

A close-up, artistic portrait of a woman with vibrant blue hair and striking yellow eyes. She is wearing bright red lipstick and has blue makeup on her eyelids. The image is a high-quality, professional photograph used as a book cover.

KIERA
HUDSON
Series One
by Tim O'Rourke

Kiera Hudson
(Complete Series One)

Vampire Shift (Book 1)

Vampire Wake (Book 2)

Vampire Hunt (Book 3)

Vampire Breed (Book 4)

Wolf House (Book 5)

Vampire Hollows (Book 6)

By

Tim O'Rourke

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Vampire Shift

(Kiera Hudson Series One)

Book One

By

Tim O'Rourke

For Lynda who kept on at me to write this...

Chapter One

My name is Kiera Hudson. I'm twenty-years-old and employed by Havenshire Police as a police constable in the southwest of England. I have been a police officer for eighteen months. On completion of my initial training, I was posted to the coastal town of The Ragged Cove. I'd heard rumours that the post was a difficult one to fill. Although this posting wasn't forced upon me by my superiors, they did make me an attractive offer I found difficult to refuse. The terms of my posting to the town, The Ragged Cove, included free accommodation and an unsociable shift allowance of £5,000, paid in a lump sum annually.

When I told my fellow recruits I had accepted the offer, some of them laughed nervously, stating that the force paid the shift allowance annually as no one had lasted long enough in the post to collect it. My shift pattern was a constant series of nightshifts that started every night at 1900 hours and finished at 0700 hours the following morning. Looking back now, I can understand the raised eyebrows of my friends, but at the time, I didn't want to refuse the post. I thought if I did, I would be viewed as inflexible by

my superiors and I had ambitions way past the rank of constable. Like me, most of the other recruits were young, and knowing The Ragged Cove was pretty remote and miles from the nearest railway station or motorway, I suspected they were more concerned about their social lives than their future careers.

So, packing a suitcase, which consisted mainly of my smart new uniform, I set off in my tired, old Mini and headed from my rented room in Havensfield to the desolate town of The Ragged Cove. I remember that day clearly as I made my way by a series of deserted country lanes towards the town. A few miles out, the sky clouded over and it started to rain. The day almost seemed to turn to night, as the rain lashed against the windscreen of my car and the wipers had trouble keeping the screen clear. With my headlights on full beam, I cautiously navigated my way towards the town. Several times I had to pull over off the narrow roads and park up by the entrance to some field and check the map I'd been given by Sergeant Phillips at training school.

I knew the town was remote, but it was only as I tried to reach it that I realised how isolated from the outside world it really was. It seemed to me that The Ragged Cove didn't want to be found. Realising I was just spooking myself, I shook off any regrets I might have been having, and carried on through the rain and gloom.

In an attempt to lighten my spirits, I turned on the car radio, hoping to find something I could sing along to. I settled for *On The Floor* by Jennifer Lopez. The roads seemed to get narrower as I headed down towards the cove, which spread out below me like a giant horseshoe. Wiping the mist from the windscreen with the back of my hand, I could see the sea in the distance and it looked black and angry as it crashed against the cliffs. As I neared the town, the radio began to hiss and spit with static until I lost the signal completely. I made the rest of my journey in silence.

I reached the town just before five, but the sky was so dark that it seemed much later. Driving my car through the cobbled streets, I peered up at the tired-looking buildings that lined each side of the road. There was a row of shops which had been shut for the day, and the streets were so deserted, I wondered how they managed to stay in business. Sergeant Phillips said that a room had been rented for me above an Inn named “The Crescent Moon”, but I couldn’t seem to find it. Over and over again, I drove up and down the same streets, the wind and the rain hammering my little car. Then, just ahead, I saw a lone figure shuffling along the pavement ahead of me. I slowed the car, bringing it to a halt. The engine rattled and rain bounced off its red bonnet. Winding the window down, I peered through the gap and called out to the figure that walked stooped forward, a dark hood pulled up over its head.

“Excuse me,” I called out, my breath forming tiny clouds in the cold.

The hunched figure, stopped dead in its tracks, back still facing me.

I tried again. “Hello?”

Slowly, the figure turned on the spot, the hem of the long coat it wore trailing in the deep puddles that filled the cracked pavement. Two gleaming eyes stared at me from beneath the hood. I drew a sudden breath in surprise at the wizened looking face peering out of the shadows beneath the hood. It was difficult for me to guess the man’s age, as his face was a network of deep groves and wrinkles. His skin was white and fleshy where the wrinkles hung loose like sacks of skin beneath his eyes. The corners of his thin bloodless lips were twisted in what looked like a painful grimace. But even though his face looked worn and old, his eyes were sharp and keen, shining a brilliant blue from beneath his hood. He continued to stare at me and say nothing.

“I’m looking for a place called The Crescent Moon Inn,” I said, inching the window closed so only the smallest of gaps was left for me to speak through.

Still staring at me from beneath his hood, the stranger raised one gnarled finger and placed it against his cracked lips. “Shhh!” he almost

seemed to hiss. Then, lowering his head, he turned away and continued to shuffle forwards along the street, rain dripping from his hood.

I closed the window and from the safety of my car, I sat and watched the stranger until he had disappeared into the gloom ahead. Once I was sure he had gone, I started my car again and crept forward. I reached the end of the street, slowed and looked left and right. I couldn't see him in either direction. It was like he had vanished. Indicating right, I turned into yet another narrow, cobbled street, where the houses and shops stood crammed next to one another. It was then, I noticed that same hooded figure watching me from the darkness of a nearby shop doorway. Looking front, and goose flesh crawling over my skin, I sped up.

It was just before six when I noticed a small side street that I hadn't seen before. Turning into it, my car bounced and lurched over the cobbled road until in the distance, I could just make out the glow of a blue lamp attached to the front of a white-washed building. Any anxiety I had early felt disappeared upon seeing it. I knew I'd found the police station where I had been posted to. They would be able to point me in the right direction to my lodgings, and it would give me a chance to meet with some of my colleagues before I started my first nightshift the following evening.

Parking the car just outside, I pulled my jacket tight about my shoulders and ran towards the old, wooden door below the blue lamp.

Pushing against it, I stumbled into the station and out of the howling wind and driving rain. I must have looked a right sight, my black hair matted in dark, wet streaks to my forehead and cheeks, my face pale with the cold.

“Can I help you?” someone asked me.

Looking up, I could see a small front counter. Sitting behind it was a police officer. He had short, grey hair and was clean-shaven. He was about forty-years-old. He was dressed in his uniform and was sucking on an old-looking pipe, which pumped clouds of blue smoke into the air.

“Can I help you?” he asked again.

Straightening my hair and pulling it from my face, I smiled and said, “I’m Kiera.”

He looked back at me as if he didn’t have the slightest idea as to what I was talking about. Holding out my hand for him to shake, I stepped towards the front counter and said, “I’m Kiera Hudson. The new recruit?”

Again he looked at me as if I were speaking in a foreign language. Lowering my hand, I added, “Force headquarters sent me. I’m to be stationed here.”

Then with a sudden look of recognition on his face, he stood up and came towards me. It was then I noticed he wasn’t in full uniform at all, but was wearing a pair of jeans and carpet slippers. He appeared to lean to the right as he walked, as if he had a limp.

“Hudson,” he said, thumbing through some paperwork on the other side of the counter. “Hudson. Kiera. Oh, yes,” he said, plucking my file from beneath a mountain of paperwork. Then, looking back at me, he said, “You know you’re getting old when the new recruits look younger than your daughters.”

Noticing the three stripes on his shoulders, I asked, “Are you in charge here?”

Placing my file to one side, he smiled back at me and said, “Kind of, but not really. I’m Sergeant Murphy – ‘Murphy’ to my friends,” and thrust out his hand. Taking it, he pumped my arm up and down until I thought it might just fall off. “We do have Chief Inspector Rom, but we don’t see him much. He pops his head in from time to time and that’s the way we like it. Don’t want the boss nosing around,” he said, winking at me as he puffed on his pipe again.

Knocking the fringe from my eyes, I noticed Sergeant Murphy was wearing a small tiepin which was in the shape of a crucifix. I thought this was a little odd as we’d had it instilled in us at training school that we were only to wear police insignia on our uniforms – nothing else, especially not anything that was religious or might cause offense.

Sergeant Murphy saw me looking, and his fingers went straight to it. “I know what you’re thinking,” he said. “Straight from training school

where you've had your head crammed full of all the things you should and shouldn't do."

"No," I said, shaking my head, not wanting to offend my new sergeant in the first few moments of meeting him.

"Well, let me tell you something, little lady," he said leaning over the counter towards me, his voice dropping to a whisper. "This little cross here will offer you more protection than any can of CS spray, a baton, or a Taser. They don't mean diddly-shit in The Ragged Cove."

"Don't listen to the old fart," someone said from behind me.

Spinning round, I saw another police officer step into the station out of the rain. His raincoat dripped water all over the floor, and it ran from the brim of his helmet. Taking it from his head, he shook the rain off. Unlike Sergeant Murphy, this police officer was younger, no older than twenty-two. He had short, black wavy hair, green eyes, and a handsome face.

"I'm sorry?" I asked, taken aback by his sudden presence. His jaw line was sharp and square and he had such a deep cleft chin that it looked as if it had been made with a nail gun. Although he was clean-shaven, the lower half of his face was shadowed where black stubble hid just beneath the surface.

"I said, take no notice of the old fart," he smiled, looking over my shoulder at Sergeant Murphy.

“You show some respect,” Murphy said, but he didn’t sound angry, it was as if it were a joke he shared with this officer.

Taking off his black raincoat and draping it over the counter, he turned to me and said, “I’m Luke Bishop.” Then smiling, he added, “The one who does all the work around here.”

“You don’t know the meaning of the word,” Sergeant Murphy scoffed, going back to his seat where he propped his slippered feet up onto his desk and sucked on his pipe.

“So you must be Constable Hudson?” Luke asked.

“Kiera,” I replied, shaking his hand.

“Good to meet you,” Luke said, and I couldn’t help but notice that he held my gaze just a little too long – long enough to make me feel uncomfortable. Looking away, I noticed the sign above the counter that read:

It is against the law to smoke anywhere on these premises.

Then, looking over at my new sergeant with the pipe dangling from his mouth, he winked at me again and picked up some of the paperwork that littered his desk.

I was immediately struck by the lack of professionalism Sergeant Murphy showed, and it felt at odds with the almost military-style of policing instilled in me at training school.

“I thought you started your shift with us tomorrow night?” Luke said, cutting into my thoughts. “You’re a night early,” he smiled, and it was a smile that seemed to light up his whole face.

“I can’t find my digs,” I told him.

“Where are you staying?” he asked.

““The Crescent Moon Inn,”” I said, and I couldn’t help but notice the look that passed between Luke and Sergeant Murphy across the counter.

“Is there something wrong?” I asked.

Shaking his head, Luke said, “No, there’s nothing wrong. I’ll show you where it is.” Throwing on his overcoat again and grabbing his helmet, I followed Luke outside. As I swung the police station door closed behind me, I could just see the top of Murphy’s head on the other side of the counter.

“Welcome to the sleepy town of The Ragged Cove, Kiera Hudson. I’ll see you tomorrow night at seven for the start of your first vampire shift.”

Not knowing what he meant, I let the door swing shut and I stepped out into the rain again.

“Is this yours?” Luke asked, looking at my beat up old Mini. “Yeah, why?” I asked, feeling proud of my little red car.

“Nothing.” Luke grinned, going to the passenger side.

Opening my door, I got in. Throwing his helmet into the back, Luke wedged himself into the front seat. His legs were so long that his knees seemed to rest just beneath his chin. Smiling to myself, I put the car into gear and we rumbled off up the street.

We sat in silence, and I felt uncomfortable. “So where is this Inn?” I asked, trying to make conversation.

“It’s a mile or so up the road from here. Just take a right at the top,” he said.

“So what’s with the crucifix and all this stuff about starting my first ‘vampire shift’ tomorrow night?” I asked above the sound of the wipers as they squeaked back and forth in the rain.

“Oh, that’s just the sarge trying to be funny,” Luke said, staring straight ahead into the dark.

“I don’t think he was trying to be funny. It was as if he were trying to give me a warning,” I told him.

Glancing sideways at me, Luke said, “Look, some strange things have happened here in the last few years or so, that’s all.”

“What do you mean by *strange*?” I asked him, struggling to see in the dark.

“Well, apart from some of the new recruits that have been sent from headquarters going missing, we’ve also had our fair share of grave

desecrations and murders for such a small town,” Luke said, looking back into the night.

“What do you mean by *missing*?” I asked, feeling intrigued rather than scared.

“Well, they don’t show up for work. One day they’re here and the next they’re gone. Not even so much as a goodbye,” Luke explained.

“What, they ask to be posted someplace else?” I asked.

“No, they just go missing,” Luke said, and again he looked at me. “I guess they just leave the force altogether. Perhaps they realise that being a police officer isn’t like watching cops on the T.V. and they quit and go find something else to do.”

“But why?” I asked, slowing down to steer the car around a rather sharp bend in the road.

“Dunno – maybe they weren’t expecting so much paperwork,” he shrugged.

“But you can’t have that much paperwork out here,” I said. “It can’t be that busy.”

“You’re right,” he said. “We don’t have a burglary problem, robbery problem, or even that much antisocial behaviour. But like I said, we do have a murder problem, and they create mountains of paperwork.”

Speeding up again, I asked, “So how many murders are we talking about?”

“Well if you exclude the thirty or so people that have gone missing, as no one really knows what’s happened to them, we’ve had about twenty murders in the last three years or so.”

“*Twenty?*” I gasped, nearly crashing the car into a nearby hedgerow. “Some cities in the UK don’t even have that amount in five years – let alone a small little town like this!”

“They started slow at first,” he explained. “The first year we had three and a couple of disappearances. In the second year we had six murders – but this year they’ve escalated at a frightening rate.”

“Are they connected?” I asked, still reeling from what he had just told me.

“The M.O. is the same in each case, if that’s what you mean,” he said.

“So you have a serial killer in The Ragged Cove?” I asked him, not being able to comprehend what he was telling me. How my colleagues had been dumb enough to turn down a posting like this was beyond me. Some officers could wait a lifetime before they came anywhere close to even getting a whiff of a serial killer case and here I was right in the middle of one, just days out of training school.

“I don’t think it’s the work of a serial killer,” Luke said, glancing at me again.

“But you said the M.O. was the same in each murder,” I reminded him.

“It is the same,” he said, then added, “but there is more than one killer.”

Gripping the steering wheel so tight that my knuckles glowed white through the skin, I asked, “How can you be so sure?”

“There are always more than one set of prints at the scene and the...” he trailed off.

“And what?” I asked, almost ready to pee in my pants.

“Forensics say the tooth marks come from different sets of teeth,” he said.

“*Tooth marks?*” I almost screeched.

“Yeah, tooth marks,” Luke said in a grim tone. “At first we thought they were the tooth marks of an animal because -”

Luke was suddenly interrupted as the airwaves radio attached to his coat began to talk in the sound of Sergeant Murphy’s voice.

“Echo One to Echo Three, receiving?” and his voice came through, mixed with the sound of static.

Speaking into the radio, Luke said, “Go ahead, sarge – what you got?”

“I hate to be the one to tell you this,” Murphy’s voice crackled back over the radio, “but Farmer Moore reckons his dog has just come across the remains of the Blake kid who went missing a couple of days ago.”

Taking a deep breath, Luke seemed to gather himself together, then said into the radio, “Okay, sarge, I’ll make my way straight there.” Then looking at me he said, “Fancy starting your duties a night early?”

