. At least there you've got an island full of friends who are on your side," Mick whispered.

Raven held her head in her hand. “Yeah and do what? We don’t know anything for sure, except that he wants me dead.”

“Are you certain? Maybe he wants to torture your father a while. Do you think he would jeopardize his relationship with Jade?”

“I don’t know anything at this point.”

“You can’t give up,” Mick said.

“If it’s my time to die, then I accept that.” Sadness wrapped itself around her like the suffocating humid air outside the plane.

Mick tensed, but he kept his voice low. “You’re giving up on a life with the man you sacrificed everything for and are just going to crawl into a ball and wither away?”

“Mick, I gave up my birthright as a Lamai. I’m mortal and eventually I’ll die. Bo will live well beyond my life span. Why should I shackle him to a woman who’s going to age and die?”

Mick sighed, shaking his head. “I guess you don’t think too much of your man, then. Is he that shallow? From what I’ve heard about him, he’s not that kind of guy, and you know it.”

She bit the inside of her cheek to tamp down her anger. “I don’t want to talk about this anymore. I’ve made up my mind. I want him to be happy and he won’t be happy for long with me. Trust me, what we had is gone.”

The plane started its engines and slowly gained speed as it moved out into open water. Soon they were airborne.

Laroque sat in his seat at the front of the plane and thought of the many ways he could kill Raven. The most appropriate would be

for Jade to turn her. But he couldn't do that to his daughter. It would be just, but it would be much too cruel for Jade to have her sister's death on her conscience.

He could infect her with the Ebola Zaire virus, which was the deadlier strain. No one knew Laroque had gotten his hands on it. A Russian scientist supplied him with the virus. There would be a ninety-percent chance of fatality upon infection, and since Raven had just transformed to human, her immune system would be no match for the killer virus. Its capacity to spread was too unpredictable, though, and as much as he wanted revenge, he did not want to kill innocents.

Then, out of nowhere, the answer appeared as he gazed toward the window and over to his longtime friend, Henri.

The dam of Bo's emotions was collapsing as he stood at the docks of Garrison Bight Marina in Key West. He knelt to the ground and caught the scent of Raven's blood where Laroque had pushed her. His hackles rose, and he felt the calling of his wolf counterpart to go after her and bring her home, to claim her once more as his mate.

Her essence oozed with fear. Her scent burned his nasal passages. His fists clenched, and he let out a howl of pain and misery. A growl emanated from deep within his soul, and thoughts of his beloved swirled within his heart and mind. Bo's fingers clenched at the spot where traces of her blood and skin lay. He began to shimmer, wanting desperately to morph and pursue her.

“I’ve failed her!” he cried out. “She saved my life, and I cannot even find her!”

In a flash, he was a black wolf, growling and snarling, relentlessly sniffing the small patch of blood. Laroque’s scent was in the air as well, and Bo turned his gaze upon Jade. Still snarling, he circled her. She carried an aroma similar to that of her father. Bo found it harder and harder to keep from lunging at her and tearing out her throat.

“Bo!” Tobias commanded attention, standing between Bo and Jade. “It’s not her fault. She’s trying to help us. Don’t let your anger for her father cloud your judgment. It will not get us any closer to Raven.”

Bo continued to growl.

He knew that with a flick of his arm Tobias could send him clear across the pavement and into the water or squish him like he was a tiny bug. He also realized Tobias would resort to that treatment only if he attacked. Bo was operating on pure adrenaline and raw emotion.

Jade stood behind Tobias, visibly afraid of what would happen if the large black wolf lunged at her. He was strong. And he had Raven’s blood coursing through his veins.

But then again, so did she.

“No sudden movements,” Tobias warned her. “He’s lost in his emotions and grieving. He’s acting totally on instinct now.”

Jade slowly knelt so she would be at eye level with the wolf. Her eyes flashed for a second to their preternatural state.

“I want to find her, too. After all these years, I want to get to know my sister. Really know her, not just through her blood memories. You don’t think this is tearing me apart? This is *my father* we’re talking about. To me, he was never a monster. I don’t want to lose the opportunity to know my sister. She’s the only other family I have. And when I think about Frank’s betrayal...I’m hurting, too.”

The wolf turned away, looked toward the water and let out a heart-wrenching cry. In an instant, he shimmered back into his human form, clothes and all. He wiped the tears from his eyes.

“I love her more than I can express in words. I feel like my heart’s been gutted out of me. If I can’t find her soon...”

Jade answered quickly. “What? You won’t give up! That love you have for her will not allow you to abandon her. You have no choice but to find her, and you will. We will.”

“How can you be so certain?” Bo asked, praying some of Jade’s optimism would rub off onto him.

“They’ve gone back to Mirabelle,” she said.

Bo turned to Tobias. “Go there. Tomorrow is the Feast of the Dead and Laroque must be planning something for then.”

“I need to get you off the island and back home, too. Let me have your cell phone so I can make arrangements for a flight out as soon as possible,” Tobias said. “I have a friend here who owns a private plane. She’ll get you back to the island.”

Jade stayed near Tobias. “Teach me to travel in the mists,” she pleaded.

“What about Bo? He has no other options. He can’t shimmer into a hawk or a falcon and fly back. Bo is part wolf. He has to travel the way of humans.”

Bo knew Tobias didn’t want to leave him behind. He also knew his sudden turn on Jade was out of character and had Tobias concerned.

Bo handed his phone to Tobias. “Don’t worry about me. Teach her. Maybe she can talk some sense into her father before I rip his neck open.” He turned to Jade. “I’m sorry, but I have anger management issues concerning your father, and you’ll have to be patient with me.”

“I’ll teach her. You have to get yourself together, son. Jade is *not* her father, and she’s been extremely helpful. I know you would have a better understanding if you saw the way she handled Frank. You can trust her,” Tobias said.

Bo nodded. “It’s going to take some getting used to.”

“I understand,” Jade said, then turned and wiped her own tears away.

Chapter Twenty-two

Dusk fell on the island of Hannah's Vineyard like the final curtain call of a brilliant Broadway show. Mick led Raven into Laroque's house through the back doors, and she noticed the familiar basement door where she'd originally snuck in.

On that fateful day she'd kidnapped Jade.

Flipping on the lights, Mick walked into the sunroom. He pressed a button that automatically closed the blinds which covered the three walls of windows. Raven followed him into the kitchen. He took out a beer for himself and offered one to Raven.

She accepted. "Sure, thanks."

"You might as well get comfortable. We'll be spending the night here. Are you hungry?"

Raven drank the icy cold beer from the dark green bottle, savoring the flavor. She couldn't remember the last time she'd eaten anything.

"I don't really know," she answered.

Mick looked into the freezer and pulled out a frozen pizza, popovers and a foil-wrapped log that had *tofu loaf* written on it. Not the gourmet comestible he had in mind. He turned the dial on the oven to three-hundred-seventy-five and unwrapped the loaf.

“Where did the others go?” she asked, taking another sip of beer.

Mick was rifling through the cabinets and smiled upon finding a can of mushroom gravy.

“I’m not sure. Henri and Philippe drove off somewhere. My orders were to come in, make you something to eat and make sure you don’t escape.”

“Henri was the man Laroque was traveling with?”

After placing the loaf in a pan, Mick began to open the can of gravy. “Yes, an old friend from New Orleans.”

“About that escape plan... I won’t tell if you won’t. I could knock you over the head with something heavy, like that meatloaf,” she said.

He gave Raven a playful jab. “It’s *tofu* loaf, and that wouldn’t make a dent on my hard skull. Nice try, though.”

“You’re not going to let him kill me, are you?” Raven asked, finishing the beer. She walked over to the refrigerator and took another. “I need to calm down and think of a way out of here. Oh, did I say that out loud?”

“Boy, one beer and you’re gabbing away. You’re an easy *and* cheap date,” Mick said as he smiled at Raven, who sat at the kitchen table.

It was a spacious kitchen with a center island and an indoor grill. The floors were Mexican tile in a light grey color and the walls were stucco. Large planters with palms, ficus trees, hibiscus and dracaena stood in otherwise empty corners. It was a lovely kitchen, but it lacked the warmth of a woman’s touch.

“I’m nervous, not easy—big difference. And this isn’t a date, is it? If so...you’re a lousy one. I noticed you didn’t answer my question,” she added.

“I don’t really know what I’m going to do. I like you, Raven. I don’t want to see you die, but I don’t know what I can do. Laroque’s my bread and butter.”

Raven caught him looking a little too long at a picture of Jade that hung from a magnet on the fridge. More puzzle pieces shifted and fell into place.

She teased the fine-looking Lamai. “Ah, and you’re also in love with Jade.”

He turned, almost dropping the pan as he went to place it in the oven.

“You *are* in love with her!”

Mick looked away. He was a striking man, his skin the color of rich milk chocolate. His features were fine, and he wore his hair cropped close to his scalp.

Raven flipped the cap from her beer bottle in the air. “That would present a problem. Killing her father wouldn’t exactly put you in her good graces.”

“Ya think?” he joked. He swiped the cap in mid-air.

“Does she know?”

“Yes, ma’am.”

She waved her index finger at him. “Oh, don’t start the ‘ma’am’ shit again. Call me Raven.”