“You bet,” I told him, my stomach beginning to buzz with nerves and excitement.

“Okay then,” Luke smiled, “Welcome to your first vampire shift.”

Chapter Two

Luke directed me along a narrow coastal road, and above the sound of the rain and the wind, I could hear those black waves crashing into the cliffs below. At one point, a gust of wind took hold of my tiny car, and I felt the pull of the back wheels as they headed towards the cliff edge. Gasping out loud, I yanked on the wheel and straightened the car. Luke sat beside me and said nothing, his face white and drawn-looking.

As we cleared the coastal road, Luke pointed in the direction of a narrow track and I followed it. At the top, there was a gate which led into a field. Killing the engine but keeping the headlights on, we climbed from the car. Waiting at the gate for us was a short man with a curved back. He stooped forward and used a stick to support himself. He wore a cloth cap pulled so far down his face; it was difficult to see his eyes. Yapping about his heels was a black and white collie.

“Evening, Constable,” the man said.

“Good to see you, Moore,” Luke said, and the two men briefly shook hands. Moore glanced up at me from beneath the rim of his cap. His ancient face was specked with what looked like festering sores and a cluster of white whiskers covered his chin. Without taking his eyes off me, he said to Luke, “Who’s the girl?”

“This is Constable Hudson,” Luke said. “A new recruit, fresh out of the box.”

“I wonder how long she’ll last?” Moore asked, and as he spoke I could see that where once he’d had teeth, there were now a set of fleshly gums.

“Where’s the body?” Luke asked, pulling a torch from his utility belt and switching it on.

“Up beyond that treeline,” Moore said, waving his stick in the general direction of a crop of trees that lined his fields. “I’m warning you though, the kid don’t look pretty.”

Flashing his torch towards the trees, Luke said, “You wait here, Moore.” Then looking back at me, he said, “Ready?”

Pulling the collar of my jacket around my throat, I nodded. I didn’t know if I were ready or not. I’d seen dead bodies before during some cases I had investigated with the help of my friend and colleague Tom Henderson, while still at training school. But thankfully, I had never seen the dead body

of a child before. I pushed those memories of those previous mysteries and my friend Tom Henderson from my mind and followed Luke. We made our way across the fields towards the trees. The earth was sodden, and my trainers squelched in the mud. At one point, my foot got stuck and I thought I might just lose my shoe. Pulling me free, Luke took me by the arm and guided me across the field.

Stepping beneath the canopy of trees, the rain seemed to ease, trapped by the leaves above. Shining his torch on the ground ahead of us, Luke went deeper into the crop of trees. It was eerily quiet and I could hear the sound of my own heart thumping in my ears. Without warning, Luke dashed ahead, shouting over his shoulder, “Look – over here!”

I followed, and as I did, I could just make out the shape of something lying face-up in the damp undergrowth beneath the trees. From a distance it looked like a pile of rags, but as I got nearer, I could see that it was the body of a small boy. He was dressed in shorts and a T-shirt which had been ripped open down the front. Luke waved the torchlight up and down the body of the boy. His face looked white and bloated but it wasn't that which sickened me; it was the look of fear forever engraved upon his small face. I had never seen the look of such terror before, and I shivered at the thought of what his attacker must have looked like.

Bending down, Luke got onto all fours, and for a moment, blocked my view of the boy. He seemed to be examining him.

“It’s definitely Henry Blake,” Luke said.

“How can you be so sure?” I asked, hunkering down beside him.

“Had dealings with the boy before,” Luke said. “Nothing serious – just chucking stones and being a nuisance, that’s all.”

It was then, as I knelt beside Luke, that I saw the injuries to Henry Blake’s throat – or what was left of it. From just beneath his chin to his chest plate, the flesh was missing, ripped and torn away in jagged chunks.

Covering my mouth with my hands, I lurched to one side, desperate not to be sick on my first night and not in front of Luke.

“Are you okay?” Luke asked, looking at me. I could see the concern in his eyes.

“Sure,” I said, swallowing hard to push away the bile that was burning the back of my throat.

“If you need a moment...” Luke started and put his arm out to rub my back.

Knocking it away, I stood up and tried to regain my composure. “I reckon he died about three days ago,” I said, trying to sound like a police officer instead of some emotional wreck.

“How do you know that?” Luke asked me. And by the tone of his voice, he sounded as if what he really wanted to say was, “How would you know anything? You’ve only been a cop five minutes!”

“See those blisters,” I said, pointing to the yellowing bubbles on the boy’s arms and legs.

“What about them?” Luke asked.

“Notice how the body is swollen and bloated?” I asked him.

“So?” Luke came back at me.

“And that fluid which has leaked from his mouth, nose, and ears?”

“What are you trying to say?” Luke asked.

“They’re all things that happen to a body about three days after death,” I told him. “Although I could be a day out, it all depends on how warm the weather has been.”

“What’s that got to do with anything?” Luke asked, looking at me.

“The whole process of the body bloating like that can be sped up, depending on how hot the environment is,” I told him.

Smiling at me he said, “Where did you learn all that stuff?”

“My dad used to be a pathologist,” I told him.

“*Used to be?*” he asked.

“He died recently – cancer,” I said.

“Sorry to hear that.”

“Me too,” I said, looking down at the mutilated boy stretched out before us. “My dad was always telling me all kinds of weird stuff about bodies and things. It was kind of gruesome but it always fascinated me.”

“What else can you see, Sherlock?” Luke said, smiling.

Taking the torch from him, I cast light over the scene. “The boy was brought or carried here,” I said.

“How can you tell?” Luke asked with a frown.

“Look at his trainers,” I told him. “There’s no mud. If he walked here, there’d have to be mud, right?”

“I guess,” Luke said.

“But wait a minute,” I whispered, kneeling down again and checking the ground around the boy’s body. I traced the tips of my fingers over the earth and dead leaves then inspected the boy. “That doesn’t make sense,” I said.

“What doesn’t?” Luke asked, sounding confused.

“The boy was murdered here – look, you can see the ground is spattered with his blood.”

“So what’s the problem?”

“Apart from the boy, there were three others,” I told him. “All of them were adults. Two were male, the third was female. The first male was about six-foot-two, the second shorter, about five-ten. He smoked Marlboro

cigarettes, Lights in fact. But he came before the others. He had been waiting for them, I guess anywhere between one and two hours. The female was about five-six and had black hair which was dyed blonde.”

“Are you making all this shit up?” Luke asked from behind me. “You know, just because you’re new to the job, you don’t have to try and impress me.”

“Shhh,” I said, not taking my eyes off the ground. “But there’s something wrong.”

“What?” he started to sound impatient.

“They can’t all have been carried here,” I said, more to myself than him. “I can understand them carrying the victim here, but...”

“But what?” Luke hissed from behind me, and he sounded pissed off.

“Look, you can see the ground around the body is covered with footprints,” I said.

“Yeah, so?” Luke said, leaning over my shoulder.

“Well, there are no footprints leading to or from the body,” I told him.

“And your point is?” Luke asked.

“So how did the killers get here if they didn’t walk?” I said, sounding exasperated. “Did they fly?”

Then, before Luke or even I could answer my own question, there was the sound of people approaching us from the distance.

“Who’s there?” Luke called out, sounding spooked.

“It’s just me and Constable Potter.”

Aiming Luke’s torch in the direction of the voice, I could just make out two figures approaching us. As they drew nearer, I could see one of them was Sergeant Murphy by the way he stooped to the right and the other I guessed was Constable Potter. He was tall and lean, with black hair that was slicked back off his forehead. He looked slightly older than Luke and I guessed he was about twenty-four-years-old. Both Murphy and Potter had torches, the lights bouncing off the trees.

Reaching us, Sergeant Murphy leaned over the body of the boy and showered him with torch light. “Jesus wept!” he gasped, kissing the tiny crucifix pinned to his tie.

“It looks like we’ve got ourselves another one,” Potter groaned, popping a cigarette between his lips and lighting it.

“I don’t think you should be smoking here,” I said before I could stop myself.

Raising an eyebrow with a cigarette dangling from the corner of his mouth, Constable Potter looked at me and said, “And you are?”

Before I could answer, Murphy had cut in and said, “This is Kiera Hudson, our new recruit.”

Drawing on the end of his cigarette, Potter smiled at me and asked, “Do you have a problem with me smoking?”

Meeting his stare, I said, “No, but I just don’t think you should be smoking here – after all it is a crime scene. At training school -”

“...they fill your head with shit,” Potter cut in. “This is the real world, sweetheart.”

I was just about to tell him that I wasn’t his sweetheart when Luke said, “Kiera says that there was three of them and that the boy has been here at least three days.”

I don’t think Luke said this to embarrass me, I think he really was impressed with what I had told him.

Blowing smoke out of his nostrils, Potter laughed and said, “Looks like we got a right little Miss Marple this time around.”

Eyeing Potter, Sergeant Murphy said, “Okay, Sean that’s enough. Let’s hear what the girl’s got to say.”

At first I didn’t say anything, fearing Potter would start ragging on me again. I know that I’d only just met him, but I already disliked the guy.

“Go on, Kiera, tell them what you told me,” Luke said, and he sounded supportive, like a good friend would.

“Go on, Hudson,” Sergeant Murphy urged. “You’re with friends here.”

So, pointing the torch back at the body of Henry Blake, I crouched down and started to point out the footprints, blisters, and fluid which had come from the boy’s mouth, nose, and ears. Before I’d finished, Potter had started to spray laughter into the darkness.

“What a bunch of horseshit!” he cried. “I don’t know what they’ve been teaching you at training school but whatever it is, you ain’t in no episode of *CSI*.”

Standing, I looked at Luke and felt embarrassed, wishing I hadn’t said anything.

When Potter had stopped laughing, he flicked his cigarette away into a nearby bush and Sergeant Murphy stepped towards me.

“I admire your enthusiasm, Kiera, but Sean is right, this ain’t no T.V. program, this is real life. Being a police officer in the real world ain’t like what you’ve been watching on T.V.”

Although Murphy was trying to comfort me, I couldn’t help but feel he was patronising me.

“I haven’t been watching -” I started.

“Kiera, this is a well-walked route by hikers and ramblers. Those footprints could have been left here by anyone. So what if there aren’t any

tracks leading to and from the murder scene? As far as we know, it could have been a really hot day and the earth could've been as dry as a bone."

I wanted to tell him that in the cool shade of the trees, it was very unlikely that the ground would've been rock-hard, but I knew there was little point. He didn't want some newbie coming into his town and telling him how to do his job. So, however much it pained me, I kept quiet.

I was damp from the rain and cold. Not being able to hide my shivers any longer, Luke approached me, and wrapping an arm about my shoulders, he said, "C'mon, let me get you to your room."

Without any resistance, I let Luke guide me away from the mutilated body of the boy. As I went, I looked back to see Potter lighting up another cigarette. Looking at me, he smiled and blew a cloud of smoke up into the night. I watched the smoke rise upwards, and as it dispersed, I noticed something. Aiming Luke's torch up into the trees, I could see the branches above the boy were snapped and broken as if someone or something had crashed through them.

Turning away, I let Luke lead me to my car. Ten minutes later, I was pulling up outside the Crescent Moon Inn.

"Is this it?" I asked, looking out of the window at the weary-looking building. It almost seemed to lean to the right, as if at any moment it was going to topple over. The roof was thatched and the windows were lattice in

design. Wild ivy climbed over the front of the Inn and up across the roof like a giant, green claw. The windows glowed orange from within and a sign which read *The Crescent Moon Inn* wailed back and forth in the wind.

Swinging open the passenger door, Luke went to climb out, but then stopped. Looking back at me he said, “You weren’t making that stuff up back there, were you?”

“No,” I replied.

“So how did you figure it all out?” he asked, staring at me again and making me feel uncomfortable. “How did you know how tall the killers were, the fact that one of them had arrived before the others, his brand of cigarettes, and that the female had black hair which she had dyed blonde? You musta been guessing some of that.”

“I wasn’t guessing,” I told him.

“What then? Are you some kind of psychic?” and he half-laughed.

“It doesn’t matter,” I told him, climbing from the car.

Putting his helmet onto his head and pulling the collar of his police coat up about his neck, he said, “So long, Kiera Hudson. I’ll see you tomorrow night at seven.”

Then turning towards the Inn, just wanting to get out of the rain, I head towards the door, then stopped. Seeing as I now knew where the Inn was, I should really have offered Luke a lift back to the police station. But

as I turned back towards him, I was surprised to see that he had already gone.

Chapter Three

Carrying what little belongings I'd brought with me, I went into the Inn. A crescent-shaped bar stood along the far wall. The Inn wasn't very busy, and those huddled around the small fire and the tables fell into a hushed silence and looked at me. As I crossed the floor to the bar, I could feel their eyes on me. It was so quiet I could hear the wood snapping and crackling as it burnt in the fireplace. I looked across at it and noticed that someone had engraved a five-pointed star into the plaster above the fireplace. Then, in the far corner, I noticed a figure. He sat alone at a table which was lit with a candle and he warmed a glass of whiskey in his hand. The male had a hood pulled so low over his head that it concealed his face. Although I couldn't see his eyes, I knew he was watching me. At first I thought that perhaps it was the old stranger I had first seen on arriving in The Ragged Cove, but his hands were free of wrinkles and the fingers were long and straight, not gnarled and crooked like a bunch of broken twigs.

Trying not to make eye contact with those gathered in the Inn, I reached the bar. I had never felt so uncomfortable in my life, and I wondered why Sergeant Phillips had decided to rent me a room in such a godforsaken place. When I thought I couldn't bear their stares any longer and was just about to pick up my case and run from the place, an elderly woman appeared from a small office behind the bar. White lengths of wispy hair protruded from her head, and her face was haggard and lined with deep, ragged wrinkles. She looked like a corpse that had been warmed up.

"Can I help you?" she asked, her voice sounding weak and broken.

"I have a room booked..." I started.

"Name?" the old woman asked, thumbing through a dusty ledger behind the bar.

"Hudson," I said. "Kiera Hudson."

The woman sniffed, and taking a key from a series of hooks on the wall behind her, she placed it on the bar and said, "Room number two."

Taking the key, I said, "Thank -"

"Top of the stairs and turn right," the old woman cut over me.

"Breakfast is between six and seven, and dinner between eight and ten."

Looking at my wristwatch, I could see it had just gone ten. "I don't suppose there's any chance of something to eat?" I asked her.

“Dinner is between eight and ten,” she repeated without looking up at me.

“I know, but it’s only just a couple of minutes past, so I was wondering -” I began.

“Between eight and ten,” the old woman said again, but this time she looked up at me. Her eyes were milky-coloured and clouded with cataracts.

Shrugging my shoulders as if I didn’t really care, I picked up my case and as I did, I noticed something rather odd. All the way along the old oak beams that supported the bar, someone had tied reams of garlic bulbs. There were hundreds – no thousands of them. As I looked up, I could see they hung from the ceiling, the back of the Inn door and walls.

“What’s with the garlic?” I asked, turning towards the old woman, but she had disappeared back into her tiny office. Turning my back on all those watchful eyes, I made my way up the stairs to my room. Holding onto my case, I fumbled with the key as I slipped it into the lock. Hearing it click, I pushed the door open and shut it behind me. The room was in darkness, so I ran my fingers blindly along the wall in search of the light switch. Finding it, I flipped it on, and the room lit up with a dim bulb that hung from the centre of the ceiling. I looked around my new home and

understood why none of the other recruits had stayed a full year in this place.