“We’ve been seeing each other for a short while, *Raven*. I know she doesn’t want to see you hurt, and I can’t say I’m too upset she’s a Lamai now.”

“Okay, so one day I could be your sister-in-law. You don’t want my death on your hands, do you?”

Mick took out some pre-packaged salad that hadn’t been opened. It was chock full of vegetables, including carrots, radishes and snow peas. He emptied the bag into a colander and rinsed the pre-washed mixture.

“Nice try, but your death would never be my fault. Laroque is the one hell-bent on killing you.”

Raven got up and went to the sink to pick out a carrot. Her stomach was rumbling with hunger. “Whatever helps you sleep at night, Mick, but you know and I know, and so will Jade, that you could’ve done something to stop this and you didn’t.”

“You think Laroque is stupid enough to leave just the two of us here? He’s got shifters patrolling the grounds. Those dogs out there are wolves. And his charms of protection are active and vastly improved. He learned from the last time, when you came and snagged Jade. He fixed things so he would feel it if *anyone* who didn’t belong here entered this space.”

Raven slumped while Mick continued. “Plus, the boat is gone, and in case you didn’t realize, we’re not on Mirabelle Cove. We’re on the Vineyard.”

She sulked. “Yes, I noticed.”

“I’m thinking, though. The men outside are loyal to him. I tried feeling them out before, when we were in the Keys.”

“They were there?” Raven asked.

“Yeah, patrolling the grounds. They’ve worked for him for at least a decade.” Mick oiled a cookie sheet and placed the frozen pizza and popovers on it. He opened the oven door and slid the food inside.

“Laroque will kill me at the festival tomorrow night. A big sacrifice, I suppose.” She let out a distraught sigh.

“Your father would never allow that to happen...”

At once, it became daylight in the yard. One-thousand-watt sensor lights blazed, making it impossible to see what was going on outside. Mick ran to the door. “Stay in here,” he commanded.

Of course, Raven followed him.

The backyard was vacant of any large trees except for one massive oak. Its branches, practically bare, cast shadows of skeletal limbs onto the manicured grass. At the base of the oak, two grey wolves stood hunched, snarling at a massive black animal.

Raven could see the well-toned muscular form underneath the ebony fur that gleamed in the lamplight. She knew it was Bo. Lamai or not, Raven could tell when her man—her wolf—was near.

One grey wolf attacked the black beast, going straight for his jugular, but Bo swiftly moved out of the way. Unfortunately, he spun around into the other wolf.

Mick’s eyes glowed a golden color almost identical to Bo’s, and his fangs extended. His head swerved sharply and he was suddenly looking at Raven. “What part of *stay in here* didn’t you understand? Get back inside.”

“Bo...” she whispered.

A hand clamped over her mouth. Her eyes widened as she tried to look at who grabbed her, but all she saw was blackness.

“Bo went to Hannah’s Vineyard,” Julianna said, gazing into her crystal pyramid. “The charms around Laroque’s house have changed from their greenish aura to red. He would know if someone had broken through, probably as soon as the perpetrator, meaning Bo, got within a certain distance of the perimeter.”

“I agree,” Solaris said, tossing small bones onto a velvet cloth. “Bo is on the Vineyard and he’s in danger, outnumbered.”

Julianna had closed The Bed and Brew early that night to prepare for the next day’s festivities. Solaris had resumed planning the Nights of the Parades once they had the epidemic under control. There were no new cases of the virus. News of Frank’s disappearance had died quickly, thanks to some spells performed by Emerald, Julianna and Solaris.

Mordred and Bridget were busy in the back preparing food for the following night. While kneading many loaves of dough, they tossed flour at each other, enjoying the moment. The scare of only a couple of weeks ago, when Mordred fought for his life, seemed years away.

Emerald sat next to Tobias and Jade, silently envying the young lovers in the other room. She was distracted and lost in thought, daydreaming about her wedding day, which would take place on the Winter Solstice.

“We searched the Vineyard—used our abilities to try to hone in on Raven’s energy. How did Bo know she was there?” Tobias asked.

Emerald’s lips parted slightly and her eyes rolled back, revealing only the whites.

A hollow voice came from petite blonde’s mouth. It was the voice of Queen Rhia. “I told you to follow the heart. The heart knows more than the mind, Tobias.”

Emerald slumped over, and Tobias grabbed her before she slid off the chair. He gathered her in his arms and laid her down on a quilted lounge chair by the roaring fire. Her eyes fluttered open and she smiled at Tobias, who gently stroked her cheeks.

“Follow Bo, my sweet. He knows where Raven is. His is the heart you must follow. Go. I’ll be fine. We’re fine,” Emerald whispered as she touched her belly. “I need to go shopping with Iris anyway. My jeans don’t fit anymore.” She raised her head and their lips met. “Go find your daughter.”

Jade stood and headed for the door. Tobias joined her.

As they walked over the threshold, both became one with the vapors.

Chapter Twenty-three

Her breath came out in puffs of smoke as she exhaled into the frigid night. Dressed in clothes suitable for the tropics, Raven was shivering. She noticed a heavy sweatshirt lying in a heap next to her. She pulled it over her head and rubbed her arms, trying to warm up. Judging by the salty air and bumpy ride, she concluded that they traveled by boat.

The cabin was dark. The purring of the engine soon cut back, signaling that they were close to shore. She stood and walked over to the cabin door, which suddenly swung open and just missed hitting her nose.

“Shit!” Mick’s booming voice drowned out her cry of shock as the two almost collided.

“I don’t have a lot of time. We’ve just arrived back on Mirabelle. I don’t know where Laroque is going to keep you until tomorrow. Raven...”

“Get her up here,” Laroque ordered, climbing down the steps to the cabin.

“Come on,” Mick said, grabbing Raven by the arm.

Raven had just stepped up onto the deck when from behind a hood fell over her head. Laroque yanked her hands behind her, and

she felt the sticky glue of duct tape against her skin. He wrapped it tightly around her wrists.

“I can’t see...” she said as she fell forward onto the deck.

“Get up.” Laroque had clearly not cooled off in the least. His voice communicated only contempt.

Mick took her over his shoulder and walked the rest of the way, carrying her as he would a sack of potatoes.

Bo shimmered back to his human form and wiped the blood from his cheeks. He tore a piece of his denim sleeve and pressed it against his neck. Blood oozed from the wound inflicted by one of the wolves sent to attack him.

Both of them now lay dead under the oak tree. Murderous rage pumped through Bo’s body as he strode inside to look for his lover. He’d caught only a glimpse of her before the older wolf bit into his neck. She looked thinner, and he wasn’t used to seeing her with so much color in her face, but she was still breathtakingly beautiful. Still his Raven.

Walking into the kitchen, Bo smelled her essence lingering in the air like expensive perfume. Bo went to the sink and rinsed the cloth. Her energy was strongest in this area. He was lightheaded from his blood loss and he weaved his way to the table where he practically fell into the chair.

He breathed deeply, absorbing what was left of her essence as it hung in the misty air. Her energy was ripe for the taking. Ripples of heat bombarded him as he recoiled from the energy she left behind.

Images of her plagued him, along with the feelings of love they'd shared for a decade. He grabbed at empty air with his mind, trying to get hold of her, but there was nothing to grasp. His memories took him to a time when he could hold her.

Tears filled his eyes as he thought of when they hadn't a worry in the world. Why had it taken ten years for him to make the commitment he'd felt in his heart since the day he met her? It was love at first sight for him and he was pretty certain she felt the same.

Bo realized that he may have been too late, that he may have lost the best thing that ever happened to him. It was too much to bear. He gave into sights and feelings from the past.

Raven had just walked out onto the newly-constructed deck in her backyard. The sun was beating down on that magnificent July afternoon. Bo had just pounded in the last nail of the railing. They were ready to go for a swim in the calm Atlantic.

Bo wore cutoffs and a tool belt, nothing more. Raven greedily eyed her hunky handyman. That's what she teasingly called him. She wore the skimpiest bikini he'd ever seen. Her breasts were barely covered by the animal print fabric. The bottom sparkled with jewels around her hips as they swayed, catching the sunlight. Simply a string covered her backside.

"You look good enough to eat," he told her as he gave her his most scandalous smile.

She stood with the sun behind her in the western sky, which gave her a haloed effect. Her hair flowed down her back, and her pale skin was moist with sweat.

"Likewise," she said as she walked to him.

A tattered bandana stretched across his brow and tied in the back, disappearing into his ebony locks. Raven's hair caught in the breeze from behind and wrapped around her shoulders. Bo gently traced the outline of her face, pushing her hair away from her face. He pulled her closer and his lips seared her face with teasing kisses.

"Thanks so much for all the work you've done here, Detective," she said coyly.

"You're welcome, Dr. Strigoi," he whispered in her ear, dropping his tool belt to the ground with one hand and pulling her closer with the other.

"I'm not a doctor yet."

"A minor technicality that you will rectify soon enough."

Her smile slayed him. "I am very grateful..." she said with a sigh, her arms sliding around his narrow waist, her hands slipping around to his rear.

"Really?" he asked as his mouth worked its way down the slender curve of her neck.

"Truly," she answered, grabbing his shorts by the waist and yanking him up against her hips.

"Show me, my love," he said, finally pressing his lips to hers.

With lips parted, he slipped his tongue inside and teased hers to come out and play. His hands tangled in her mass of coal black hair.

She wiggled from his grasp and knelt in front of him, pulling down his shorts. His erection was clearly visible through the flimsy old denim, and she moaned with desire as her hands grasped him from behind. She kissed the tip of his cock and took him into her

mouth for a moment. Moans of ecstasy escaped his lips as he slowly dropped to his knees and took her by her shoulders, guiding her down upon the grass.

“I’ve wanted to make love to you all day. You’ve tortured me, parading around in that poor excuse for a bathing suit,” he murmured between long, passionate kisses. His hands managed to remove the bikini without her even realizing it.

The sun felt wonderful against their naked flesh as they lay upon the soft grass. It was their favorite place to make love—outdoors, under the bright blue sky or with the moon peeking down, just as it was on their first night together.

Raven rubbed against his hips, inviting him to enter her and ease the wanton lust. But he wanted all of her right now, from head to toe and needed to taste her salty skin and velvet flesh. His hand rubbed at her pebbled nipple while he devoured her breast with his lips.

Letting out a moan, he felt the desire rise from his being and settle between his legs. A throbbing hunger pulsed inside as he waited to feel her tender flesh. The anticipation became overwhelming.

“Now, Bo, I can’t wait anymore... I was fantasizing about you all day, too.”

The sun on his back felt wonderful as he traversed the landscape of her ivory form. His mouth toyed with her breasts, his tongue teasing and suckling, first one then the other.

He reached for her hand and guided it to his shaft, wrapping her fingers around it and letting out a low groan of delight as she

stroked him ever so gently. She eased over to him and kissed his mouth with a fierce hunger and unbridled craving.

“I love you so very much, Raven,” he said, nipping at her neck, licking at the blood that pooled.

The slight smell of blood in the air caused Raven to die a little death. Her eyes flashed to silver and her incisors extended with another type of hunger. The two merged and she bit down into his flesh, sucking his blood while crushing her hips upward, trying to guide him inside. The ache was unbearable, and he needed to feel her, wanting to be one.

Bo moved down and kissed her stomach. He felt the familiar tug as all feelings merged to his cock. She spread her legs apart, panting as he moved closer with the growing promise of pleasure.

“Please, Bo...” she pleaded, trying to wrap her legs around him.

But he wanted her to lose herself. He placed his lips between her legs, licking playfully, tasting her. Gently he sucked in her smooth folds, teasing with his tongue, and she’d asked for more. Her slender fingers grasped at clumps of grass as he felt her come. So powerful was the experience for Bo that it blotted out the sun itself as her cries echoed across the ocean.

She lifted her head and grabbed a fistful of Bo’s hair. His eyes met hers. She was gone. Blood covered his bottom lip. She swiftly moved, turning him over onto his back, sucking at his lip. His body jerked in response, longing to make love to her.

Her head nestled between his neck and shoulder, and she writhed back and forth on top of him, his cock just at the entrance of

paradise. He could feel she was wet with hunger, devoid of all thoughts as she stared at him. Encompassing her soul, he owned her very being. Bo couldn't begin to tell where she ended and he began.

She sank her teeth into his flesh once more and tasted him, slowly moving her hips down to meet his awaiting sex. He cried out as he pushed himself deep inside, almost climaxing at the velvety feel of her. She drank from his neck, yet it was if she were making love and sucking his cock at the same time.

His whole body trembled.

Firmly grasping her by the waist, he rammed farther inside her, the feel of the wet grass beneath him, the smell of salty air and skin all around. Her eyes, a liquid silver, held his gaze as she wiped his blood from her mouth in a seductive manner, which drove him over the edge. She had that look. The look that drove him wild.

He turned her over now, covering her body with his own, delving into the inner depths of his love. Their animal instincts took over and their lust for each other knew no end. Her fingers dug into his back as she clawed desperately at him. Bo needed to get as close as he could to her very core, where her soul resided.

She licked the blood from her fingers. He felt wave after wave of pleasure taking control of her. She smiled seductively.

Her legs wrapped tightly around him. With every thrust, he lifted her off the grass. She held on as if her life depended on staying connected to him.

"More... I want more..." she begged as he crashed into her, mimicking the waves against the rocks a few feet away. It seemed as if it wasn't enough, as if she could never get enough of him.

“Is this what you want, my love?” he asked as he rocked inside her.

“Oh, Bo...yes...and more...” She closed her eyes.

His arms curved underneath hers and he cradled the back of her head. With every thrust, he felt closer to release. He tried to delay, but the day had been long and in his fantasies he had made love to her a hundred times already.

As their passions crested, his will grew weak.

But this was just the beginning. They would have the whole night ahead of them. They would enjoy every moment spent in each other’s arms.

“Love me...” he whispered as his teeth sank into her flesh once more.

With a sudden jolt, he came inside her. Lifting his head to the heavens, he let out a blood-curdling cry of pure ecstasy.

He held his head in his hands at the table. His mind whirled at the memory of that afternoon, sending signals to his body that were better ignored. He ached for Raven. He knew there was a message for him in that memory. Since they’d made love so close to the ocean, his best guess was that she was traveling over the water again. Back home. To Mirabelle.

He stood, inhaled deeply and headed for the boat. The memory of their coupling clung to him as fiercely as Raven had on that blissful summer afternoon.

He headed for the Boston Whaler. It bobbed in the water at the dock, a quarter-mile down from Laroque’s property.

Chapter Twenty-four

Bo was lost in thought as he stumbled out of the house at the same time Jade and Tobias shimmered out of the vapors. They practically collided.

“Damn!” he cursed, sidestepping Jade, virtually falling over the front steps.

“Thank God you’re all right!” Jade said, throwing her arms around his neck. Upon second thought, she pulled away immediately. He’d not been so jovial in her presence the last time they were together.

“I’m sorry,” she said. “I know I’m not your favorite person.”

“No, I’m sorry. It’s not your fault. I was...” Bo headed toward the water, his head down, shoulders slumped. He looked terrible.

“Wait. Where are you going?” Jade called to him.

“Let him be,” Tobias said, and in an instant he stood at the side of the boat. “Are you okay, Bo? Let me take a look at your wound.”

“It’s healing, Tobias. I’ll be fine. I must have just missed her... She was so close. I saw her for the briefest second.”

The rope tied to the cleat lay loosely around the metal hook, and Bo leaned to unknot it. He dropped to his knees and grabbed the cleat, ripping it from the wooden dock.

“Raven!” he howled into the night.

“I know where my father is. Let me go talk to him,” Jade pleaded with Tobias and Bo while they sat around a table at The Bed and Brew having a quick meal.

No one was eating. The three of them hadn’t slept or eaten in days, with the exception of Jade downing a pint or two a day of O negative. Bo showed the worst signs of fatigue.

“He’s on the island at this guy Henri’s house. It’s located on the south side. I went there last night.”

Bo jumped up from his seat. “You what?” he exclaimed, slamming his fist on the table.

“I went there. Tobias was with Emerald and you were—where were you? Anyway, I used my abilities to tune in to both my father and Raven. She’s there with two other Lamai and three shifters. Henri is one Lamai, and Mick is the other.”

“The same Mick from Blood Pool?” Bo asked.

Jade’s face flushed.

“You know this man?” Tobias stated more than asked.

“Yes. I’ve been seeing him for a few months now.”

Bo moved suddenly, knocking the table over in his wake. “You’ve been in contact with this Lamai all along?” His ire visibly inundated him as he grabbed Jade by her shirt collar.

“N-no—Bo, listen to me. I haven’t been in contact with him...”

Bo tossed her to the side, and she crashed into an empty table and chairs. Bridget poked her head from the kitchen and wisely made a quick retreat.

Jade straightened her white cotton shirt and tucked it back into her jeans. She was more stunned than physically hurt by Bo's reaction. She knew she should have seen it coming. Bo was running on empty and feeling more and more dejected at every turn.

"I was so close to rescuing Raven the night before. I had her in my sights and lost her because I was paralyzed by my emotions. I-I didn't realize the other two shifters had noticed me and were circling."

"Tobias, I haven't spoken with Mick in days. Since I came back to Mirabelle Cove, we haven't spoken. I didn't tell Mick where I was in case he'd unwittingly let my father know what I was doing, that I was helping you. I swear to you both I didn't speak with Mick last night, either."

"You know what, Jade, I don't give a fuck." Bo stormed across the room and stood just inches away from her. "All I know is that ever since you got here, my life has been a living hell. I almost died trying to save your ass, and now your father has Raven. The gods only know if she's even still alive."

"She is alive. I saw her last night, asleep. She knew I was near. I don't know how I did it, but I managed to enter her dream." Jade turned to walk out of the bar. "But you don't want to hear what I have to say," she snapped as she slammed the door behind her.

Bo yelled over the clamor, "You're right! Like I said, I don't give a fuck!"

Tobias walked over to try to calm the brooding man down. Bo spun around and roared, "Don't, Tobias! Don't say a word!" With that, Bo bolted out the door.

Tobias was left standing alone in the ransacked room.

Bo beat a path to Blood Pool by noon, his stride purposeful as he entered Solaris's office. She sat behind her desk with the curtains drawn. Incense burned in the brazier. A midnight blue velvet cloth covered the desktop. Tiny bones lay scattered across it, forming a pattern that made sense only to Solaris.