There was a narrow bed wedged in the far corner, an old fashioned-looking wardrobe, and a desk with a lamp. The carpet looked threadbare, and the walls were a dingy, grey colour. There was a small bathroom, which had a toilet and bath. I didn't know how much headquarters was paying the old woman downstairs, but whatever it was, they were being ripped off.

Placing my case onto the bed, I went to the bathroom and ran myself a bath. While it was running, I unpacked my stuff and hung it in the wardrobe. When I was all fixed up, I got undressed and climbed into the hot water. Closing my eyes, I leant my head back against the rim of the bath. I thought about everything that had happened since arriving at The Ragged Cove and my mind soon wandered to Luke Bishop. Out of everyone I had met so far, he seemed the nicest. He had a kind and honest way about him, and I was grateful he took my side over that of Potter, who seemed like a real prick. Loved himself, too, by the way he was acting all cocky. Sergeant Murphy, I was still to make up my mind about. He seemed set in his ways and I guessed he didn't want some young cop coming in and telling him how to run things. But I wasn't trying to do that. I didn't care that he wanted to lounge around the police station all night in his slippers, smoking a pipe. But what did trouble me was his apparent disregard for properly

investigating a crime scene, and not any old crime scene. That was the murder of an eight-year-old child and he was letting that idiot Potter smoke and trample all over it.

If only they'd taken the time to study it, they would have *seen* the things that I had. It wasn't magic – the clues were there if you looked for them. I'd always been like that. My father had called it my 'gift' – but it wasn't really – I just had a knack of noticing things that others seemed unable to see. I saw stuff that other people missed. But it wasn't magic and it wasn't a 'gift', I called it 'seeing'.

But what about Luke? What could I see about him? Nothing. He was like a blank sheet of paper. Apart from his obvious good looks and incredible smile, it was the fact that he was a mystery that I found so attractive. I felt a sudden pang of guilt as I thought of my friend Tom Henderson. Friend? More than a friend? That was over now. It had to be. It was the best thing for both of us. But it hurt to think of him and what he might be doing right now. Was he thinking of me too? Or had he met someone new? A small part of me hoped that he had. I just wanted Tom to be happy and I knew he wanted the same for me too. But for now we had to stay apart. Perhaps one day – in a different time and place – we might be together again. But I was just torturing myself even thinking like that. So, sinking beneath the hot water, I let images of the Blake boy lying dead with

his throat ripped out, ripple across the front of my mind as I concentrated on the crime I had been presented with. There were two things that troubled me. My father had often told me that you could tell a lot from a crime scene by the pattern of blood left behind. But that was the problem – there was very little blood for such a gaping wound. The brachiocephalic artery had been ripped apart and I remembered my father telling me once how he had worked on a murder where the victim had had their throat cut. Their life blood had pumped away through the wound in that particular artery.

How then had there been so little blood at the murder scene of the Blake boy? Where had all the blood gone? It was almost as if it had been siphoned off, and what about the lack of footprints leading to and from the scene? I didn't buy Murphy's theory about the ground being too dry for any prints to be left. If prints could be lifted from carpets and lino floors, they could be seen in earth – how ever dry. But how had the killers gotten to the scene? The only clue was the hole made in the trees above, where the branches had been broken and smashed. It was almost as if someone or something had entered the crime scene from above. But that would be impossible, right?

As I tried to examine these theories inside my head, I was startled by the sound of someone outside my bedroom door. Leaping from the bath, I wrapped a towel around me and went into the bedroom. Tiptoeing to the

door, I listened to the rustling sound. Screwing up my eyes, I could see a shadow fleeting back and forth in the gap beneath my door.

Reaching out for the key I'd left in the lock, I called out, "Who's there?"

There was silence.

"What do you want?"

Then I heard the sound of footsteps rushing away. Holding the towel tight about me, I yanked open the door and peered along the landing. And as I did, I caught the last fleeting glimpse of a shadow disappearing down the stairs. My instincts told me to run after them to find out who it had been. But with nothing on except the bath towel, I reluctantly stepped back into my room, and as I did, I noticed a small white envelope tacked to the door.

I removed it and went back inside. Across the front of the envelope someone had scribbled 'Kiera'. I sat on my bed, and as I opened it, a small silver crucifix fell out into my hand. Placing it on the desk beside my bed, I went back to the envelope. My heart skipped a beat, as I could see from looking at it, that the person I'd seen sitting in the bar with their face hidden behind the hood, was the person responsible for leaving me the crucifix.

Chapter Four

I woke early, just before six. I didn't want to miss breakfast like I'd missed dinner the night before. The owner of the Inn seemed particularly strict on the rules surrounding meal times.

As I pulled on a sweatshirt, jogging bottoms, and trainers, my stomach groaned. It was then I realised I hadn't eaten anything since before leaving my home in Havensfield the day before. As I made my way down to the dining area, I switched on my mobile phone. I scrolled through my contact list, until I came across 'Sergeant Phillips'. I pressed the call button, but all I got back was an unobtainable tone. As I reached the dining area, I noticed the signal bar on my phone was red, indicating that it was unable to find a signal.

Putting the phone in my pocket, I was frustrated that I couldn't get hold of Phillips. I wanted to ask if he could find me some better accommodation. The old woman I'd spoken with the night before trundled

over to my table which had been laid with a bowl, plate, and a mug. Apart from me, the small eating area was deserted.

“Tea or coffee?” the old woman croaked, not looking up from a small pad she held in her liver-spotted hands.

“Good morning,” I smiled, hoping to get off on a better footing with her than I had the night before.

“Tea or coffee?” the woman asked again, and her eyes met mine with her glazed stare.

“Coffee, please,” I told her, trying to keep my smile.

“Bacon and eggs?” the woman asked, the pen poised over her note pad.

“Just toast please.” Although I was hungry, I wanted to go for a run and I didn’t want to be bloated out with a stomach full of greasy bacon and eggs.

“Toast,” the woman said, turning away and shuffling towards the kitchen. The dining area, like the bar, was decorated with cloves of garlic, but with one difference. Along the far wall was a small coffee table which was covered with a white lace cloth. On top were an arrangement of crucifixes and small bottles of water. Someone had written the words ‘Holy Water’ across each bottle with a black marker pen.

Smiling to myself, as I wasn't superstitious at all, I got up from my seat and crossed over to the table. The crucifixes were identical to the one that had been left for me the night before. Picking up one of the tiny bottles of water, I heard the old woman speak to me as she shuffled towards my table with a plate of toast.

"They're for sale, if you want one." she said, placing the plate on the table.

Putting the little bottle of holy water back with the others, I crossed back to my table and sat down.

"Why would I want to buy a bottle of holy water?" I asked her, and took a bite of the toast.

"For protection," she said, pouring a cup of coffee.

"Protection from what?" I asked, half-smiling.

Glancing back over her shoulder as if she were scared someone might be eavesdropping, she leant in towards me and whispered, "From the vampires," and her breath smelt stale and warm against my face.

Looking straight back at her, I said, "I don't believe in vampires."

"That's what the others said when I tried to warn them," she hushed, snatching another quick look over her shoulder.

"Who?" I asked, sipping my coffee.

“The other ones,” she sighed, starting to sound impatient. “The other police officers who came here before you.”

Looking into her milky-grey eyes I asked, “Do you know what happened to them?”

“They -” she started but was cut dead by a gruff-sounding voice from the other side of the room.

“That’s enough, mother!” the voice said, and I looked up to see a fat, balding man come waddling into the dining area. He wore a red chequered shirt with the sleeves rolled to the elbows and a white apron that was smeared with old food and drink. His cheeks were flushed red and his forehead glistened with sweat.

“The girl has a right to know!” the old woman barked at him.

“There’s nothing for her to *know*!” her son snapped back. Then, crossing towards the table with the bottles of holy water and crucifixes, he added, “And how many times have I told you to get rid of all this bloody nonsense?”

“You keep a civil tongue in your head, Roland!” the old woman hissed. “This is still my Inn – it ain’t yours yet.”

“But you’re scaring away all the customers,” he told her, his jowls wobbling.

“It ain’t me that’s scaring ‘em off,” she snapped at him. “It’s those things – those *creatures*!”

Roland saw me staring at both of them as they argued in front of me. With a fake smile stretched across his face, he wiped his meaty hands on his apron and came towards me saying, “I’m sorry about mother. Don’t be put off by what she says.”

Munching on the last of the toast, I smiled and said, “Don’t worry about me, I’m not easily spooked.”

Hearing this, the old woman hobbled towards me and leaning into my face she gasped, “You *will* be.”

Taking his mother by the arm, he escorted her from the room and back into the kitchen. Within moments, he had returned and came to clear away my empty plate and mug.

“So what is all this stuff about vampires?” I asked him.

“Just stories,” he said, without looking at me. “Okay, the town has had more than its fair share of strange goings on, but I don’t agree with all this scaremongering. It was good for business at first. People came from all over to visit the town, believing it to be infested with vampires. We did the Inn up as you can see, and we even did a roaring trade in those little crosses and bottles of water, but it was just a laugh, you know, to attract the tourists,” he told me.

“So what went wrong?” I asked him.

“More and more murders started to happen. People started to go missing and then there was the grave robbing,” he said, wringing his hands together.

“Grave robbing?”

“Yeah, but it was more than that,” he said, his voice dropping to a whisper. “The bodies of those poor murdered souls were being dug up and stolen.”

“By whom?” I asked him.

“Greedy freaks, that’s who,” he spat. “The whole thing just started to get out of hand. People were making a lot of money – me included – off the back of the rumours being spread about the vampires. But people got bored or scared of The Ragged Cove, and just stopped coming. The guest houses started to empty, the restaurants had no bookings, and then High Street became deserted. So the incidents just got more and more bizarre, and I reckon it was all down to some of the locals, hoping that they could entice people back by strange evil-doings and stories. Everybody likes a good scare, don’t they?”

“I guess,” I said. “But digging up the bodies of murder victims seems a bit extreme.”

“Not if you’ve got mouths to feed and a business to keep going,” he said. “Folk will do the strangest of things to survive.”

“But what about these murders?” I asked him, interested to see what his view was. Like me, he hadn’t been hooked on the whole vampire thing.

“Undoubtedly there is a murderer in our midst,” he said, and again his voice had dropped to a whisper. “But I reckon all this attention is just encouraging him, getting him all excited-like.”

I didn’t tell him about the three sets of tracks I had found by Henry Blake’s body. I let him continue to believe the murders were being committed by just the one killer.

“What do you mean ‘excited’?” I asked.

“These serial killers love all the attention they get from the media, don’t they,” he said more as a statement than a question. “Seen it on the T.V. I have. They love it when the newspapers give ‘em a name like ‘The Ripper’ or ‘The Black Panther’, makes ‘em feel all important like – when really, they’re nothing but scum,” he said.

“So do you have any ideas?” I asked him.

“About what?” he asked.

“Who this serial killer might be,” I said, staring at him.

Then, looking straight back at me, Roland said, “Shouldn’t I be the one asking you that question? After all, you’re the police officer, ain’t ya?”

Getting up from my seat, I said, "I'm working on it."

"You make sure you do, pretty lady, 'cos that sergeant of yours couldn't find his own arse with both hands and a flashlight," he said as I reached the door.

Looking back at him, I said, "I'm sure Sergeant Murphy is doing his best." But in my heart, I doubted he was.

Chapter Five

The morning was overcast and dreary, but at least the rain from the night before had stopped. I didn't know the area at all, and I thought I would spend the morning getting to know it. My first official nightshift started at seven, and I wanted to get a feel for the place and its people before I started policing it. If I were going to be successful in my new post, I would have to know my patch.

Heading back in the direction Luke had brought me the night before, I started a slow jog. There were no pavements and I had to keep to the side of the road. In some places, the undergrowth was so overgrown; I had to run further out into the road. It wasn't as if I were putting myself in danger, as the roads seemed deserted. Not one car or person had passed me in the last twenty minutes or so.

Slowing down, I looked left then right, trying to decide on which way to go. Then, looking over my shoulder in the direction I'd come, my stomach tightened and my heart sped up as I saw the hooded figure from

the previous night. He was cycling towards me, his face hidden by the same hoodie he'd worn before. Turning front again, I turned left, wondering if he would follow me. I hadn't gone very far when I glanced back again, and to my surprise I saw him turn onto the narrow road I had taken.

I tried to tell myself that perhaps it was just coincidence that he was cycling the same stretch of road I'd chosen to jog along. But who was I trying to kid? He was following me. After all, I knew it had been him who had left that crucifix tacked to my door. But why? Perhaps I should ask him?

Slowing to a standstill in the middle of the road, I turned around. With my hands on my hips, I faced the oncoming hooded cyclist. Seeing I had stopped running, he stopped cycling. There was a long moment that seemed to stretch out forever, as I stared at him while he stared back at me from beneath his hood.

Turning my back on him, I started to run again, this time picking up my speed. After a short time I looked back, only to find he had started cycling again towards me. I slowed and so did he, always careful to keep a good distance between us. What did this guy want? I wondered. And why wouldn't he show his face?

Again, I stopped running and turned to face him. As I suspected he would, the cyclist stopped and just sat and watched me.

“What do you want?” I called out, and my voice sounded echoey as it travelled across the empty fields on either side of the road. “How do you know my name?”

The hooded guy said nothing, but just sat on his bike and looked at me from beneath his hood. Then, without giving him any warning, I ran as fast as I could towards him. He turned his bike around in the road and pedalled as fast as he could away from me.

Knowing I could never catch him, I slowed, doubled-up gasping for breath. Once I had stopped, so did the cyclist ahead of me. Turning his bike again in the road, he sat and watched me.

Drawing in lungful’s of oxygen, I shouted as loud as I could, “Why did you leave me that crucifix?”

The cyclist, whoever he was, didn’t respond; he just sat motionless on his bike.

“I know it was you!” I yelled at him. Turning, I started to run again. Okay, I thought. If he wanted to play games, I could play along. Ahead there was a bend in the road, and running as fast as I could, I raced towards it. I rounded the bend and saw that it opened out into a wide, open area of wild grass and sand, which led down through the cliffs and towards the cove. Off to the right was an outcrop of rocks. Diving behind them, I lay flat against the ground. From my hiding place, I could hear the sea crashing

against the shore in the distance, and the sound of seagulls as they squawked overhead.

Peering around the rocks, I watched as the cyclist rode his bike onto the open area. He stopped, looking from left to right, his hood never moving, not offering the smallest glimpse of who was beneath it. After a few seconds, he rode forward and headed towards the rocks. As he drew nearer, I could see his hands were covered with gloves, and apart from the dark black hoodie, he wore blue jeans and trainers. There was a chill in the air, but I found it odd that he was so snugly wrapped up and wearing gloves. It was as if he didn't want to show any of his skin.

Squatting on all fours, I waited for him to draw level with the rocks. When he was almost on top of me, I sprang from my hiding place and made a desperate grab for his handlebars. I managed to get hold of one before he twisted them away and out of reach. Holding on as best I could, the bike wobbled and the cyclist steadied himself by slamming both of his feet down into the sand.

"Who are you?" I hollered at him, his head lowered so I couldn't see beneath his hood. "Tell me who you are!" I demanded.

Without so much as a murmur, he rolled the bike backwards, dragging me along with him. Losing my footing, I fell forward, letting go of the handlebar. As I went down, I caught my wrist on one of the bike pedals,

tearing the skin from my wrist. I cried out in pain, rolling into the sand, cradling my bleeding arm. Seeing he had cast me loose, he pedalled as fast and as hard as he could away from me and back down the narrow lane towards the cove.