She didn't bother to look up as he made his way over to the chair opposite her.

"I need to know where she is, Sol. You're my last chance."

"Why don't you let Jade show you?" Solaris lowered her lids and bore into Bo's soul with her gaze.

"I don't trust her," he stated.

She canted her head. "After all she's done, you still don't trust her?"

Bo stood and paced, not knowing what to do with all the angry energy tearing apart his insides.

"What has she done? Almost gotten me killed? Lied?"

Solaris reached for her cup of tea. "I know you want to blame someone for everything that's happened, and someone is responsible, but it's not her. You can trust her."

"Tell me where Raven is...please," he begged.

Sorrow filled her eyes. "I don't know. Don't you think if I had this information I would tell you?"

Bo heard the sound of a door creak behind him. He turned.

"Oh, it's you," he spat with disdain.

Jade stood in the threshold between Solaris's office and the hall leading to the basement.

"Yeah, it's me. I figured since you don't want to hear where your lady love is, I thought I'd share the information with..."

She was about to say *with someone who cares*. Bo could hear it in her voice as clearly as if she'd spoken the words aloud.

But she knew better, he thought.

Of course he cared, but he was hurting too much. And he was a cop, which at times sucked for him. Cops don't trust anyone and sometimes he missed that ability to simply trust.

"His name is Henri Rioux, and he lives at 19 Avery Drive, in Bayport."

"Does Tobias know?" Solaris asked as Bo ran out of her office.

"Of course I told him," Jade said.

Solaris rose from her seat. "Bo—wait!"

Jade tried to shimmer into Bo's car, but only made it across the room. "It works so much better when Tobias is around," she whined.

"Come on. I'll drive," Solaris offered.

"He'll be back shortly. She's not there," Tobias said as he walked into Solaris's office. "I caught him as he was getting into his car and told him. I'm worried about him. He's falling apart. He's just sitting in his car, staring into space."

"He hasn't eaten or slept since we were in the Keys," Jade added.

“I’ll go talk to him, maybe get him to eat something,” Sol said, grabbing a small leather pouch.

Solaris walked out into the afternoon sun. It would be glorious weather for the celebration that night. Except for their current predicament, she would be ecstatic.

Knocking on the glass window with one hand, she reached for the handle on the passenger side of Bo’s Mustang with the other. It wasn’t locked. She slid in silently.

They both sat there watching the workers from the town put up barricades for the final parade. Shopkeepers set up tables outside to sell their wares in preparation for the big night.

“She found her once. She can find her again,” Solaris said, breaking the silence.

“I know.”

“So what’s the problem?”

He turned to her, his eyes red from the tears he’d shed. “I should be able to find her. We had that connection once. Maybe she doesn’t love me anymore. Maybe she regrets the price she had to pay for saving me. And if she doesn’t now, she will in the future.”

“Bo, she’s not Lamai, she’s human. That’s why you don’t have the same connection—not because her feelings for you have changed. I may not know where she is, but I do know she still loves you.”

Bo rubbed at his face with callused hands.

“I want you to come inside and let me make you a bowl of soup. You need to eat or you’ll be no good to Raven when we get her home,” she said with a smile.

Jade stood by the entrance of Blood Pool and watched as Solaris walked in with Bo at her side. She saw the tiny leather pouch hanging around the older woman's neck and wondered what was inside. Solaris would never tell, but whatever was in there must have helped get Bo to eat a bowl of stew and get an hour of sleep.

Chapter Twenty-five

Up until this point, Raven had some semblance of trust that Laroque would not poison her, but that had drastically changed. She was bone-tired and weak from not having eaten since they left the house in Key West.

Her muscles ached from the rough travel and bad weather. All she wanted to do was crawl into bed next to Bo and drift off to sleep in his arms. She thought back to the last time they were together at home.

It was a bittersweet memory.

When Mick arrived in her room with a bowl of soup, she was leery about accepting it. From behind his back he revealed a bag from a local hamburger joint.

“It’s a double cheeseburger. You have to eat, and I don’t blame you for not wanting anything prepared in this house,” Mick said.

“My last meal—from the king of burgers,” she said with a smirk.

“I wouldn’t go so far as to say that.” He lowered his voice. “Laroque is keeping everything very hush-hush. I haven’t seen him since he returned with Henri. He’s up to something. I just don’t know what.”

“You can’t read him?” she asked, taking the bag.

“I’m sure by now you’ve figured out he’s a powerful *bokur*. He can create any illusion he wishes. So, to answer your question, no, I can’t read him.”

Raven took the sandwich and nibbled at it. Her gaze lingered in the corner, staring at a coat rack. On it was a velvet gown in a forest green color. It was cut low both in the front and back. A jewelry box sat on a dressing table alongside it. She reached for it and took a closer look.

It contained a magnificent diamond and ruby necklace.

Graduated, pear-shaped, alternating stones made up the antique jewelry. There were earrings to match. Raven hesitantly touched the box.

The word *mother* came to her then *cancer*. A glimmer of understanding penetrated Raven’s psyche. Laroque’s mother must have had the disease. Perhaps this was Laroque’s reason for wanting to work on a cure for cancer.

“You need to dress in that outfit after you’re done eating.” Mick pointed to a doorway at the other end of the room. “You can shower in there. I left you soap and shampoo. There are plenty of towels.”

“What’s going on, Mick?”

As he turned to leave, he looked into her blue-green eyes. “We’re going to the ritual soon. It’s almost dark.”

“I’m running out of time,” she said.

Mick just looked at her with a sad smile and left.

Raven swallowed the last bite of her sandwich then took a hot shower.

The dress fit perfectly, and for a moment, Raven was lost in her reflection in the mirror. The gown hugged her curves of as if someone had painted it onto her. The back was seductively plunging, reaching all the way down to her waistline.

Laroque entered the room with a cup of tea.

She removed the necklace nestled in the jewelry box and put it on.

“Here, it’s cold out. Have some peppermint tea.”

“Oh, shit,” she mumbled. “I didn’t hear you come in.”

Philippe Laroque stood before her in a black designer suit—Versace, Raven guessed. He looked her over and signaled with his hand for her to turn. Reluctantly, she spun around.

He handed her the teacup. “Drink it.”

She put it down.

“Really, Raven,” he said in an exasperated tone. He lifted the cup and took a sip. “Now drink some.”

She took the tea and drank a bit. It tasted delicious.

“There are shoes in that box by the bed. Put them on,” Laroque ordered.

Raven sat and took out the velvet pumps, which were the same shade of green as her gown. Suddenly, she felt woozy and held onto the edge of the bed.

“You look beautiful,” he said.

Raven remained silent. She finished her tea.

“What are you going to do to me? Hang me by my neck or burn me at the stake?”

“Don’t be ridiculous. That kind of treatment is inhumane.”

She stood to look at her reflection in the mirror. Her head felt as if it were spinning, and she was dizzy again.

On wobbly legs, she staggered to the window that overlooked the ocean. Night fell quickly, revealing a smattering of stars and the luminescent full moon just rising in the east. Raven felt as if she’d had too much wine at a dinner party, only there was no wine—and definitely no party.

His good nature evaporated with the light of dusk. He held out his hand to her. “Let’s go.”

She moved to him, still feeling groggy, her legs felt like they had lead weights attached. “Did you put anything in my tea?” she asked.

“Just a little something I prepared to calm you. An old recipe, tried and true.”

They made their way down the stairs. She held on to his arm. “Terrific and how thoughtful,” she retorted.

“Thank you. I agree,” he said, guiding her through the patio doors and outside to the driveway. Mick followed, ready to get into the driver’s seat of the Mercedes.

“Henri is driving tonight. You stay here,” Laroque commanded.

Raven caught a glimpse of the expression on Mick’s face, but the sedative made her too sleepy to fully appreciate the terror that flashed there for a moment.

He obviously knew enough not to argue with Laroque. He simply nodded and stood simmering in silence until the three drove off to Town Hall for the opening ritual.

Once they were out of sight, Mick shimmered into the ethers.

“She’s traveling, getting closer,” Jade said from a corner booth at The Bed and Brew. The restaurant filled quickly with people ready to party until the light of dawn.

That night would be the opening ritual at Town Hall, followed by a procession to the cemetery on the west end of the island. Townspeople would leave behind food and wine for their loved ones who had shed their physical bodies. There would also be another small ritual at the graveyard in honor of the dead.

Jade, Bo and Tobias were about to get up and head to Town Hall when a roadblock appeared in the shape of Mick Harris. Jade ran into his arms.

“I missed you!” they professed simultaneously. Tenderly, they kissed.

Tobias and Bo walked around them, trying to get to the front door.

Mick pulled away from Jade. “Wait!” he called to them, trying to get their attention. “Something’s going on, and I’m sorry to say Laroque has cut me out of the loop. I think he sensed I’ve come to like and respect Raven, and he doesn’t trust me anymore.”

Bo stood and turned, his face as hard as stone as he looked at the Lamai eye-to-eye. “Why should I believe you? You could have come and helped us anytime, but you didn’t.”

Mick straightened his shoulders. “You’re right. But I’ve found my love and I didn’t want to jeopardize what I have with her.” He gazed lovingly at Jade. “Besides, once we left the Keys I wasn’t informed as to his plans. Believe me or don’t. It’s your choice.”

Bo spoke between clenched teeth. “Go on.”

“He’s with his longtime friend Henri Rioux, and they took Raven a few moments ago—I’m guessing to the opening ceremonies.”

Tobias stepped forward. “Why can’t we locate him? What type of magick is he using?”

“He hasn’t confided in me since we were in the Keys. He was getting sick and persuaded Raven to help create a vaccine. It seems Frank infected him. I think she only helped him because of you.” He motioned to Jade. “He’ll be after the mayor next.”

“That won’t be necessary,” Jade said.

Bo was anxious. “I’m heading to the hall,” he announced, and quickly left the three behind at the restaurant.

“How is Raven?” Tobias asked, his face flushed with anguish.

“Pretty good. She’s a strong woman. I got her something to eat today, but when I went to join Laroque and Raven to drive them, as I normally do, Laroque told me to stay behind at the house. He’s obviously planning something and is keeping it to himself. As far as his magick goes, I’m sorry I can’t be of more help. He performs his rituals alone. Jade, would you happen to know what he’s been practicing lately?” Mick asked.

“He’s always adding and changing his style, making it unique. I know he’s studied ceremonial, and lately he’s talked about his

version of chaos magick.” Jade paused. “How will we know where he’s going to bring her?”

Mick put his arm around her. “I have an idea...”

Chapter Twenty-six

Dusk had descended on Mirabelle in violent colors of ochre, red and bright oranges. The parade began on time. Solaris stoically performed the opening ritual. Looking radiant, she wore her traditional white sari with woolen leggings and satin gloves for warmth. Once the ceremony was over, she placed her woolen cloak over her head. She kept searching for a trace of her friend—a sight or sound, a feeling. She felt familiar eyes settle upon her, but who they belonged to she wasn't certain. She only knew the energy was male.

Tobias waited at Nigella's farm, Bo was at Town Hall, and Jade hid in the cemetery with Mick. Jade had a peculiar feeling that her father would choose to perform whatever deed he had in mind at her mother's grave.

Jade wore all black, from suede boots to leather jacket. As she waited in the shadows, the ghosts that inhabited the land whispered to her. Thanks to her father's instructions, she hadn't lost the ability to speak with the spirits.

But, ironically, the one voice she needed to hear was the one that kept silent. Her mother. She probed with her mind to try to coax Nicolette to talk to her.

All she heard were echoes of other people's pasts.

Even in the dark and from a distance, she could see the lanterns as the procession headed closer. From the southern entrance of the cemetery, Mick noticed headlights approaching.

“Jade, we need to shimmer—don’t go anywhere until I’m certain it’s your father. Then go get Tobias and Bo.”

“Bo should be here any minute. He was coming here to meet us after the opening ceremony,” Jade said as her energy vibrated faster and faster, becoming a blur.

Soon they were like the fog that rolled in off the water, hovering for a moment.

Car doors slammed shut—one, two, three of them—and Jade sensed her father and sister’s energies. In an instant, she was gone and materialized next to Tobias.

“They’re at the cemetery—Henri, my father and Raven,” Jade reported, and soon the two traveled the blackened mists back to where Mick was secreted.

As they reappeared, the first gilded carriage arrived at the gates of Mirabelle Cemetery. The caretaker opened them up to let the rest of the followers in. The carriages circled around to the row of mausoleums that housed the first inhabitants of Mirabelle Island.

Nicolette’s five-foot grave marker stood ten feet from there. It was an exact replica of Nicolette.

“It’s incredible. The likeness,” Jade said to Tobias, admiring the statue of her mother.

“I couldn’t leave Nicolette’s body in Louisiana and, after Hurricane Katrina, I’m glad I brought her body to Mirabelle years earlier.”

Solaris exited the carriage along with the few Empusas who stayed for the rituals. Bo was next to hop off the carriage. He noticed Tobias and hurried toward him.

That was when Jade spotted a man of medium build escorting Raven to their mother's grave. She'd been waiting for this moment for what seemed like forever. She caught sight of Bo and froze for a split second. He looked ready to pounce on the man with Raven.

She grabbed Bo by the shoulder. "Don't do anything, Bo. That man's a Lamai. I recognize him as a friend of my father's. He'll attack Raven before you even get off the ground."

"Take it easy, Bo," Tobias whispered.

It took every ounce of willpower Bo could muster to obey the elder Lamai.

"What do we do, then?"

Tobias patted Bo's back. "*We* don't do anything. You stay put."

As Solaris prepared to make her speech, the caretakers started the bonfire, while the celebrants brought flowers, candles and their trays of food for the ancestors. Torches blazed at the four directions surrounding the fire.

Bo circled the other way to approach Raven from behind. As he did, he glimmered and became his wolf counterpart. Silently he padded across leaves colored in a variety of jewel tones, amber, citrine and garnet. This was Raven's favorite time of year. He couldn't lose her now that he was so close to her. Neither could he stand idly by and do nothing. He owed Raven the very same

sacrifice she'd made for him. The love they shared would endure the changes life inevitably would throw at them. Existence without her was unthinkable. She *was* his life.

Bo eyed Jade as she stood beside Mick, both still shimmering to keep their whereabouts hidden from Laroque. Tobias lingered somewhere in the mists.

Solaris made her way to the mausoleum marked with the names Jeremiah and Rachel Starr. Julianna, along with Bridget, knelt in front of the tomb, leaving a bottle of absinthe and a tray of fresh meats and vegetables.

As the new mayor opened her mouth to begin her speech, chaos erupted.

Philippe Laroque appeared from the murky fog, standing on the other side of Raven and Henri.

The flames in the fire pit loomed over six feet high, lighting up the area, along with the full moon that washed everything with a silvery glow. Everyone fell silent for a brief instant.

A moan echoed from the crashing waves that surrounded the island, heralding The Night of the Dead.

The winds picked up in intensity.

It seemed as if the winds were crying, that Nicolette was crying.

Raven watched a scene she'd witnessed too many times to count. The flames seemed to leap higher and higher. She thought her totem animal flew overhead to sit in a tree branch above her.

It was the raven—a messenger.

The raven cautioned the light bearers about impending devastation and battle. *Be forewarned*, she cried, allowing time for preparation. Raven was a bird of the Underworld. She had the capacity to see into the past, the future and beyond the veil of mortality. The gift of the raven was in her journey. She was able to travel from this world and across the barriers of death to the other side. A gatherer of information, mystical raven then returned with her knowledge to impart upon the seeker or healer.

Raven prayed the bird was a positive omen. She readied herself for battle, hoping her warrior was nearby. Hope sprang up from within her, unasked for and persistent. She *knew* he was close. There still existed a connection between them.

Henri held her against him. He felt as cold as the October night. She began to shiver and instinctively headed for the fire. For Bo.

Raven lurched forward and, as she stepped a few feet away, the vampire lunged for her, obviously startled by her movements.

That was when Bo made his move.

He pounced onto the man holding his mate. Clamping his jaw and razor sharp fangs around the neck of Henri Rioux, he refused to let go.

Bo deduced Henri was a clever and resourceful vampire. Proof of that was when Henri immediately transformed to mist. The bastard left Bo with only a mouthful of blood and flesh. He waited for the man to resurface. Bo had wounded him, and he could not remain in the ethers for very long.

But Bo's attention was ripped in two as Laroque grabbed Raven and pinned her arms behind her back.

"I wish to make a sacrifice tonight in honor of my love, Nicolette, who was taken away much too soon!" he cried into the night.

The wolf sidled up behind the *bokur*, unnoticed.

All eyes were on Laroque, shocked, as the crowd listened to his declaration of love for Nicolette.

Bo cursed to himself as Jade attempted to reach her father.

It all happened too fast for the newly-changed Lamai. He knew she would have to, in a flash, decide between her love for her father and the desire to save her sister.

The choice must have paralyzed her.

Bo's eyes, the wolf's golden gaze, fixed onto Laroque. His muscles tensed as he prepared to leap and attack the *bokur's* neck, longing to hear the crunch of bones and tendons. Graphic images of revenge pounded his mind. Never had he wanted to kill another living creature as desperately as he wanted to at that moment. He could taste the blood in his mouth and feel the flesh against his intensely sharp fangs.

Henri reappeared from the vapors and grabbed Bo in midair by his flank. The Lamai's sharp nails dug into the wolf's side as he hit the ground.

Bo, though dazed, saw Tobias appear, his fangs fully extended, his irises the color of clear water. Menacing rage surrounded Tobias.

The ancient vampire seemed to double in size, but it was too late.

Laroque's eyes flashed yellow. He had morphed between the spaces of time in seconds and bit down into Raven's tender flesh. Crimson blood trickled onto her neck and down the front of her gown.

An invisible barrier kept the outside world at bay while Philippe Laroque acted out his ultimate plan of revenge.

Tobias plowed into the energy blockade, sending a ripple through the air. Bo shifted back to his mortal form and looked at Jade, who stood staring wide eyed at her father.

Solaris grabbed Julianna and Bridget's hands, racing over to Nicolette's grave. Emerald stood at the front of the crowd, staring at Tobias as he recovered from his impact with the magickal shield Laroque had constructed.