“Come back!” I yelled after him, but he was soon gone, disappearing amongst the rocks and cliffs. I rolled onto my back and gripped my bleeding wrist in an attempt to stop the flow of blood. It oozed through my fingers in red, sticky rivulets, and for just the briefest of moments, I felt dizzy and the world seemed to turn black.

“Are you okay?” I heard someone say.

Opening my eyes, I looked up to see Luke standing over me, a concerned look etched across his face. “What happened?”

“I fell over,” I said, trying to get to my feet.

“Come here,” Luke said, offering me his hand to help me up. It was then he saw the blood flowing through my fingers and he almost seemed to flinch in horror.

“What’s wrong?” I asked, getting myself to my feet. Again, I couldn’t help but notice that he seemed unable to take his eyes off the blood which now ran up my wrist towards my forearm. The colour had drained from his face and he looked suddenly unwell.

“Are you okay?” I asked him as he took a step backwards.

Continuing to look at my bleeding wrist, Luke said, "I'm not very good around blood. It kind of makes me queasy."

"You're meant to be a cop," I winced in pain.

"I know, but I just don't like the sight of blood, that's all," he said, and again I noticed that he couldn't help but stare at the cut.

"Well don't just stand there," I said. "Give me a hand."

Shaking his head as if coming out of a trance, he said, "I'm sorry. Sure." He pulled his sweatshirt from over his head and wrapped it tightly around my arm. I noticed how careful he was not to get any of my blood on him.

"What are you doing out here?" I asked him as he knotted the sleeves of his sweatshirt around my arm like a makeshift bandage.

"I could ask the same of you," he said, eyeing me.

"I was taking a run," I told him. "That was, until I started to be followed."

"Followed?" he asked, sounding alarmed. "By who?"

"I don't know," I shrugged. "He had his face covered. But he left me a crucifix outside my room last night."

"A crucifix!" Luke said. "Why?"

"I don't know that either." I told him.

"Where is he now?"

“Cycled off down there after knocking me to the ground,” I said, pointing in the direction of the rugged path. “Where did you come from?”

“That way,” Luke replied, nodding in the direction I had been pointing.

“You must have passed him then,” I told him. “He was on a bike.”

Shaking his head, Luke said, “No one passed me on a bike.”

“Are you sure?” I asked, feeling confused.

“Sure,” he replied. “Now let’s get you back to the Inn, before you bleed to death.”

“You never said what you were doing way out here,” I reminded him.

“Oh,” Luke smiled, “I often drive out here, park up, and take in some of the sea views.”

“Where’s your car?”

“Over there, on a piece of flat,” he said, pointing beyond the rocks. “There’s a narrow road, but you can get a car up here if you’re careful.” Then he wrapped his arm around my shoulder and led me back down the path.

Chapter Six

Back at the Inn, I invited Luke up to my room. Luke closed the door behind us and sat on the chair by the desk as I went to the bathroom. I had no worries about inviting Luke into my room, even though he was pretty much a stranger to me. He was a cop just like me, so that had to count for something. Alone in the bathroom, I removed the makeshift bandage from my wrist. I pulled off my sweatshirt and ran my arm under the cold tap. The icy water made the cut sting and I winced in pain.

Luke appeared in the doorway. “Is everything all right?”

Seeing that I was standing there in my bra, the colour suddenly returned to his cheeks. Although he looked embarrassed walking in on me like that, he didn’t immediately turn away, but lingered in the doorway, looking at me. I didn’t move, either, although deep inside I knew that perhaps I should have. But something and I didn’t know what, kept me rooted to the spot. And for the longest seconds of my life we just stood and

looked at each other. Then slowly, I covered my chest with my good arm and said, “You couldn’t get me a fresh top from the wardrobe, could you?”

There was another pause as if it took a moment for my request to register with Luke. He looked away and almost collided with the doorframe. “Sure. Give me a minute.”

Placing my wrist back under the running water, I cleaned the cut with a piece of tissue paper. To my relief, I could see it wasn’t deep and thankfully wouldn’t need stitches.

“Here you go,” I heard Luke say.

I looked up to see his arm poking around the doorframe with a T-shirt hanging from his fist. This time around, he hadn’t barged straight in on me. I turned off the running water, patted the cut dry with the tissue, then snatched the T-shirt from him. Pulling it over my head, I went back into the bedroom to find him sitting in the chair by the desk.

“Are you okay?” he asked me.

“I’ll live,” I told him.

“I’m glad,” he said, and flashed me one of his smiles.

Taking some plasters I had buried at the bottom of my make-up bag, I covered the cut. When I had finished, Luke asked, “Had you seen the guy on the bike before?”

“Last night, in the bar downstairs,” I told him.

“Then again leaving the crucifix outside your room?” he asked.

“No, I didn’t see him do that,” I said.

“Then how did you know it was him who left it?”

Pointing to the envelope on the desk, I said, “That was the envelope he left. Look at it. What can you see?”

Picking up the envelope, Luke turned it over in his hands. After several moments, he looked at me and said, “It’s got your name on the front.”

“But what else can you see?” I pushed him.

With a blank expression on his face, he said, “Nothing.”

“Give it to me,” I demanded, holding out my hand.

Coming to sit next to me on the bed, Luke handed me the envelope. “The guy I saw in the Inn last night was wearing a hoodie and he wore it in such a way as to mask his face,” I told him.

“So if you didn’t see his face, how do you know it was him?” Luke asked.

“I’m getting to that,” I said. “The guy in the hoodie was sitting at a table in the corner. He was sitting away from the rest of the other people in the bar. The corner of the room was dark and I noticed there was a candle on the table. He was holding a glass of whiskey in his left hand.”

“So?” Luke said.

“Well take a closer look at the envelope,” I told him, holding it up.

“The writing on the front has been written by a man. See the way the writing leans to the right? That suggests it has been written by a left-handed person.”

“But that still doesn’t mean...” Luke started and leaned in closer to me.

“Now look here and here,” I said, pointing to the top right-hand corner of the envelope. “See those spots of wax? He used the candle so he could see to write my name on the front, and in doing so, some of the wax spattered onto the envelope. I had dealt with something similar before while still at training school. It was just a few drops of wax that helped me and my friend Tom catch...”

“But...” Luke tried again.

“Then there’s this,” I said, lifting the flap of the envelope and running the seal against the tip of my nose. “The unmistakable smell of whiskey. The man probably took a swig to moisten his tongue to seal the envelope securely.”

“And the crucifix?” Luke asked, sounding somewhat in awe.

“Easy-peasy,” I smiled. “They sell them in the bar.”

“But...” Luke mumbled.

“I know, it’s all subjective, but I was convinced I was right after my tussle with the man on his bike this morning,” I said.

“But how?”

“As I gripped his handlebars, again I noticed several spots of white wax on the sleeve of his black-coloured hoodie. You would’ve had to been blind not to have seen them.” Then, looking Luke straight in the eye, I added, “I know this town is somewhat remote but they do have such a thing as electricity. It seems doubtful, then, that he would have got the wax on his sleeve anywhere other than the bar downstairs.”

Luke sat in silence for a moment, then said, “That’s brilliant, Kiera. That was bloody awesome!”

Blushing, I said, “See, I told you it wasn’t magic. It’s just that I have this ability of *seeing* things that other people don’t.”

“Is that how you knew so much about what had happened at the crime scene in the woods last night?” Luke asked.

“Yes,” I said.

“I still reckon you guessed some of it!”

“I never guess,” I told him.

“But how did you know how many killers there were? How did you know what sex they were, the fact that one had arrived before the others and

had waited more than an hour for them? And that one of them dyed their hair?” Luke asked, never taking his eyes from mine.

Breaking his stare I explained. “Firstly, there were three different sets of footprints around the body. Two sets were too big to have belonged to females. The third set was much smaller. Too big to be a child’s, and too small to be a man’s. So that only left a female. By the size of the gait between each footstep, I could roughly work out each person’s height. One of the males, the one that was about five-foot-ten tall, was the smoker. His footprints were clearly visible by the tree next to the body of the dead boy. Several cigarette butts, Marlboro in brand, had been ground out by the base of the tree by the same boot that left the footprints, which meant they could have only been left by him and not anyone else. The fact that there were several, suggests that he waited some time for the others, and while he did, he smoked to pass the time. Depending on how heavy a smoker he is, depends on how long he waited there. Let’s say he smoked four to five in an hour, then he waited about an hour and a half, but no more than two.

“Wrapped around one of the boy’s fingers was a long, blonde hair. It could have come from the head of a male, but after quickly examining it in the torchlight, I could see that the first half inch of the hair leading from the root was black. Therefore, the hair would more than likely have come from

the female. It's not often that a male would have dyed his hair peroxide blonde. And that's about it," I finished.

"That's about it?" Luke whistled through his teeth. "You noticed all of that in the short space of time you were there?"

"It just happens," I told him. "I just *see* stuff."

"That's spooky," Luke said.

"No, it's good police work," I smiled. "I haven't told you anything that forensics wouldn't find."

"Forensics," Luke said, and his voice sounded kind of flat.

"I know this town is like at the end of the Earth, but you must have forensic officers?" I asked him.

"Yeah, we do have a forensic officer," he said, sounding as if he were trying to hide something from me.

"Who?" I asked.

"Potter," he said, looking away as if he were ashamed.

"That cretin?" I exclaimed. "He couldn't find his way out of an elevator!"

"He's been on a course and everything," Luke tried to assure me.

"A course?" I said in disbelief. "No wonder the killers haven't been caught if he's responsible for examining the crime scenes."

“He seems to do a thorough job,” Luke tried to assure me. “I’ve seen him gathering up evidence and bagging and tagging it for SOCO to examine.”

“You have scenes of crime officers posted out here?” I asked, hoping that he would say yes.

“No,” he said. “But Potter puts the stuff in the freezer back at the station and they either collect it, or he sends it to them via the post.”

“And what have been the results so far?” I asked him.

“Not much I guess, or we would have the killers locked up by now,” Luke said.

“What about those teeth marks you told me about?”

“We’re not even sure what type of creature they belong to. The teeth don’t appear to be that of a human, more like some kind of wild dog,” Luke said.

“There wasn’t any dog or any other type of wild animal involved in the death of Henry Blake,” I insisted.

“But even with your great powers of observation,” Luke said, “you still don’t know how the killers got to and from the crime scene?”

He looked at me and I pictured the broken branches in the trees above the boy’s mutilated body.

“Well?” he asked, sounding impatient.

“I don’t know,” I admitted, the only possibility left after examining the scene was that the killers had entered the scene from above. But I didn’t want to say that – because it would have been impossible.

“Look, Kiera, we’ve lived with these murders for the last few years. And yeah, we might not be super-cops from headquarters, but we’ve done our best with the limited resources that we have,” he said, getting up from the edge of the bed.

Holding out my good hand towards him, I said, “Luke, I wasn’t trying to knock you or your team – it’s just...”

“Just what?” he asked. “None of us are as switched on as you? Is that it?”

I shook my head and looked away from him.

“You’ve been in The Ragged Cove five minutes and you think you know this case better than us,” he said. “Well let me tell you something for nothing, this ain’t a normal town and the murders ain’t normal either. Whoever or *whatever* is carrying out these killings will be caught. One way or another, we’ll catch them.”

“I’m sorry,” I said. “I didn’t mean to offend anyone.”

“Just take some time to get to know this town and its people before you go jumping to any conclusions,” he suggested, and his voice had

softened. Then, coming towards me, he took my hand in his. His skin felt cold. Then just like he had in the bathroom, he stared at me.

“I hope you last longer than the other recruits they sent.”

“Why?” I asked, looking into his pale green eyes.

“Cos’ I like having you around,” he smiled. Luke let my fingers slip from his and then headed towards the door.

“Is that the only reason?” I found myself asking him. And I wasn’t sure why I was bothered if he wanted me to stay in The Ragged Cove or not.

“And you seem like a pretty good cop,” he said, turning to look at me.

“Just *good*?” I grinned back.

“If you really want to impress me,” he said, “tell me the name of the hooded guy who’s been following you and then explain how those killers got to and from that crime scene. Do that and you won’t just be good – you’ll be amazing!” Snatching up his sweatshirt which was covered in my blood, he left the room, closing the door behind him.

I went to the window and looked out. After a few moments, he appeared below and made his way to his car. Unaware that I was watching him, he climbed into the front seat. Then he did something so strange and

unexpected, I gasped aloud. Taking the sweatshirt, he raised it to his face and sniffed the bloodstains left on it.

Starting the engine of his car, he sped off down the country lane and disappeared from view.

Chapter Seven

I slept to just before six, and when I woke, my room was in darkness. Still wearing my jogging bottoms and T-shirt, I remembered crashing out on my bed after Luke had left earlier. I'd only intended to doze but was grateful that I'd slept well, as I had my first nightshift starting in just over an hour.

Crossing to the window, I looked out at the cold December evening and could see that it was raining again. *Didn't it ever stop raining in this town?* I wondered. After a quick bath, I got dressed into my uniform and went downstairs. Before leaving my room, I snatched up the tiny silver crucifix and stuffed it into my shirt pocket. *For luck*, I thought to myself. As soon as I stepped onto the landing, I could smell roast beef wafting up from downstairs. The smell of it made my stomach somersault with hunger, but I didn't have time to stop and eat, I'd have to grab something later while out on patrol.

As I made my way down the stairs, I pulled my mobile phone from my pocket. The signal bar was still glowing red, telling me there was no reception. I was still keen to contact Sergeant Phillips – if nothing more than to update him to how I was settling in. As I passed through the bar area, the old woman was shuffling back and forth behind it.

“Do you have a phone I could use?” I asked her.

“Phone?” she said.

“Yeah, I need to make a call and don’t seem to be able to get a signal on my mobile,” I told her.

“Sure we have a phone,” the old woman said.

“Do you think I could you use it please?”

“You could if it worked,” she said, eyeing me with her glazed stare.

“What’s that supposed to mean?” I asked her. “Is the phone broken?”

“Not broken,” she cackled. “This god-darn weather we’ve been having has brought down all the lines in the area. God only knows why we even bother to pay for line rental in these parts. They’re always coming down.”

Looking into her watery eyes, I said, “Not to worry, I’ll use the phone at the station.”

“Good luck, dear,” she half-smiled as I turned away.

Throwing my hat and utility belt onto the passenger seat, I made the drive to the police station. As it had the night before, rain and wind lashed against my tiny car and I gripped the wheel, hoping I could keep it on the road. Leaning forward, I switched on the radio and was met with the deafening sound of static. Switching it off, I sat back in the seat and began to feel that the world outside The Ragged Cove was fast disappearing.

Parking my Mini outside the station, I grabbed my kit and hurried inside. Sergeant Murphy was sat as I'd found him the night before, slippered feet propped up on his desk, pipe dangling from the corner of his mouth. Potter was on the other side of the desk and was filling out some paperwork, a cigarette smouldering away in an ashtray in front of him. Again, I looked at the *No Smoking* sign fastened to the wall. Potter caught me looking at it and he just grinned at me.

The door leading from the front office opened and Luke stood on the other side of it.

"Evening, Kiera," he smiled.

"Hello, Luke," I said, and thought of how I'd seen him sniffing the sweatshirt with my blood on it.

"You okay?" he asked me.

"Sure," I said.

"It's just that you look a bit apprehensive," he said.

“First night nerves,” I smiled back.

“You’ve got nothing to be nervous about,” Sergeant Murphy said.

“We’re one big family here.”

“I’ll show her where everything is,” Luke said.

“No, Potter can show Kiera around,” Murphy suddenly said. “I’ve got a report that has just come in that I need to discuss with you.”

With a cigarette smouldering from the corner of his mouth, Potter pushed his chair back from the table and stood up. I wasn’t overjoyed at the thought of having to spend any time with Potter, but then again, was he any worse than Luke? Luke seemed friendly and easier going, but then again I thought I’d caught him smelling my blood on his sweatshirt earlier that day. With something close to a scowl on his face, Potter hooked his thumb in the direction of a door set into the far wall of the outer office.

Leading me into a narrow corridor, cigarette smoke trailing back over his shoulder, Potter pointed out the female bathroom and locker room, the mess room, and exhibits store. At the end of the corridor was a secured cabinet. Taking a key from his pocket, Potter said, “You’ll need one of these.”

He took one of my hands in his, and pressed the key into my palm. His touch was ice cold, like he had just pulled his hand from beneath a stream of cold running water.

I pulled my hand quickly away at his touch. A grin formed at the corner of his lips and his dark eyes shone mischievously. I closed my fist around the key and broke his stare.

“The key will open the cabinet where we store the CS spray and Taser,” Potter told me. “Yours are marked with the number four.”

“What’s under there?” I asked him, pointing to a hatch in the floor of the corridor. It had been secured with a large padlock.

Potter dropped the cigarette end to the floor and squashed it flat with the sole of his boot. He lit another almost at once. “You don’t need to worry about what’s down there,” he said in a patronising tone. “That’s just the basement. It’s full of old office furniture and stuff – just crap,”

Taking me by the arm, and steering me away from the hatch in the floor, he led me further down the corridor. I pushed his hand away. From the corner of my eye, I saw him smile to himself, as if he were part of some private joke but only he knew the punch line.

At the end of the stone corridor was a metal gate. Unlocking it, Potter swung it open and said, “This is the cell area. There are only three cells. We don’t have much use for them. But they do come in handy from time to time.”

Switching off the light, he swung the gate shut. “Get your stuff together and I’ll take you out on patrol,” he said.

“But I thought I was going out on patrol with Luke...” I started.

“Looks like our first night will be a busy one,” someone said over my shoulder.

I glanced around to find Luke standing behind me. Grateful that he had saved me from having to spend any more time with Potter, I said, “How come?”

“Sergeant Murphy has just informed me that Father Taylor, the priest up at St. Mary’s, has reported that another grave has been desecrated,” he told me.

“Who’s grave?” I asked him.

“The grave is that of a fifteen-year-old girl who was killed a month or so ago. Her name was Kristy Hall,” Luke said.

“How did she die?” I asked, already guessing his answer.

“Like the others – throat ripped out,” he said, turning away. “I’ll see you outside in five.”

Drawing my equipment from the secured cabinet, I couldn’t help but feel Potter’s eyes boring into me as he stood smoking and watching me take a radio that had been charging in the office. Trying my best to ignore him, I put on my police jacket. The guy made me feel uncomfortable.

Looking up from his paperwork, Sergeant Murphy said, “All set, Constable Hudson?”

“I guess,” I said, fastening my jacket.

“You be careful out there,” Potter smirked, sucking on the end of his cigarette.

“Don’t take any notice of him,” Murphy said. “I’m sure Bishop will take good care of you. He’s a good lad. Bit naive, but a good lad.”

“Taking you up to the graveyard, is he?” Potter grinned.

“That’s right,” I said.

“Keep an eye out for the vampires,” he said, and again that cheesy grin of his spread right across his face.

“Vampires?” I asked, as if I had no idea of the stories I’d already been told.

“Haven’t you heard?” Potter said with mock surprise.

“Heard what?” I said, acting dumb.

“Put a sock in it,” Murphy told Potter. Then, turning to face me, he added, “Just be careful, Kiera, and you’ll be fine.”

I turned my back on them and left the station. Luke was waiting outside in a marked police car. I yanked open the passenger door and jumped inside, throwing my cap onto the back seat.

“Good?” Luke asked.

“Oh yeah,” I said, glad to be back in my uniform and raring to go.

“Let’s get going then,” Luke smiled back at me as we sped into the night towards the graveyard at St. Mary’s Church.

We drove in silence and I couldn’t help but think back to how I’d seen him smell the bloodstains on his sweatshirt. So to break the uncomfortable silence and to find out a little more about him, I said, “So what’s your story?”

“You tell me,” he said, looking straight ahead. “You’re the super sleuth,” and I caught him smiling.

“That’s the problem,” I said. “You don’t give much away.”

“Work your magic,” he said over the sound of the wiper blades.

“You’re not married,” I told him. “You don’t have a girlfriend and you live alone.”

“How can you be so sure?”

“No wedding ring for starters,” I smiled.

“But I could live with a girlfriend,” he said back.

“No, I don’t think so.”

“What makes you so sure?”

“You use cheap smelling soap and no aftershave, so you’re not trying to impress anyone. You hurriedly ate a fried egg sandwich before you left for work tonight, which suggests that you can’t cook and there isn’t anyone cooking for you, so therefore you live alone. The sweatshirt you

lent me today hasn't been washed since you last had a haircut, which I'm guessing was about four weeks ago by its current length. Again this suggests you're a typical bloke fending for himself and only having to do a wash when you really need to. You haven't had a female in your car – apart from me – in the last six months. So everything added together, tells me that you're single and you live alone," I told him.

Luke smiled at me and said, "Very good. I can see now how you figured some of it out. But how did you know what I had for my dinner, that I hadn't washed my sweatshirt since my last haircut, and the fact that I haven't had a female in my car for over six months? Sadly, it's been a lot longer than that, but how did you know?"

Looking out of the passenger window and into the dark, I smiled to myself and said, "You have ketchup and egg on your tie and some down the front of your trousers, which wasn't there last night. When you lent me your sweatshirt earlier, I noticed that around the neck there were hair clippings, which tells me that you were wearing it the last time you went to the barber and as the hairs are still there, you couldn't have washed it. As for the car thing? There is an oily-black thumb print on the vanity mirror in your car, probably left by the mechanic who last serviced it. If you'd had a woman in there, she would've wiped it off so as to check her make-up from time to time. In the foot well of your car, along with a load of other rubbish, I

noticed a receipt from the garage where you last had the car serviced, which was dated six months ago.”

“Jesus, you don’t miss a trick do you?” he said. “I can see I’m going to have to be careful around you.”

Looking at him, I said, “Why? Have you got something to hide?”

Before he could reply, Luke was slowing the car. “Here we are,” he said.

Looking through the windscreen, I could just make out the tall steeple of a church set back from the road in the middle of a graveyard. Tall, leafless trees wrenched back and forth in the wind, like dark twisted limbs. Just looking at the place gave me the creeps and I shivered.

Grabbing my cap from the back seat, I climbed from the car and out into the driving rain and howling wind. The graveyard was surrounded by an ancient-looking stone wall. Luke led me around it, bent forward against the wind. Reaching an old weather-beaten gate set into the wall, Luke pushed it open and we made our way through the gravestones to the front of the church. The wind was bitterly cold, and the rain jabbed at my face like needle points.

Then without warning, someone stepped from the shadows of the church and said, “Rather inclement weather we’re having.”

Without being able to stop myself, I yelped at the sudden appearance of the figure.

“I’m sorry, my child. I didn’t mean to scare you,” the man said. On his head, the stranger wore a wide-brimmed black hat and rain ran from it in constant rivulets. His face was thin and gaunt-looking as if he were sucking in his cheeks. His eyes were bright and keen and they almost seemed to twinkle in the darkness. His lips were thin, and twisted upwards in a grim smile. Beneath the upturned lapels of his long black coat, I noticed the white markings of his clerical collar.

“Good evening, Father,” Luke said with an awe-like respect.

“Good evening, Constable Bishop. I’m so glad that you and...?” he looked at me and gave that grim smile again.

“Constable Hudson,” I said, over the roaring wind.

“Constable Hudson,” he said, and his eyes twinkled again as he looked me up and down. “Very good.”

“Sergeant Murphy said you’d left a message – another grave has been disturbed?”

Nodding his head and leading us towards the back of the graveyard, he said, “Yes, sadly so, Constable. God rest the poor soul. Only fifteen-years-old was poor Kristy. It doesn’t seem more than a few weeks ago that I was baptising her as a baby.”

He led us further away from the church into the darkest corner of the graveyard. I pulled my torch from my belt and switched it on. Weaving the beam of light before me, I could see rows and rows of gravestones, stretching out in every direction. Some leant to one side, others looked smashed or broken. The inscriptions on some had either worn away or had been covered by moss.

“This way,” Father Taylor said, leading us towards a tall tree that twisted up into the night sky like a giant ogre. As we drew near, Luke switched on his torch, and with both our beams of light, I could see a mound of disturbed earth ahead of us. With my heart racing in my chest and my stomach tightening, we made our way towards it. Once we were a few feet from the broken and disrupted soil, Father Taylor stopped.

“What’s wrong, Father?” Luke asked.

Crossing himself, he looked at us from beneath the brim of his hat and said, “I can’t go on, Constable. There is evil at work here tonight.” And he crossed himself again.

“Evil?” I asked him.

Ignoring me, Father Taylor spoke to Luke again. “I’d be better served back in my church, praying for the soul of that poor girl.” Then looking at the both of us he added, “I shall pray for you too.”

Without another word, the priest turned and hurried back off into the night, back towards the church, which loomed like a shadow in the distance.

“I guess we go on alone,” Luke said looking at me.

I stared back at him.

“Are you sure you want to go on?” he asked.

“Don’t concern yourself about me,” I said, trying to mask my nerves. “I’ll be just fine.”

I brushed past him. Reaching the grave, I shone my torch into the hole in the ground. Luke came to stand beside me. The rain made a drumming sound against what was left of the coffin lid. It was splintered and ripped open. Crouching down to get a better look, I could see that the coffin was empty – the body of Kristy Hall had been taken. A putrid stench wafted out of the hole, and I covered my nose and mouth with my free hand.

“What can you see?” Luke asked, kneeling beside me.

“Not a lot,” I said, shining my torch over the walls of the grave and the ground surrounding it. I placed the end of the torch between my teeth and I swung my legs over the side of the grave.

“What are you doing?” Luke asked, gripping my shoulder.

Taking the torch out of my mouth, I said, “Getting a better look.”

“Are you insane?” he asked; rain running down his face like tears.
“Can’t it wait till daylight?”

“Not in this weather,” I told him. “The rain will wash away any clues that might be left.” I bit the end of the torch again and scrambled into the open grave.

“Hang on!” Luke shouted over the howling wind. But it was too late. I was gone.

I landed with a thump on top of what was left of the coffin lid. Wiping rain from my eyes, I pulled back the lid and some of it came away in my hands. The coffin was lined with white silk, which was now wet and soiled. Maggots and spiders scurried away, frightened back into the darkness by the light from my torch.

Inside the coffin I found a small toy bear, obviously buried with the girl by her parents. Her favourite toy to accompany her on her journey to wherever it was she was going. Steadying myself in the slippery mud, I placed one hand against the wall of the grave and bent forward. There was something glistening in the corner of the coffin. Balancing on the broken coffin lid, I reached down and picked it up. Holding it up in the torchlight, I could see it was a string of rosary beads. I placed them back where I’d found them and pulled away part of the coffin lid, turning it over in my

hands. In doing so, I saw something that almost stopped my heart and made my blood run cold.

The underside of the coffin lid was covered in claw marks. There were no marks on the top like there should have been if someone had broken into the coffin. But to my horror and disbelief, they were underneath. The lid was covered with them, and how ever improbable, the only conclusion I could come up with was that Kristy Hall had been buried alive and she had raked and clawed at the underside of the coffin lid as she tried to get out. Dropping the piece of wood, I shone my torch around the walls of the grave and could see similar claw marks in the earth, as if she had scrambled out.

Numb with shock at what I'd discovered, I looked up at the hole above me.

"Luke, you won't believe this!" I shouted.

There was no answer, just the sound of the rain thumping down at me and the wind screaming above.

"Luke!" I called out, this time louder. "Luke, are you there?"

No answer.

"Luke!" I called again. And this time I detected a tremor of fear in my voice and I hated myself for it. Where could he be? Perhaps he had gone

back to the car to get some evidence bags so we could do the job properly for once?

Realising that he wasn't coming back in a hurry and just wanting to be out of the grave, I switched off my torch, fastened it to my belt and started to scramble up the inside of the grave. The earth was wet and slippery and several times I lost my footing and slid back down on top of the coffin again.

"Luke, goddammit," I cursed under my breath, and started to climb again. As I neared the top, I saw a shadow of what looked like a person flit past the opening above me.

"At last!" I muttered. "About time you came back." I said, pulling myself from the hole. I was filthy. I had wet mud all over my hands, down the front of my jacket and trousers, and my boots were caked with the stuff. I turned around, expecting to see Luke, and jumped with such a start that I nearly toppled back into the grave. Standing just a few feet away from me was a teenage girl.

Fumbling for my torch, I yanked it from my belt and shone it at her. Immediately, the girl threw her hands to her face and screeched as if in pain.

"I'm sorry," I said, wanting to scream myself.

I looked at the girl and I could see she wore a filthy dress. I guessed it had once been white; but it was now covered with earth and dirt. Her hair

was long and matted in filthy clumps to the side of her ashen face. Her fingernails had earth beneath them and her bare feet and ankles were splashed with mud.

“Are you okay?” I asked her, not knowing what else to say. I was still stunned by her sudden appearance in the graveyard.

“Mummy,” she said. “Where’s my mummy?” and her voice sounded deep and hollow.

Starting to back away, I reached for my radio, wanting to call for Luke.

The girl came towards me, her steps long and slow.

“Kristy?” I said, fumbling for my radio. “You are Kristy, aren’t you?”

“I want my mummy,” she said again. “I’m hungry.” And she sniffed the air and licked her lips with a dry-looking tongue.

“I’ll find your mummy for you,” I told her, leaning my head towards the radio.

Sensing I was going to call for help, she reached for my radio with one filthy hand. I could see that her fingers were long – more like claws. Stumbling backwards, I yelled into my radio, “Luke if you’re receiving this, I need backup right now!”

The radio crackled and hissed, and the girl covered her ears. She screamed as if the noise was unbearable. Then over the sound of the wind and the rain, I heard a tearing noise. It sounded wet and moist, like flesh being ripped from bone. The girl jerked backwards and her back arched. Rolling her head back on her shoulders, she opened her mouth and screeched as if in agony.

Her whole being seemed to ripple and contort in front of me and I shouted into my radio again.

“Luke! Luke! I need urgent assistance right now!”

Again, there was only static.

The girl lowered her head and looked at me. Her eyes glowed like hot coals as if they were on fire. She opened her mouth and her two front incisors were now long and razor-sharp. She came towards me, and for a moment, I seemed unable to move, captivated by her frightening beauty.

All the while she moved towards me, working her way between the gravestones, her hair now billowing in the wind. The girl rolled her shoulders back as if shrugging and I could hear her bones twisting and stretching beneath her skin. The sound of it shook me from my trance. Focusing on the creature that was approaching me, every survival instinct I had was screaming at me to *run!*

Spinning around, I raced as fast as I could away from the girl. My legs felt like jelly. I willed them not to buckle beneath me and send me crashing to the ground. Weaving my way between the rugged gravestones, white plumes of breath squirted from my nose and mouth and disappeared into the cold, black night. Behind me, I could hear the sound of feet fast approaching. Not being able to help myself, I glanced back over my shoulder to see the girl within reaching distance. She pounced into the air.