The three women began to chant, calling on the spirit of Nicolette Strigoi.

*"Spirit gone beyond the veil, aid us now, we must not fail.
Break this magick wall of ire, in perfect love, we all conspire.
Let love break this evil spell, and save your child, we must compel."*

The chanting grew in intensity. The townspeople joined, aiding in the spell's power.

Mick stood beside Jade as they all watched in horror as Laroque drained Raven of her blood.

*"Spirit gone beyond the veil, aid us now, we must not fail.
Break this magick wall of ire, in perfect love, we all conspire.
Let love break this evil spell, and save your child, we must compel."*

Again, they pleaded to Nicolette.

Emerald quickly made her way over to where Solaris and the others stood watching the drama unfold.

“No!” Bo cried, racing to the perimeter of the impenetrable circle. He clawed at it in desperation, determined to break through. His soul was shattered. He looked down at his blood soaked shirt, which gave him the appearance of truly dying of a broken heart.

“Raven! *Mitawa!*”

Laroque nicked the skin on his wrist and placed it to Raven’s mouth. His eyes met Tobias’s as he gave him a bloody smile. It seemed to say, *I win.*

Like a hungry babe, she drank.

Jade stormed over to where progenitor and progeny stood, her eyes glazed. The shield dissolved.

Mick rushed to her side.

“Stop,” Jade said, only it was Nicolette’s voice. “Philippe, you must stop this madness. Tobias is not to blame.”

It was too late.

Laroque stared at his daughter, “Nicki...” he whispered.

“It was Frank Dubois. He killed me, not Tobias. I tried to tell you, but your anger kept you from hearing me—from hearing the truth.”

Bo crawled to Raven and took her into his arms. “Oh, my love...I’m so sorry.” He sobbed as he held her, her body limp, blood dripping from her lips.

“Tobias!” Nicolette called from Jade’s mouth.

Bo watched as Tobias loomed inches away from Laroque, his sights locked on Jade. His fangs were fully extended and ready to sink into the man's neck to avenge his daughter's attack. His eyes were now red with the call of death. His body appeared rigid.

Nicolette's spirit lamented. "This hatred has to end. Don't, my love—don't take Jade's father from her, please."

His anger was palpable. "What of your other daughter?"

She whispered only for him. "Do you trust me, love?"

Tobias pleaded for an answer. "H-how did this happen? I don't understand."

"I love you, Tobias. I'll always love you."

"Meu dragoste..."

Before collapsing into Mick's arms, Jade struggled to speak. "Get Raven to the hospital."

Philippe Laroque rode the mists off the island, followed by Henri.

"Emerald, go with them. I'll meet you all there," Tobias ordered before he disappeared.

"She's still with us," Bo murmured, carrying Raven to his car. "I feel her heart beating."

They piled into the car left by Jade's father. The keys were still in the ignition. Mick drove while Bo held Raven's nearly lifeless body in the backseat, whispering words of his never-ending love for her, pleading for her not to leave him, promising he would follow wherever she went. Even to death's door.

Chapter Twenty-seven

Tobias traveled the mists, following the blood scent of Henri Rioux. It brought the three of them to Hannah's Vineyard, to Laroque's home. Henri held his hand on the spot where Bo had ripped a chunk of flesh. It was healing quickly. Laroque opened the sliding glass doors and walked in to face Tobias.

With fisted hands, he declared, "If my daughter dies, you die. I don't care what Nicki asked of me. Do you understand, Philippe?" His voice echoed through the house.

Henri came at Tobias from the side, his fangs exposed. The ancient one simply flicked his hand as if swatting a fly. Henri flew across the room and crashed into the wall.

Laroque stood there, his whole body slumped in despair.

Tobias seethed with untamable ferocity. "I see your friend here changed you so you could have the pleasure of killing my daughter—who, by the way, saved your miserable ass," he raged.

Laroque's voice was low. "She saved my ass for Jade's sake. She knew what she'd done to Jade and had to make it up to her somehow." He paused a moment. "I simply was the one to benefit from her guilt."

Tobias's chest heaved with angry breaths. "You better pray she doesn't die."

Laroque nodded. “I do.”

“Lucky for you, *your* daughter takes after her mother.”

Laroque was silent for a moment. Tobias attempted to quiet the madness screaming inside his head for revenge.

“Tobias, is it true that Frank killed Nicki?”

“Yes.” Tobias ran his hand through his hair. “He was in love with her since they were both young, but he managed to hide that fact—and his talents as a sorcerer—from everyone.”

“How do you know?” Laroque asked.

Tobias’s voice was hollow. “Because I killed him, with your daughter’s help—Jade found out and confronted him. We both saw Nicolette’s murder through the blood memory of Frank Dubois—what really transpired. She and I both killed him. Now I know the truth, and so do you.”

Laroque was still. He embraced his fate. “Kill me, then, if you must. I am suddenly very tired of this existence.”

Tobias narrowed his gaze at the *bokur*. “I’d like nothing more than to oblige you.”

“Then do it.”

“Sorry to have to inform you of this, but you’ll probably be around for a long time now that you’re Lamai. That is, as long as Raven stays alive,” Tobias threatened. “Perhaps that’s punishment enough.”

The ER attendants wheeled Raven into a private room and hooked her up immediately to heart monitors, as well as a pulse

oximeter, sphygmomanometer and IVs. It was a whirlwind of activity. Bo never left her side.

Her heartbeat remained regular—for a Lamai, anyway.

Tracy entered the room with tears flowing down her face.

“What the hell happened?” she cried.

“Laroque,” Bo said with a sigh as he clutched Raven’s hand.

“Dr. Odin will be here in a minute. He wants a full blood work-up done on Raven.” Tracy checked her pulse. Bianca and Gary Davis soon joined them. “Get her some O negative.”

“I can’t believe this is happening. She’s still alive, though, so that’s good news,” Bianca said, full of hope.

Davis’s face was pasty white. “Yeah, I thought... W-well...I’d heard that if she was t-turned—sh-she’d...”

Bo was lost in thoughts of Raven. He caressed Raven’s arm and brushed his fingertips across the porcelain planes of her face. The color had drained from her cheeks, and she appeared as Bo had always known her.

Raven moaned and fidgeted in the bed where she lay. Ian Odin came storming through the doors with Maureen, the on-duty nurse, at his side. He was a white cloud of fury as he snarled out orders.

“I want the works. A full blood panel—*full*—soup to nuts,” the white-haired doctor demanded.

Maureen had already begun to draw the first vial of blood from Raven before Ian finished speaking.

His voice softened. “How are you, Bo?” Ian asked as he put his hand on Bo’s shoulder.

Bo had tears in his eyes, which he tried to wipe away. “I’m scared for her.”

“Bo, something else has to be going on. I’m not exactly sure, but if Raven was supposed to die,” he paused. “She’d be dead. Hekate doesn’t mess around. If she told Raven she would die if anyone tried to turn her, then that’s what would happen. Be thankful she’s made it this far.”

“Should I set up for transfusions, Dr. Odin?” Maureen asked.

“No, continue with the O negative. I want to get a clearer picture first. Let’s get all the results back, and then I’ll decide the next course of action.”

Bianca kissed Raven’s cheek while Davis stood by speechless.

“Jade wants to come in. I’ll go wait outside,” Bianca offered, but Bo wasn’t listening. He was waiting for Dr. Odin to tell him Raven would be all right.

Then he would exhale.

Tobias took one long last look at Philippe Laroque. His eyes flashed red. His posture resembled Queen Rhia’s. “I promise you, if anything unfortunate happens to Raven, I will hunt you down. You will die a slow and agonizing death.”

Laroque sat at his desk with his head in his hands, undoubtedly thinking of Nicki and Jade. He didn’t seem to know what to say. Perhaps there was nothing to say. He couldn’t even have the pleasure of torturing Frank Dubois.

“I hope you got some gratification from killing Frank,” Laroque finally said.

Tobias stared at him. “Almost as much as I would derive from killing you.”

“Then just do it,” Laroque begged.

Instead, Tobias reared his fist back and smashed Laroque’s face. Every bone shattered. For a while, at least.

“To answer your question, all I felt was Nicolette’s pain,” he admitted.

With that, Tobias shimmered back to Mirabelle.

Tobias appeared in the corner of Raven’s room at the precise moment Ian Odin walked in grinning from ear to ear. Solaris followed right behind him with Tracy at her heels. Solaris went straight to Bo and hugged him tightly.

“You can breathe now,” she said.

“What is it?”

Ian stood there for another moment, brimming with joy as he noticed Tobias in the room.

“Good, you’re all here.”

“What is it, Ian?” Tobias asked.

Ian smacked Bo on the back. “Bo, you’re going to be a father,” he said, almost too matter-of-factly.

Bo looked wide eyed at the doctor, shaking his head.

“I—what? I-I—don’t...”

“Raven is pregnant with your baby. I assume it’s yours,” Ian began to explain.

“Of course it’s his,” Raven muttered. Her eyes fluttered opened. She looked over to her father, then to Bo. “What’s going on? Where am I? Am I dead?”

Bo gathered her in his arms and embraced her tightly. “No, my love, you are very much alive.”

Not missing a beat, Ian continued. “That’s what saved her when she was turned. The baby’s mystical DNA from you saved her life. I would guess she’s about four to five weeks along. I need to keep her here for a while, so don’t start threatening to take her home,” Ian ordered, but Bo didn’t hear him.

Everyone began congratulating the happy couple, Tobias and even Jade.

Solaris cried for joy. “Auntie Jade,” she said with a sigh as she hugged the young woman. She turned to Bo and smothered him with kisses.

Bo teased Tobias, “How does it feel to be a grandpa?” he said, still in shock himself.

“Magickal.”

Both men stood on either side of Raven, each holding a hand.

Tobias waited a moment for her to gain her bearings.

“Father,” she whispered.

Tobias smiled as he leaned over to kiss his daughter’s forehead.
“*Dulciuri inimă.*”

“I thought I was supposed to die if I was turned. I remember drinking his blood—didn’t I?”

Bo looked deeply into her smoke-colored eyes. “Yes, you did drink it, but our son or daughter saved you,” he said with a glowing smile.

She pulled back. “I’m pregnant? I thought I was dreaming.”

“No. You’re not dreaming, love.”

“Yes, you are pregnant. We’ll figure out exactly how far along soon,” Ian answered.

Solaris made her way over to Raven and hugged her dear friend. “Your mother is standing next to your father and she is absolutely beaming with love.” She turned to Tobias. “Soon you will be reunited and she says she can’t wait. She sends her undying love.”

Tobias wiped a rarely shed tear from his eye. “Tell her...”

“She knows,” Solaris said. “And she sends her love to you girls—I mean women.”

Raven smiled and motioned to Jade. “Come here, Auntie Jade,” she whispered.

The two women embraced. “I’m so sorry things happened the way they did. I’m sorry I turned you. That wasn’t my intention.” Raven was weak from the abrupt changes her body had gone through in the last few weeks.

Jade smiled. “Rest. And don’t be sorry. I found love with Mick who, as you know, is Lamai. So now I really feel like I’m part of the family.”

“He’s a good man,” Raven said.

“I know. He was under my father’s control when he was working at Blood Pool. That was the white powder you saw, Sol. The *coup de poudre* caused him to act out of character.”

Solaris nodded as she gazed at her friend. “So, will I be an honorary aunt?”

“Of course! I can’t believe this. I’m still in shock.” Raven began to cry as she put one hand on her belly while the other caressed Bo’s face.

The room slowly cleared out, giving the two lovers privacy.

“I love you. You are my life,” he whispered as he kissed her neck.

“Oh, Bo, I was so upset over what happened—that I changed. I was going to let you go. I didn’t want you to be saddled with a mortal woman. You deserve so much more than I would’ve been able to give you.”

Bo hugged her. “Don’t ever say or even think that, *tehila*. Without you, I am nothing. It doesn’t matter now, though, because we’re going to have a family of our own.”

He pulled a black velvet box from his pants pocket and opened it.

A flawless, heart-shaped diamond, set in white gold, sat inside. He removed it from the box and placed it on her ring finger.

“I’ve been carrying this around for weeks.”

“It’s beautiful!”

“You’re beautiful. You told me you would marry me, remember? Now, it’s official. I want you to be my mate for life—to be my wife. So start thinking about dresses and food for the

celebration. As soon as you're well enough, we're getting married. I should have done this years ago. I'm sorry I made you wait, *tehila*."

Raven put her arms around her man and held on tight. "You were worth the wait, lover."

About the Author

B. Ella Donna is a freelance writer both online and off. In addition, she has had work appear in *Black Night* magazine and *Pagan Pages*. Ella has over thirty years of experience in the field of metaphysics and Wiccan philosophy. Currently she is a Reiki practitioner and High Priestess as well as an artist. She's the mother of three terrific sons and lives in a seaside town in the northeast. Ella is currently working on another paranormal romance novel. To learn more about B. Ella Donna, please visit www.b-elladonna.com. Send an email to B. Ella Donna at info@b-elladonna.com or join her Myspace group to join in the fun with other readers as well as B.Ella Donna! www.myspace.com/elladonna.

Look for these titles by B. Ella Donna

Now Available:

Every Witch Way but Dead
The Upside of Karma

*Get out your bells, books and candles; this witch is ready to kick
some ass.*

The Upside of Karma

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For Angelica Kane, encountering the ghost that terrorized and nearly killed her a year ago is more than just an eerie annoyance. It's just the first in a proverbial house of cards. A psychic-fair reading reveals that another woman is out to seduce her husband Jonathon. Then the woman turns up dead, Jonathon's business card clutched in her hand.

Angelica's world tumbles into a downward spiral, accelerated by sizzling sexual chemistry with her very own Lancelot—Sean Bennette, the officer investigating the murder. As rumors of an affair spread, Angelica finds an ally in a sister witch who shares her gift of psychic visions. Together the two women, the handsome detective, and the specter lugging a load of karmic debt race to prove Jonathon's innocence.

But poison is no respecter of time. Angelica must decide if she's willing to pay the price to uncover the painful truth. Truth that could bring her love—or cost her life.

Enjoy the following excerpt for The Upside of Karma:

“So, you started the divorce proceedings?” he asked, sipping the soup.

I smirked, running my fingers through my hair. “Yes. Jon is being very generous.”

“That’s good.” His eyes locked onto mine. “You look so beautiful.”

His observation took me by surprise. “I’m a wreck, but that was sweet of you to say.”

“I mean it. I, uh...I’m having a hard time keeping my hands to myself,” he admitted.

“Maybe we should think about more...unpleasant things, like what do you think is going on with this letter?”

He smiled, but I could see it was an empty smile at best. “I think your husband was being blackmailed. The papers, though, for the construction job, do not name Joan as a partner of any kind. They were signed the nineteenth of December.”

“That doesn’t look good for him, but poison? No way.”

Sean stopped eating, barely making a dent in the food laid out before him. “We have to keep looking. It may not have anything to do with him. She could have screwed over someone else,” he added.

I sipped my wine and snacked on a piece of sun-dried tomato and Havarti cheese. I was lost in thought and didn’t notice Sean staring intently at me.

I came back to reality and watched as the snow still fell in swirls outside the windows.

“What? Do I have cheese on my face?” I asked, wiping away imaginary crumbs.

“No, you’re just so...incredible. I’m sorry.” There was that southern twang weaving its way throughout his verbiage.

I must have turned all shades of ruby red. “Thanks Sean, you’re pretty incredible yourself. How come no woman’s captured your heart in all these years?”

“I don’t know. I just never met anyone that moved me like Rita... Until you.”

I felt so alone, so vulnerable. I needed to feel desirable again. My self-esteem had been at an all time low these past few weeks.

I sat there and sighed, not knowing what to do next, invite him upstairs or to the front door. I was torn again. A flood of emotions were coursing through me, and left to my own devices I would have tossed all caution to the wind and snuck him upstairs to my room. I wanted to.

He reached for my cheek and caressed my skin longingly. I felt the electricity pass between us. I entered dangerous territory. I felt dangerous, not caring anymore about appearances, or what the right thing to do was. I wanted to do...everything. With Sean. He was weaving his own powerful spell on me.

I got up and took the dishes to the sink. “I better clean up. You still hungry?”

“Ravished, but not for food,” he said in a husky tone.

He walked over to me. I stood leaning against the counter, rinsing dishes. He pushed my hair away from my neck and began gently kissing me at the nape of my neck, down to my shoulder. Warm, probing hands made their way around my waist, pulling me closer, into him. I leaned my head back and let out a soft moan. Massaging my breasts, he heedfully unbuttoned my tightly bound

bodice. I turned to him, my hands still wet, and he kissed me ever so lovingly. His lips were petal smooth.

“Angelica, I can’t take another night of this torture. Please, let me be with you.”

Had my children not been home, I would have torn his clothes off of him where he stood. I would have kissed him all over then started from the beginning again. I’d postpone our pleasure until we both couldn’t take it any longer. I’d be merciless. I would explore his body like a new lover, tenderly, slowly, intently. I would finally take him inside me and we both would lose ourselves, reaching the heights of pleasure we both deserved and couldn’t deny.

However, my children were home.

I kissed him long and hard. A desperate kiss. A kiss I hoped would convey how much I did want him to stay.

“God, I want you,” he moaned in my ear. His warm breath sent chills up and down my spine. I felt his arousal pressing against me.

Unfortunately, I also felt guilt.

I slowly pulled back, gazing into his sultry, azure eyes. I knew my own eyes gave away all my feelings. They always did.

“I know, the kids,” he said, resigned to the fact that wouldn’t change.

I rubbed against him. I knew it wasn’t fair, but I couldn’t help myself. “I’m sorry. I do want you, too. You have to know that.”

His gentle expression hardened. “No, actually, I don’t. I’m putting my heart in your hands. Please don’t break it. I’m moving too fast for you, I know it. I can’t seem to help myself when I’m with you. I should give you space, you need to heal. I know what I

should do, damn it, but it's not what I want to do. I told you once I'm a patient man and I meant it. I'm sorry, Angel. I'll give you your space."

I was speechless. He was so selfless. It was all too much for me to deal with. If I had my way, I would have had my way with this suave, sexy man standing in my kitchen, but I had to be responsible. I couldn't afford the luxury of having a sexual encounter whenever the mood came over me.