Dropping to the ground, I rolled over onto my back to see the creature go soaring over me. Realising she had missed, the girl landed and came rushing back. She moved at an incredible speed, her hair billowing out behind her like a mane. Kristy's hands looked like talons, and she grabbed for me. Taking a deep breath, I rolled away, her claws snagging at my jacket. Not daring to look back, I got to my feet and ran towards the gate in the wall. With my heart feeling as if it were going to burst in my chest, and my arms working like pistons by my sides, I ran for my life.

Reaching the gate, I yanked it open. Sliding over the bonnet of the police car, I pulled open the door and climbed into the driver's seat. Hitting the automatic lock with my fist, I screamed into my radio one last time.

"Luke! Luke! I need urgent assistance. *Please help me!*"

Nothing.

Finding the key swinging in the ignition, I turned it and the car rumbled into life. Gripping the steering wheel, I looked ahead to see the girl pouncing out of the night sky straight towards the windscreen. Throwing the car into reverse, I started back down the narrow lane. But she was too quick. Within an instance, the creature had slammed into the windscreen. Cracks started to appear in the glass, spreading out like a spider's web. Punching her long talon-like fingers into the bonnet of the police car, they cut through the metal like it was made of cardboard. Throwing her head back, Kristy smashed her face repeatedly into the already-cracked windscreen. It broke, showering me in splinters of glass.

“Get away from me, you bitch!” I screamed, throwing the gear stick into drive. The creature shot forward, her head coming through the hole in the glass, her razor-sharp teeth snapping just inches from my face. Foam flew from them and splattered me. Slamming down on the brake, the girl flew backwards off the car and crashed into the stone wall that circled the graveyard. I shot forward too, my face smashing into the steering wheel. My nose started to gush blood and I could feel it hot and sticky as it ran over my lips and off my chin.

With my head pounding, I looked up to see the creature lying stunned on the ground against the wall. Stamping on the accelerator, I shot the car forward, my plan to crush her against the wall with the front of the

police car. But just before striking her, she looked up, saw the danger she was in and sprang away into the dark. With no time to react, the front of the police car crumpled against the wall. I shot forward in my seat. Sticking out my arms, I managed to absorb much of the impact. Screaming in pain, I heard a thud as something landed on top of the car.

Looking up, I could see the roof begin to buckle inwards as the creature pounded her claws into the top of it. Dazed and confused, I tried to focus as I searched for the emergency lights and sirens. Finding the right switch, I punched it and the night lit up in strobes of luminous blue and red. The sirens started and above them, I heard the sound of screaming. Twisting in my seat, I looked out of the window and upwards, to see the creature, her claws pressed against her ears.

Seizing the moment, I threw the car into reverse again and could have yelled in joy, as despite the damage to the car, it rumbled into life and started to roll backwards. With one hand on the wheel, and looking back over my shoulder, I tried to call for help again.

“Luke! Luke!” I shrieked into my radio. “If you can hear me – please, I need you!”

Nothing.

With the night sky throbbing blue and red and the *whoop! whoop!* sound of the sirens breaking apart its silence, I raced the car backwards, the

monster wailing and banging above me. I found a gap in the road and spun the car around so it was facing away from the church and back towards town.

I pressed as hard as I could on the accelerator. Blood continued to gush from my nose and it tasted coppery in my mouth. With the back of my sleeve, I wiped it away, and as I did, I saw Kristy scrambling from the roof of the car and onto the hood. With her eyes burning red and her mouth wide open in a scream, she launched herself at me through the broken windscreen. Losing control of the car, it crashed into a ditch, stopping dead in its tracks, lifting me from my seat and bashing my head against the roof. Everything started to turn black, and I fought to stay conscious, knowing that if I didn't, I would be dead. Climbing onto the crumpled bonnet, the girl crawled towards me.

"Keep away from me," I cried, reaching for my Taser. Then, at the very last moment, changing my mind, I stuck my hand inside my jacket.

"Hungry," the girl hissed, climbing into the car via the broken windscreen. Licking her lips with a bright red tongue, spit swung from her jagged teeth.

I looked into her eyes, and they seemed ablaze, as if her brain were on fire.

"Hungry!" she screeched, lunging forward.

“Suck on this!” I screamed, stabbing the tiny silver crucifix into her tongue. Almost at once, the girl’s eyes grew fat and wide and the brightness within them seemed to fade. Throwing her hands to her mouth, she gagged as if choking on glass. White foam began to ooze through her fingers, her mouth frothing like a rabid dog. Shrinking back from me, Kristy slid down the bonnet as if being dragged by her ankles. Screaming, a gush of milky-looking liquid shot from her mouth. It splattered over the bonnet of the car, blistering the paint. Covering my eyes with my arm, I watched as she shot backwards into the sky, disintegrating in an explosion of ash and dust.

Sensing the danger was over, I leant back in my seat. My chest was pumping up and down as I tried to gasp in air. Every part of me trembled, adrenaline racing through my body. Then, just when I thought it was all over, I heard the sound of footsteps racing towards the car. Glancing into the wing mirror, I could see a pair of black booted feet coming towards me. With trembling fingers, I reached for my Taser, but as everything around me started to fade, I lost consciousness. The last thing I saw was Luke’s terrified face looking in at me through the shattered car window.

When I woke, it was dark. I was lying on something soft. Although I felt disorientated and confused, I knew that someone was close. “Who’s there?” I asked, my voice sounding croaky.

“It’s me, Luke,” he said.

“Where am I?”

“Back in your room.”

My head hurt and my face felt bruised. “Am I okay?” I asked, feeling drowsy.

“You’ll be fine,” he said from the darkness. “Just some cuts and bruises. You were in a nasty car crash.”

“It was a car crash?” I mumbled, consciousness fading again.

“There was a vamp -”

“Shhh,” he said, moving away. “We can talk about it tomorrow.”

“Don’t go,” I whispered.

“What?”

“Stay with me,” I said. “I don’t want to be alone.” I had spent my life *seeing* things, but now when I closed my eyes, all I saw was the terrifying face of a vampire screaming out of the darkness at me.

“Why?” he asked coming back across the room towards the bed.

“I don’t want to be alone,” I told him. I thought I had got used to feeling lonely since me and my friend Tom had taken separate paths, but the sense of loneliness I now felt was crushing. “Don’t go, Luke,” I whispered again.

Without saying anything at all, Luke climbed onto the bed next to me. Wrapping my arms around him and resting my head against his chest, I

shivered against his cold embrace. I slipped back into unconsciousness.

Chapter Eight

It was light when I woke. Dull, grey sunlight seeped in through my window, making my room look like an old black and white photograph. My head felt sore, as did my nose, and my mouth felt as if I'd been sucking on sandpaper all night. I was lying on top of my bed in just a T-shirt and knickers and I wondered how I'd gotten here and who had undressed me. Then I remembered Luke had been in my room last night and a vague image of me holding him came flooding back. Blushing, I pulled the blankets over me and called his name. I couldn't see him, but the bathroom door was closed and I wondered if he might be in there.

Getting no reply, I swung my legs over the side of the bed, wincing at the pain inside my head. In fact, my whole body ached and throbbed and I felt as if I'd been in a car wreck. Then as if being punched in the face, the memories of what had taken place the night before came rushing back. Like a waking nightmare, I could remember everything. Climbing into the open grave, finding the scratch marks on the underside of the coffin lid, Luke

disappearing and not answering my calls on the radio, the girl, Kristy Hall, turning into a vampire and chasing after me as I tried to escape in the police car. Shuddering, I remembered how I had stabbed the crucifix into her tongue, then watched her explode in a pile of dust.

Had all of that really happened? In my head, I tried to tell myself that it couldn't have, but in my heart I knew that it had, and the realisation made me want to throw up. Hobbling to the bathroom, I knelt over the toilet and heaved. Once I'd been sick, I leant against the bath. What was happening to me? What was happening in The Ragged Cove?

Feeling bruised and battered, I turned on the taps and started to fill the bath with warm water. Shuffling back into my room, I searched for my mobile phone. Holding it up into the grey dawn light, I groaned at the sight of the red signal bar flashing on the screen.

"What is wrong with this place?" I hissed. "It's like it's shut off from the rest of the world."

I desperately wanted to call Sergeant Phillips and tell him what had happened to me and what I'd seen. Whether he would believe me or not, I didn't know. But I needed to tell him that all was not well in the sleepy town of The Ragged Cove.

The town seemed to exist in its own little universe. None of the telephones worked, the police radios didn't seem to transmit – even my car

radio didn't want to pick up a signal. Realising that I hadn't actually listened to any music since my radio went dead in my car two days ago, I pulled my iPod from my case and took it with me into the bathroom.

Easing myself down into the water, I stretched out. Closing my eyes, I popped the earphones into my ears and turned on the iPod. Rihanna started to sing 'Only girl in the World'. I did feel like the only girl in the world – the *world* I now found myself trapped in.

Closing my eyes, I turned the volume up and rested my head against the back of the bath. Over and over again the memories of what had happened the night before kept playing out in my mind. Could those murders have been committed by vampires? But weren't they just in movies and books? If I hadn't been attacked by one, then I would have said yes, but now I wasn't so sure. Was the boy, Henry Blake killed by them? But that sort of thing just didn't happen. Like my father had been, I was only interested in facts. But I could remember him telling me that once you had studied all the evidence and had dismissed all the theories and rumours, whatever you were left with, however unlikely, was the truth.

Okay, so let's just say that the murders and disappearances were the work of vampires – who were they? Did they live among the townsfolk by day and kill by night? Were they all gathered together in some secret location? And how many were there?

With so many questions racing around my mind, my head began to hurt all over again. But there was one question that just wouldn't go away: Where had Luke disappeared to last night? Where had he been when I'd needed him?

Climbing from the bath, I toweled myself dry and brushed my teeth. Pulling on a pair of jeans, T-shirt, and jumper, I tied my hair into a ponytail and checked out the cuts and bruises on my face in the bathroom mirror. I had a green-blue bump on my temple, my top lip was spilt and I had a graze just beneath my chin. What with the gash on my wrist, I'd never had so many cuts and bruises in such a short space of time.

With my stomach aching for food, I decided to try out Roland's bacon and eggs. Toast this morning just wouldn't be enough. Opening the door to my room, I found another envelope tacked to it. As before, 'Kiera' had been scrawled across the front. Pulling it free, I opened it to find another tiny silver crucifix. Looking at the envelope, I could see that it had been left in the last couple of minutes or so. Yanking the door closed behind me, I ran down the stairs, through the lobby, and out into the road. I looked left, and then right but the road in both directions was deserted. Although I knew he had left the envelope only moments before I'd discovered it, what I didn't know, was how he knew I needed another crucifix.

Chapter Nine

Taking a seat at one of the tables in the small dining area of the Inn, the old woman made her way around the nests of tables and chairs.

“Looks like you’ve been in a fight,” she said, eyeing the cuts and bruises on my face.

“I’m okay,” I said, forcing a smile.

“It ain’t right,” she said, pouring me a mug of coffee.

“What isn’t?” I asked.

“A pretty girl like you being a cop ‘an all.”

“How’s that?” I asked, kind of flattered by her remark.

Then looking over her shoulder as if being spied on, she turned to me and said, “If you’re not careful, you’ll end up dead...*or worse.*”

“What could be worse than being dead?” I asked her, sipping the coffee.

“One of the living dead,” she whispered, and her voice sounded dry and raspy.

Looking into her cloudy, grey eyes, I was just about to ask her to tell me more, when Roland appeared in the doorway that led from the dining area and into the kitchen.

“Mother!” he hollered, and the old woman seemed to flinch at the sound of his voice. “How many times have I told you not to go upsetting the guests with your stupid stories?”

Before turning to face her son, the old woman slipped her hand into her apron, removed something, and gave it to me. Then winking, she said, “That’s on the house.” Before I had a chance to say anything, she shuffled away.

Uncurling my fingers, I could see that she had slipped me one of the tiny bottles of holy water I’d seen the previous day.

Hiding it beneath the table, I watched Roland come towards me. His beefy face looked hot and tired. “I’m sorry about that,” he blustered. “Mother doesn’t know when to stop talking.”

“It’s okay,” I assured him.

“What can I fix you up with?” he asked, wiping his greasy hands on his white apron. Although I felt a little sickened by the sight of his lack of hygiene, my stomach continued to rumble.

“Bacon and eggs would be good,” I told him.

“Bacon and eggs it is,” he smiled, turning away.

As he wobbled back across the dining room, I called after him and said, “I don’t suppose you’ve seen a guy hanging around here this morning?”

Turning to face me, Roland said, “I don’t think so. What did he look like?”

“I don’t really know,” I told him. “He wears a hoodie so it’s kind of hard to see his face.”

“Haven’t seen anyone like that,” he said. “What did he do?”

Taking the envelope from my pocket, I held it up and said, “He left this tacked to my door about five minutes ago.”

“How do you know it was in the last five minutes? It could’ve been left at any time.” he said.

“The seal is still damp from where he licked it,” I told him.

“Oh,” said the fat little man, shrugging his shoulders.

“Don’t suppose you have any CCTV, do you?” I asked.

“CC what?” he asked.

“Never mind,” I told him and drank my coffee.

Despite Roland’s greasy hands and apron, the bacon and eggs were wonderful. The bacon was crispy and the scrambled eggs were light and fluffy. After breakfast, I wrapped up warm and drove my car into town. I wanted to get a better feel of my surroundings and pop into the police

station to speak with Sergeant Murphy about what had happened the previous night.

The day was bitterly cold, but the rain had stopped at last. The sky looked like a layer of bruised skin, as dark purple clouds covered the sun. Turning on the car's heater, I warmed myself as I navigated the narrow, winding roads. As I reached town, I couldn't help but notice that the streets and shops were pretty much deserted. I only passed a handful of people, their heads down, as if too scared to make eye contact with anyone. Parking my car in front of a small Post Office, I walked the length of the small high street towards the police station. There was a tea shop, and a couple of old people gathered around a table out of the cold. I passed a shop that sold walking and hiking equipment, but a CLOSED sign hung in the window and the lights were out. There was a fishmonger, butchers, and green-grocers, but none of them seemed very busy, and again I wondered how these little shops made any money.

Turning off the main high street, I made my way up the small cobbled side road towards the police station. Reaching it, I pushed against the door and was surprised to find that it was locked. Standing on tiptoe, I peered through the small front window. The station was in darkness. Biting my lower lip, I wondered why the station wasn't open. Didn't they have a dayshift on duty?

“You won’t find anyone on duty at this time of day,” someone said from behind me.

Spinning round, I found an elderly gentleman walking his dog. The black-coloured Labrador was taking a leak up a nearby lamppost.

“What did you say?” I asked the man.

“They only seem to work at night,” the man said. He looked as if he were in his mid-sixties. He was on the scrawny side, with a wrinkled face and short, white beard. His eyes were a piercing blue. On his head he wore a flat cap, and in his hand he carried a walker’s cane, which had a distinctive silver top. He wore a green wax coat, tweed trousers, and a worn pair of hiking boots. Without even knowing that I was doing it, I could tell he was a heavy smoker, he liked a good drink, and he wore glasses to read. At some time in his life, he had been a military man and had served in the parachute regiment. He was returning from a walk along the beach, not the woods, and he was going to have sausages for his dinner, some of which he would probably share with his dog – not with his wife – she was dead and had died recently.

“Don’t you know it’s rude to stare?” the elderly gentleman asked me.

“I’m sorry,” I said, but I couldn’t help notice the dark brown nicotine stains on the first two fingers of his right hand, the deep red

capillary veins on his cheeks, the pinch marks on either side of the bridge of his nose left by his glasses, the winged crest of the parachute regiment pin attached to the lapel of his jacket, the sand covering the tips of his boots, cane and the paws of his dog, the pack of sausages protruding from his coat pocket and the black armband strapped around his left forearm. Sometimes I wished I didn't have to *see* all these things. Why couldn't I just look at someone like any ordinary person would? My father called it a 'gift' but I often thought of it as a curse. Sometimes my head felt like it was going to burst with all the information that my eyes absorbed.

"Like I said, young lady, you won't find any police on duty at this time of day," the old man said. "If you want to report a crime, come back then."

"Okay, thanks," I said.

"Visiting are you?" he asked, eyeing me with suspicion. "You're not a reporter, are you?"

"Why would I be a reporter?" I asked, feeling bemused.

"Come to spread lies about what's been going on in the town?" he said.

"What's been going on?" I asked.

"Well if you don't know, then let's keep it like that," he said, and whistled for his dog to catch up with him. "What you don't know can't hurt

ya.”

He whistled again, but his dog seemed reluctant to come towards us. “C’mon, you daft thing!” the man spat.

The dog cowered by the lamppost and made a whining noise in the back of its throat. “Come here I’m telling ya!” the man ordered his dog. But again it whined, like it was scared of something.

“What’s got into ya?” he asked, walking back towards the animal.

Taking hold of the dog by its collar, he dragged it towards the police station. As they got near, the dog began to bark and howl. I watched the man struggle with his pet, as it dug its claws into the street, not wanting to come too close to the police station.

“Stop messing about, you stupid thing,” the old man shouted and slapped the dog’s hind quarters. Again, the dog howled as it was dragged nearer to the station. Then, as the old man succeeded in drawing the dog level with me, it started to snarl. Why was the dog snarling at me? Its lips rolled back from its teeth in anger – or was it fear? It was like the dog could sense something within me that it didn’t like or feared. Looking back at the empty building, I could only wonder what had upset the animal so much.

With a struggle, the old man managed to get his dog past the station and almost at once the dog seemed to calm down. Glancing back, the old man said, “So long, pretty lady. Whatever your business in The Ragged

Cove is, leave as soon as you can.” Then releasing his dog, he followed it away and out of sight.

I pushed against the locked door of the police station one more time, then made my way back to my car. Sitting behind the wheel and strumming my fingers on the dashboard, I thought about what the old man had said. Why weren't there any police officers on duty during the day in The Ragged Cove? Then, realising I knew very little about my colleagues, I wondered where they went, where they lived, and what they did in such a small town when not on duty.

Outside the Post Office, I noticed a public telephone box and it gave me an idea. I climbed from my car, and I yanked open the heavy red door. I lifted the receiver and wasn't surprised to find the line was dead. But it wasn't the telephone I wanted, it was the telephone directory. Taking it from beneath the phone, I thumbed through it until I got to the letter 'M'. How many Murphy's could there be in such a small town as this? Running my finger down the list, I couldn't find one Murphy listed. I then looked under 'P' for Potter, but again there wasn't anyone with that surname living in town. Drawing a deep breath, I turned to the letter 'B' and just like the others, there wasn't anyone with the name Bishop listed, either.

Stepping out of the phone box, I went into the Post Office. By the door, there was a stand that contained postcards. Taking the first one that

came to hand – I really didn't care what picture was on the front – I wrote this message.

Dear Sgt Phillips,

I believe I'm in great danger in the Ragged Cove. I don't want to leave my post – but please come. Your help and advice urgently needed.

Police Constable Kiera Hudson.

I quickly scribbled the address of Police Headquarters onto the card and bought a stamp from the postmistress. Taking it from me, she placed it into a sack that hung on the wall behind her. Leaving the Post Office, I went back to my car and drove away. As it was still early, I decided to go back to the church. I wanted to examine the open grave in daylight – I needed to know if there was anything that I'd missed and anything that might lead me to the vampires, if that's what Kristy Hall had really transformed into. Not only that, I wanted to have my facts straight for when I returned for my nightshift. I suspected that Sergeant Murphy would want a full account of what had happened.

Following the winding roads out of town, I managed to find my way back to the church. Parking just down the road from the front gate that led into the graveyard, I climbed from the car. The day had turned bitterly cold,

and I thrust my hands into my coat pockets. My fingers brushed against the bottle of holy water and the crucifix and I hoped I wouldn't have to use them again so soon.

As I approached the wall circling the graveyard, I could see flecks of white paint where I'd crashed the car. The gate wailed on its rusty hinges as I made my way into the graveyard. I weaved through the gravestones and although it was day, it took nothing away from the creepiness of the place. As I made my way deeper into the graveyard towards the overhang of the trees in the corner, I could see two people standing by the desecrated grave I'd climbed into the night before.

Crouching, I ducked behind a gravestone and peered into the distance. One of them was the priest, Father Taylor, and the other I couldn't quite see. Darting from my cover, I raced towards another gravestone and snuck behind it. From here, I had a better view of the second person. Looking at them, my stomach began to knot and my mouth turned dry. Father Taylor was deep in conversation with the hooded man who'd been following me and leaving crucifixes outside my bedroom door. Shifting my position behind the grave, I strained to see his face beneath the hoodie. But however much I tried, it was dark beneath the trees, and the overcast sky only made it more difficult to see him. I was too far away to hear what they

were saying to one another. From my hiding place, I watched them talk.

Several times the hooded man pointed into the open grave.

After only a few minutes of spying on them, they shook hands, and Father Taylor walked away. And as he did, I noticed that he was limping.

He hadn't done so the night before – I was sure of it – I would have *seen* it.

Making myself as small as possible, the priest walked right past me on the other side of the gravestone that I was crouching behind. I watched him go back towards the church. Turning back to spy on the hooded male, I watched him kneel down and carry out some kind of an inspection of the earth around the open grave. Taking a small bag from his jacket pocket, he scooped up some of the earth and placed it inside the bag.

As I watched, part of me wanted to sneak up on him, pull back his hood and find out his identity. But what if he saw me before I could reach him? I'd already had a confrontation with him and come off worse for it. So I decided to wait for him to finish whatever it was that he was doing, then follow him. After all, he knew where he could find me and it would be nice to be on equal terms. I didn't have to wait long before he turned away from the open grave and started back across the graveyard.

Peering over the top of the grave, I watched him go to the front of the church, where he disappeared from view. Scrambling to my feet, I darted amongst the gravestones, desperate to catch up with him. As I neared

the front of the church, I saw the male speed out from the other side on his bike and cycle down the path to the gate. On reaching it, he leant forward, pulled it open and maneuvered through it and was gone. A thought occurred to me and I froze. To get back down the road, he would have to cycle past my car. He would know that it was mine – how many other beat-up old red Minis were there in the town?

Keeping as low as possible, I made my way towards the wall. Peeking over it, I could just make out my car parked further down the road next to the hedgerows. I couldn't see the cyclist. Passing through the gate, I made my way towards my car. Once I was sure he wasn't nearby, I ran towards it, wanting to catch up, so I could follow him from afar and see where it was he was headed.

Climbing into my car, I started the engine and turned on to the road. Hitting the accelerator, I drove back towards the town, scanning the road ahead for the cyclist. After a mile or so, I'd hoped that I would have seen him ahead of me, but it was like he had vanished. Glancing in my rear view mirror, I hit my brakes. He was tailing *me* on his bike. Not believing what I was seeing, I pulled over and stopped, but kept the engine running, just in case. I stared at him in the rearview mirror and waited for him to draw level with me, but he didn't. Once he was within a hundred yards or so of my car, he stopped in the road.

Jumping from my car in frustration, I clenched my fists and shouted up the road at him, “What do you want from me?”

Again he said nothing, but just sat on his bike, staring at me from the shadows of his hood.

“Right, you chicken-shit,” I said under my breath. “I’ve had enough of your fun and games.” Climbing back into my car, I spun it around in the road and raced towards him. On seeing me coming, he took something white from his coat pocket, leant over on his bike and attached whatever it was onto a branch protruding from the hedgerow. Then swooping left on his bike, he cycled away and sped down a narrow lane set between two fields.

Pulling alongside the lane, I could see it was far too narrow for me to drive my car down. Thumping the steering wheel with my fist, I screamed in anger as I watched him disappear into the distance. Looking to my right, I tried to see what it was he had placed in the bushes. Climbing from my car, I went over to find that the male had skewered a folded piece of paper onto a branch. With the edges of the paper flapping in the breeze, I pulled it free. Unfolding the note, I read what was written upon it.

Sorry, didn't mean to hurt you yesterday. There is more danger to come – be careful.

I looked at the piece of paper and I knew the cyclist had been aware of my presence in the graveyard the whole time. The piece of paper had been torn from a bigger piece. In the far corner, I could just make out the word 'Mary's', which suggested he had taken it from a piece of headed note paper from St. Mary's church. The only opportunity he would've had to write the message was while he'd gone to the church to collect his bike after leaving the graveyard. And if he'd written the note then, he must have been aware of my presence in the graveyard. He then hid somewhere along the road and waited for me to pass him in my car.

Whoever he was, I was certain he meant me no real harm. He'd had a couple of opportunities to do so. But who was he? And why did he have to behave as if he were some kind of guardian angel?

Tucking the note into my jeans pocket, I got back into my car and headed back towards the Inn. As I pulled-up out front, the first specks of snow flurried past on the wind. Hurrying to my room, I pulled the bedcovers over my head and tried to get some rest before my next *vampire shift* began later that evening.

Chapter Ten

I arrived at the police station just before seven. While I'd slept the rest of the day away, it had continued to snow and was now coming down in thick flurries. The narrow streets of The Ragged Cove were covered with it, as were the fields that stretched out on either side of the country roads I'd taken to get to work. Several times, the back wheels of my car had slipped and skidded and I'd had to be careful not to drive head-first into some ditch. So it was with some relief that I arrived at the station without wrecking my second car in less than twenty-four hours.

Hurrying into the station and out of the snow, I found Sergeant Murphy, Potter, and Luke all sitting at their desks behind the front counter. It was as if they were waiting for me. Coming around the front counter, I glanced at Luke and he held my gaze with his brilliant green eyes. The last time I'd seen him, we had been curled up together on my bed in my poky room. I wondered how he felt about that. Luke half-smiled and I looked away. Sometimes I found it hard to look at him, I could sense something

between us, but I didn't quite know what. If I were to be honest with myself, I knew that I found his rugged looks attractive, but there was something else – something that told me I should try and keep my distance.

“How are you feeling tonight, constable?” Sergeant Murphy asked, and I noticed straight away that he hadn't called me by my first name like he had before.

“A bit bruised and battered,” I said, placing my uniform and utility belt on the desk in front of me.

“Not as battered as the police car you wrecked last night,” Potter chipped in, lighting a cigarette.

I looked across at Luke and he was still staring at me. Ignoring Potter's remark, I turned to face Sergeant Murphy and said, “I don't know if Luke has already briefed you, but there was an incident last night up at the graveyard.”

Popping his pipe into his mouth, Murphy looked straight at me and said, “I'd like to hear your account of what took place last night.”

“It's difficult to explain without sounding -” I started.

“Without sounding like what?” Potter cut in.

“Like I've lost my mind,” I said.

“Tell them what happened,” Luke told me. “You're amongst friends here.”

Hearing this, I glanced at Potter and wasn't so sure. Turning away from him, I looked at my sergeant and explained how I'd carried out an examination of the open grave.

"When I was down in the hole, I lifted up a piece of the coffin lid to find scratch marks on the underside of it," I told him.

"So?" Potter said, putting out his cigarette and immediately lighting another.

"So," I continued, "it suggested to me only one explanation – and I know this sounds far-fetched – but the girl Kristy Hall must have been buried alive."

"Buried alive!" Potter scoffed, squirting streams of blue smoke through his nostrils.

Raising his hand as if to silence Potter, Murphy said, "Let's hear Constable Hudson out before we comment." Then looking at me, he nodded, as if telling me to carry on.

"I also found claw marks on the inside of the grave, again supporting the theory that someone had climbed out rather than in," I told them. "I tried to call Luke on my radio, but it seemed that he either didn't receive my transmission or there wasn't any signal. I climbed out of the grave to find Kristy Hall standing there."

"Oh this is just such a lot of old bollocks," Potter cut in again.

“Be quiet, Sean!” Murphy snapped, and he sounded as if he were getting angry. “Carry on, constable.”

“She looked pale, as if she were sick,” I said. “Not only that, she was covered in earth and mud. She kept asking for her mother. I asked her if I could help her, but she kept saying she was hungry.” I stopped and again I looked at Luke, who was staring at me, his eyes keen and sharp-looking. I couldn’t tell if he believed me or not. I wanted to go on with my story, but it was so bizarre I feared I risked my professional reputation before I’d even fully started on my career. I’d been in bother at training school several times and this wasn’t going to help. But just like the trouble I’d often found myself in at training school, none of this was my fault.

“Go on,” Murphy said, sounding impatient.

Swallowing hard, I said, “Then she started to change.”

“Change?” Potter laughed. “What’s that supposed to mean?”

“I won’t tell you again, Potter,” Murphy hissed. “Put a sock in it, or get out.”

Lighting another cigarette, Potter folded his arms across his chest and grinned at me.

Trying to ignore him, I carried on. “The girl began to wail as if in pain. Then I heard this awful sound, like flesh ripping. Her teeth looked as

if they had grown.” Then closing my eyes, so I didn’t have to look at any of them, I added, “The girl had fangs.”

I heard a snigger come from the corner of the room and I didn’t have to open my eyes to know it was Potter who was laughing at me.

“What happened next?” Sergeant Murphy asked.

“I ran for my life, Sarge,” I said, opening my eyes and staring straight into his. “I didn’t know what else to do. I kept calling for Luke over the radio, asking for help, but again, I don’t think my messages were getting through. I managed to get to the police car, but the creature – or whatever it was – came after me. It smashed the windscreen with its face. I drove the car forward and the *thing* crashed into the graveyard wall. I drove the car at her, but...” I paused.

“But what?” Murphy persisted.

“She escaped,” I said as Potter stifled another fit of the giggles. “She leapt away at an incredible speed. I managed to turn the car as I tried to escape. I was injured and my nose was bleeding. As I drove away from the church, the vampire-thing attacked again. She was so fast and strong. She punched her fists through the bonnet as if it were made out of paper.”

“If she were so strong and powerful, how did you manage to survive?” Potter smirked.

“I had a crucifix on me, and as she tried to bite me, I stuck it into her mouth. It was almost as if she had swallowed poison. She started to convulse on the bonnet of the car. Her mouth started to foam up and the foam ate through the car’s paintwork like acid. Then, before I knew what was happening, she exploded into a pile of ash and dust. Realising that the threat was over, I started to lose consciousness, and before I blacked out, I saw Luke peering in at me through the broken car window,” I finished.

“And?” Sergeant Murphy asked me.

“That’s all, Sarge.” Then glancing quickly at Luke, I added, “The next thing I was aware of was waking in my room this morning.”

Without saying a word, Sergeant Murphy sucked on the end of his pipe, not taking his eyes off me. After what seemed like an eternity, Murphy said, “So that is your statement, Constable Hudson?”

“Yes, Sergeant,” I said, knowing that I had only told him what I believed to be the truth.

“You don’t wish to change anything?” he asked.

“No, Sergeant.”

Standing up, again he was wearing jeans and slippers; he came towards me, his right pelvis sloping to the right as if in need of a hip replacement. “I’d heard good things about you, Hudson,” he said, and he sounded almost sad. “Excellent things, in fact. I was led to believe that

although you could be a pain in the arse at times, you were however, the most gifted recruit at training school. That's why you were recommended for this difficult posting. I thought you would be an asset to this station – that you would be able to assist us in tracking down those responsible for the killings in The Ragged Cove.”