I didn't want my anger at Jon to spill over into anything that might develop, whether with Sean or any other man in my future. I had work to do, both psychological and ritual. All these thoughts caught, unexpressed, in my throat.

Instead, I leaned into him and kissed him again, wrapping my arms around him. It wasn't right and yet it was. I knew that bringing him to the edge of passion and sending him on his way home, alone and unsatisfied, was wrong. I had no other choice. After all, I was the responsible one. So, on we went pushing ourselves to the point of no return then slamming on the brakes. One of these times, I thought, he will not stop, and I had to accept that. I couldn't go on like this with him and expect him to leave. I didn't want the evening to end this way, either. I sought to feel loved as well.

"Soon, I promise," I whispered.

He backed me against the refrigerator, his hands roaming every curve and winding my hair around his fingers. He breathed in deep. I arched against him, breaking all the rules and losing myself in the moment. He caressed me between my legs, and I thought I'd melt

into a puddle onto the floor. My hand reached for him. He was hard and ready for me. “Oh, Goddess...” I whimpered.

He cupped his hands around my face and gently kissed me goodnight. “Like I said, you’re worth the wait.” He headed for the front door, grabbed his coat and vanished into the snowy night, leaving me with nothing to cool me off but the cold outdoors. None of which brought any relief. Again.

It was supposed to be a simple burglary...but the ghosts had other ideas.

Ariadne's Thread

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Glaswegian single mother Ariadne McSween is not having a happy New Year. Instead of celebrating with family and friends in time-honoured tradition, she's helping her scallywag brother and his even less-savoury friends burgle a mansion in the Scottish Highlands. And nothing is going right.

First there's the bad weather and car breakdowns. Then, instead of a quick, quiet robbery under cover of a noisy party, Addie finds herself flirting outrageously with the house's owner, sexy concert pianist and accused murderer, John Maxwell. Worse, her violent and erratic accomplice, Shug, takes their hosts hostage.

Another complication: The house turns out to be haunted, and not just by the ghost of eminent composer Christopher Maxwell. Two randy spirits drawn to the lust of living want to join the party—along with the vengeful shade of John's murdered wife.

Soon Addie becomes entangled in a host of mysteries, like why are Ariadne and her cohorts being paid to rob a house that holds nothing more valuable than dusty musical manuscripts? And most of all, how does she avoid falling in love with the chief victim of her crime?

Enjoy the following excerpt for Ariadne's Thread:

Don't get involved in this, Add—get yourself out the door. Any minute now, someone's going to discover Tammy locked upstairs... She's going to scream... She lifted the glass to her lips.

He said, "You're beautiful."

Startled, she almost choked. "Aye, right," she said cynically and became fascinated by the way his eyes laughed at her while the rest of his face remained straight.

"And that's the other reason I like you." His gaze dropped to the region of her lips, causing those butterflies in her stomach to tighten once more. Heat began to spread outward. She wondered how he would kiss, how he would taste.

Hastily, she took another gulp of the gorgeous whisky.

He said, "So is there a boyfriend lurking somewhere?"

"What's it to you?" she demanded from habit, and his eyes crinkled at the corners.

"Absolutely nothing, as it happens, but I thought it might matter to you."

"Do you always speak in riddles?"

His intense gaze remained steady. "You know exactly what I mean. I like you and I'd like to know you better."

Oh, Jesus, why does this have to happen now? Does he know what these words do to me?

Of course he does. He's just another man...

She said, "Aye, well I know exactly what *that* means."

"Tell me," he invited.

He really thinks I won't. She looked straight into his eyes.
"You fancy a quick fuck."

Laughter and something far hotter swept over his stormy face.
“Not quick.”

Oh, Christ. Heat swamped her, melting her jeans. Before the conversation got even further out of hand, she downed the last of her whisky and laid her glass down on the nearest table. “Look, I have to...”

“I want to show you something,” he interrupted with a bewildering change of mood. “Come on.”

He took her hand, and it felt so good there that although she’d truly meant to leave at that point, she actually found herself going with him. Worse, he was leading her back upstairs.

Where Tammy was, no doubt, banging on the office door.

“Where are we going?” she asked breathlessly. “I thought the party was downstairs?”

He laughed. “Why do you think we’re going up?”

She pulled away. “I’m not going up there.”

He glanced down at her, his devil’s eyebrows arching in a look both tempting and challenging. Beneath them, his eyes gleamed with that curious darkness she’d noticed before. And something else that she recognized as bitterness. Half the country believed he’d murdered his wife. Certainly, no one had proved he hadn’t.

He said, “Why not? Are you afraid of me?”

There were several good answers to that. Answers that would have lost him and got her finally out of the house. Unfortunately, her mouth always answered a challenge before her head gave it permission.

“Don’t be daft.”

And she was climbing the stairs again. “Maybe I’m scared of your ghosts.”

“No, they’re second rate ghosts, not scary at all. Mostly.”

“I think I saw your great-grandfather.”

“Bad luck, to quote my great-grandmother.”

She blinked at that, but since she really wanted to know, she asked, “Is that his piano I was mangling?”

Laughter hissed out between his teeth. “You didn’t mangle it that badly. I’ve heard a lot worse played on it, believe me. Though the old bugger would prefer if you played the notes he actually wrote.”

Suddenly she wanted to laugh, too, at his casual disrespect of a national icon as much as at the outlandish nature of the conversation. “Did you learn to play on that piano?”

He shrugged. “It was always there.”

“Did he lean over your shoulder and encourage you?”

“Well, he swore at me when I got it wrong.”

“You mean he speaks?”

“Constantly. As the ogre said, it’s getting him to shut up that’s the trick.”

Shrek? He knew *Shrek*? How incongruous was that?

They had reached the top of the stairs now. *Turn right, please turn right, away from Tammy...*

He drew her to the left. Addie was sure she could hear the office door rattling. She coughed to cover up any shouting, then found herself whisked into the piano room and the door firmly closed.

“What are we doing here?” she demanded.

“I thought you might like to play the piano with me.”

The lamp was still on. By its poor light, his face looked rugged and more devilish than ever. And he stood too close, much too close. With the door behind her, there was nowhere she could go. God help her, there was nowhere she wanted to go...

“Though now we’re here, I find I don’t give a stuff about playing.”

You could drown in the storm of those eyes. She so needed to be away from him...

“Shit, Kate.” His breathing seemed suddenly uneven. “Remember what you said about the lucky bag?” She opened her mouth to deny that she’d meant any of that, but he didn’t let her speak. “You’re right. It would be a bloody unlucky dip that dropped me in your lap. Tell me to sod off. Tell me quickly, and mean it—right after this kiss...”

His head swooped down and his mouth seized her parted lips before she could think, let alone react to his words. She wasn’t prepared for it. She had no time either to reject him or to savor the moment. He went from speaking straight to kissing, his hands on either side of her face while his body pressed her back into the door. Paralyzed, she hung there while his mouth devoured hers, moving across her lips with a strange, tender hunger she’d never encountered before. It astounded her, enchanted her. So when his tongue slid between her lips, she opened wider to him, meeting his tongue with her own. He wound it in his, danced with it, sucked it into his own mouth while he explored every nook of hers.

Sensation rolled inward like a tidal wave. Every caress of his sensitive fingertips at the corner of her lips, every movement of his devastating mouth, dragged her further in. She clung to him, kissing him back with forgotten passion till he groaned into her mouth.

His hands left her face, trailing down her neck to her shoulders, and down the sides of her body, just teasing her breasts on the way to her waist where they lingered, stroking. Her hard, needy nipples pressed into him through the thin camisole. She moved in his arms, rubbing them against his chest. His hands swept down her hips, holding her while he pressed his lower body into her, his sporran jabbing into her abdomen.

With an impatient jerk, his hand pushed between their bodies, pushing the sporran aside so that he could grind his erection into her instead. Through the thickness of his kilt, she could feel it already hard and thick. Desire flooded her, soaking her jeans. Her pussy pulsed with need.

This can't be happening...how can I want him so much so quickly?

Changing the angle of his mouth, he deepened the kiss even further. One questing hand found her breast, cupping and caressing, his thumb flickering back and forth across her rigid nipple, making her moan into his mouth. She pressed forward into the delicious hardness of his cock and obligingly he rubbed it against her. She wanted it inside her, pushing, thrusting. She wanted him naked, to feel his skin, every inch of the hard body pressed so beguilingly against her now.

At last, as if it were a supreme effort, he dragged his mouth free. "Tell me now," he whispered, touching his forehead to hers. "Tell me quickly... 'Sod off, John Maxwell, you're nothing but trouble.' Kate..."

His mouth found hers again, brushing back and forwards across her lips as reality flooded back, bringing shame and guilt and a pain so sharp it made her gasp aloud. She grasped his head between her hands to stop his devastating mouth.

"Johnny... I... Johnny, I'm not..."

Something bumped inside the room, crashing against the window frame at the same time. A body fell into the room, cursing in fluent Glaswegian.

Appalled, Addie watched over Johnny's shoulder as Big Malky rose to his feet, shaking his shaggy head as if to clear it.

Johnny spun round. "What the...?"

Malky blinked at the pair of them. "Aw right there, big man?" he said amiably to his host. "Happy New Year."

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