“But that's -” I started, but he spoke over me.

“Instead, I've been sent nothing more than an immature fantasist – a know-it-all,” he barked.

“But -”

“In less than twenty-four hours, you've clambered over two crime scenes, destroyed evidence, recklessly destroyed police property – namely one of our only two police vehicles - and have now brought into question your own honesty and integrity by coming up with a pack of lies to excuse your unruly behaviour,” he said.

I couldn't believe what I was hearing. I'd done nothing wrong. Every word of my statement had been true. Not prepared to stand by and have my integrity questioned, I spoke up and said, “Have you actually been up to the grave and examined it yourself?” I asked him.

“No, I sent our forensically-trained officer up there today to carry out a proper examination,” Murphy said, and looked at Potter.

“What, him?” I asked, and now it was my turn to scoff.

“Yes me!” Potter said. “Got a problem with that, Columbo?”

“Well, if you’d examined it properly, you would’ve seen what I had,” I said.

“Sure - I found the coffin lid – what was left of it after you’d trampled all over it,” he sniped.

“And the scratch marks?” I asked.

“There were scratch marks, but they’d been made by animals – foxes, rats, badgers – after the girl’s body had been removed,” he said.

I couldn’t believe what I was hearing. “Are you being serious?” I said. “What about footprints?”

“Well to be honest, after you had stomped all over it in your boots, it was hard to see anything. But after a careful and *thorough* examination, the only footprints I could find were yours and Luke’s. So if this *vampire-girl* had chased you across the graveyard, I found no footprints – only yours,” he smiled at me.

“What about the damage to the car?” I asked him.

“What about it?”

“The broken windscreen?”

“By the state of your face tonight, it looks like you’re the one who smashed through it,” he said. “As for the scratches across the bonnet and sides of the car, it is my opinion that they were caused by your reckless

driving as you scraped against the stone walls up at the church and the branches and thorns from the overgrown hedgerows.”

“What about the acid burns?” I asked.

“You’ve already admitted to driving the car straight into the wall up at the graveyard, and in doing so, you crushed the battery which ruptured and sprayed the bonnet with battery acid,” he smiled.

“I don’t believe this,” I groaned.

“No, we don’t believe *you*,” Sergeant Murphy said.

Turning to Luke I said, “You were up there. You must have seen something?”

Looking at me, his eyes almost grey, Luke slowly shook his head and said, “I’m sorry, Kiera, but all I saw was you driving away at a high speed from the church and crashing the car.”

“So you didn’t see the girl?” I asked, almost pleading with him.

“Sorry, Kiera, I didn’t see any girl,” he said. “As soon as I saw you racing away in the police car, I came running after you.”

I glanced down at his trousers and knew that he was lying. Knowing that whatever I said wouldn’t be believed, I looked at Sergeant Murphy. “So what happens now?”

“You go back to headquarters,” he said. “I don’t have room for a liar in my station.”

“But...” I began.

“Don’t worry about your precious record, I’ll tell them that you were homesick – the climate down here didn’t agree with you. I won’t drop you in the shit with Sergeant Phillips. I’m not that kind of bloke.”

Hearing this made my blood boil, and I could feel tears standing in my eyes. They had no right to treat me like this. Clenching my fists by my side, I took a deep breath and then let loose. “You make me laugh. You couldn’t solve a game of Cluedo, let alone a series of brutal killings,” I seethed. “For the last few years, you’ve had people go missing, graves desecrated, over twenty brutal murders, a string of police officers have disappeared off the face of the Earth, and you have the nerve to stand there and tell me I’m no good at my job!”

“Hang on a minute!” Potter said coming forward.

“Let her say her piece,” Murphy said. “Because when she’s finished, she’s out of here.”

“You accuse me of destroying crime scenes, when you let that cretin stand and smoke over the mutilated body of an eight-year-old child. And as for you,” I said, looking Murphy up and down, “you’re the most unprofessional sergeant I’ve ever come across. You’re meant to be representing the police service and you lounge around the office in jeans and slippers, with a pipe hanging from your mouth. And as for calling Force

Headquarters – go on – I dare you. Or perhaps you haven’t noticed that none of the telephones work in this godforsaken place. Nothing works! The shops hardly ever open, the streets are pretty much deserted and you can only speak with a police officer at night. Now I don’t know about you – but this place seems fucked-up!”

“What’s the point in being on duty during the day when most of the crime in this town happens at night?” Potter cut in. “That’s just good police work.”

“Good police work!” I laughed at him. “I haven’t actually seen you *do* any police work since I arrived. If your idea of good police work is smoking yourself to death in this office, then you’re very good at it.”

Then pausing to draw breath, someone cut in and said, “Have you finished, constable?”

Spinning around to see who had spoken, I was shocked to find a tall, lean-looking man standing in the corner by the passageway that led to the cells. He hadn’t come in via the front entrance and I knew from the tour Potter had given me the night before that there was no other way into the station.

The man was about six-foot-four, with steely-white hair that was combed back off his narrow forehead. He looked as if he were in his late fifties but was in good shape. I could tell by his tanned, dry skin he had

recently come back from his holidays, which had been spent in a hot climate. He had strong, muscular hands. His thumbs were looped through his belt loops. He wore a police uniform, and by the three silver pips on each shoulder, I knew he was a chief inspector.

“I said, have you finished, constable?” he asked me again, and his bright blue eyes bored straight into mine.

“Yes, sir,” I said.

“Then let me introduce myself. I am Chief Inspector Rom. And this station and its officers are under my charge,” he said in a low, grim-sounding voice. “If you feel you have a complaint on how my officers perform then feel free to raise your concerns with me.” Then coming forward, his eyes never leaving mine, he stood before me and whispered, “But one thing I do know, is that I don’t need some snotty-nosed recruit coming into my kingdom and telling me how to run things. Do you understand?”

Looking up at him, I said, “Yes sir, I understand.”

“Now if you would be so kind as to gather up your uniform, leave this station, and don’t ever come back,” he said. “Tomorrow morning you are to travel back to force headquarters where you will be assigned a new posting. And believe me when I tell you that the report I will be sending

about you, won't be as charitable as Sergeant Murphy's. Now get out of my sight."

Feeling as if I'd been kicked in the guts, I picked up my jacket and made my way around the front desk and left the station. As I went, I couldn't help but notice they were all staring at me, Luke included.

Stepping out into the cold, flakes of snow stung my face and covered my hair and shoulders. Climbing into my car and slamming the door shut, the tears I'd been fighting back in the office now ran down my cheeks in warm streams. Jumping, I looked up as someone appeared at the window. Luke stood beside my car, his black hair now looking white with snow. He knocked on the glass.

"Kiera!" he shouted.

Wiping away my tears with the back of my hand as I didn't want him to see me crying, I opened the window an inch and said through the gap, "What do you want?"

"What are you going to do?" he asked.

"I'm going home," I told him.

"I'll come up to the Inn and see you before you go," he said.

"Don't bother. I won't be there."

"What's that supposed to mean?"

“I’m going *home* now,” I told him. Then looking through the gap in the window at him, I said, “You know what, Luke? I thought we were friends. I thought we had a connection. I mean, you stayed with me last night.”

“I am your friend,” he said, brushing snow out of his eyes so he could see me.

“It didn’t seem like that in there!” I snapped.

“What could I say?” he said.

“You could’ve told the truth.”

“I did!”

“You’re a liar, Luke Bishop,” I said, looking straight into his green eyes. Then winding up the window, I said, “Goodbye.”

Without looking back at him standing in the oncoming blizzard, I pressed my foot down hard on the accelerator and headed out of The Ragged Cove.

Chapter Eleven

The engine of my little car groaned as I forced it up the narrow, snow-covered roads and away from the town below. Fierce gusts of wind shook its very frame and the wipers worked overtime to clear the snow.

I'd cranked the heater up to full blast, but it did nothing to take away the freezing chill. Even inside the car, wispy plumes of breath escaped from my mouth and nose and covered the windscreen in a misty film, making visibility almost zero. Leaning forward, I peered out, desperate not to steer off the road and into some ditch. I knew that if I could just reach a main road, the chances were that it would have been gritted with salt and I would be able to make my way home to Havensfield without incident. Even if I had to drive all night, I was determined to get there. I hadn't even stopped at the Crescent Moon Inn to collect my stuff – I would pay to have it forwarded to me at a later date.

I just wanted to be away from The Ragged Cove; but more than that, I wanted to be as far away from Luke as possible. I didn't care if I ever saw

him again. I felt crushed inside at how he had treated me back at the station and how he'd lied about what had taken place up at the graveyard. I knew he had seen that girl – *I knew it!* If only my friend Tom had been posted to the Ragged Cove too, we would have solved the mystery of this place in a blink of an eye. He would have believed me and he definitely wouldn't have lied. Tom knew that being a cop stood for something. Christ, even my colleague constable John Miles, who wasn't the brightest of sparks, would've seen that The Ragged Cove was seriously messed up. So, why wouldn't Sergeant Murphy and his team see it too? Deep down, I knew they did, but for whatever reason they pretended not to.

Wiping at the inside of the windscreen with the back of my hand, I could just make out a sign fixed to the side of the road. As my car crawled towards it, my heart almost leapt with joy. The sign read:

You are leaving The Ragged Cove

Please drive carefully!

Feeling as if I were returning to civilisation – *the real world* – where mobile phones worked, radios got a signal, shops stayed open, and vampires didn't chase you around graveyards in the middle of the night, I almost felt like punching the air with joy. Taking one hand from the wheel, I

switched on the radio and my heart sank as the sound of static hissed through the speakers.

But then, as my car inched towards the sign, I heard something faint – a sound within the static and it sounded like music. Turning the dial on the radio, I leant forward and to my joy, I could hear the sweet voice of Adele singing ‘Someone like you’.

“C’mon,” I said aloud. “I want to hear you!”

Her voice was faint, almost like she was lost somewhere within the static, but with every inch my car took towards that sign, her voice became clearer. Turning the dial in the hope of picking up a clearer signal, I took my eyes off the road for what seemed just like a second. But in that moment, I hadn’t seen the sheet of black ice covering the road. The back end of my car skidded right, then left as I gripped the wheel and screamed, “No!”

The Mini spun out of my control and headed for a huge drift of snow. Thumping into the ancient stone wall that lined the road, the car tilted right, and for a moment I thought it was going to tip over onto its side. Slamming my hands against the dashboard to steady myself, the car nose-dived into a ditch, its rear wheels lifting off the road. Leaning forward in my seat, my chest pressed against the steering wheel, the voice of Adele began to fade until the sound of static seemed almost deafening.

Pushing against the car door, I clambered free of the car and fell into the snow outside. At once, my nose, ears, and hands began to sting with the cold. Shielding my eyes against the blizzard, I looked around, trying to get some bearings. The sign telling me I was so close to escaping The Ragged Cove was behind me and it seemed to taunt me. Turning my back to it, I peered back in the direction I had come, and some miles in the distance, I could just make out the twinkling lights of the town. Looming up into the night like a twisted finger, I could see the steeple of the church in the dark. Cupping my hands around my mouth, I blew into them. They were fast going numb. Turning to look at my car sticking up out of the ditch, I leant against the boot and tried to force the rear wheels back onto the road.

“Please!” I groaned. “I just wanna get out of this godforsaken place. Is that too much to ask?” I shouted into the dark.

The car rocked up and down like a seesaw, but however much I tried, I couldn’t get the car out of the ditch. With each passing minute, the snow grew deeper and deeper around my shins.

Knowing I had to make a decision as to what I was going to do, I considered my options. I could stay in the car and hope that someone came by and helped me, but the chances of anyone being out on a night like this was remote. The roads were fast becoming impassable, so I knew there was little chance of being rescued by a passer-by. I could stay in the car with the

heaters running, but I doubted they could melt an ice cube, and I would more than likely freeze to death. I didn't have any blankets or warm clothing in the boot, and the rate the snow was coming down, my little car would be covered within a couple of hours. I didn't fancy dying entombed in a 1960's Mini, buried beneath a mountain of snow.

Remembering my mobile phone, I rummaged for it in my pocket. Pulling it out, I looked at the signal bar which continued to glow red. Holding the phone above my head, I tried to search for a signal.

"Please!" I hissed. "Just give me a break. I deserve one with everything that I've been through!"

But however much I turned and moved towards the border, the signal bar remained that constant, angry red. Putting the phone away, I looked back at the town below me. I figured that if I crossed the fields, it could be no more than a couple of miles away. I could stick to the road, but it wasn't as direct with all its twists and turns and would probably double the distance of my journey. But however much my life depended on it, I really didn't want to go back there. What was I going back to and how many days would I have to spend there before the snow eased and I could get my car back onto the road? I really didn't want to go back to that Inn, and now that I'd been banned from the police station, I had no reason to be there. I didn't know if I could face any of them again – I didn't know if I

could face *Luke* again. But I couldn't stay out on the road. Not only was I exposed to the freezing weather, I was a sitting target for vampires.

So taking my torch from the car, I pulled the collar of my jacket up and set off across the fields, back towards The Ragged Cove.

Bent forward at the waist to protect myself from the freezing wind and falling snow, I trudged across the fields. The snow was falling so hard and fast that when I glanced back at my car in the distance, I could hardly see its little red frame and my tracks had already been covered. Ahead and to the right, I could see what looked like a wooded area. So cutting diagonally across the field, I made my way towards it, hoping that the trees would offer me some shelter.

The snow whipped and howled all around me, and in the noise of the wind, I was sure that I could hear the far off sound of screaming. Looking in the direction of those cries, I thought I saw shadows flitting back and forth across the skyline. Turning around in the snow, trying to locate those sounds was disorientating and it wasn't long before I had lost all sense of direction. Peering into the distance, I was sure I could see a dark smudge on the horizon, and hoping that it was the wooded area, I set off towards it.

I hadn't gone far when I noticed the dark smudge had changed and now looked like three dark shapes in the distance.

“What’s that?” I said, shielding my eyes with my hands, trying to work out what the shapes were. With every second they seemed to get closer and they were coming straight towards me. As they got closer still, I thought that perhaps they were three people, but that couldn’t be right. They were travelling way too fast. No one could move with such speed and agility in the heavy snow.

With my heart almost stopping, I realised the shapes coming towards me *were* people, and they weren’t walking, they were *running* towards me at an incredible speed, as if they were soaring just inches above the snow. Realising I was in incredible danger, I ran as fast as I could, hoping I was heading towards the shelter of the trees.

My progress was slow, hampered by the deepness of the snow, which was now level with my knees. Looking back, the three figures were now so close I could hear the sound of the rushing wind their speed created, whipping up the snow beneath them and spraying it into the night.

“No! Please God, no!” I cried, staggering forward and losing my footing. Panicked, I clawed myself back onto my feet. My whole body trembled – not because of the cold – but in fear. My legs felt as if they were going to give way at any moment and I desperately needed to pee. Not sure which direction I was headed, I stumbled on, tears running down my face through sheer terror.

Sucking in mouthfuls of freezing cold air to try and calm myself, I turned around to see the three vampires racing towards me, their gleaming white teeth glistening like razors in the night. Standing rooted to the spot, I screamed. Within touching distance of me, one of them darted left and the other right, so as to surround me.

“Stay away from me!” I screamed.

They circled, zipping back and forth as if examining their prey. The third one raced forward, its eyes burning red and mouth drooling. Shrieking, it grabbed for me, its claws skimming just inches from my face. I ducked, dropping into the snow. Glancing up, I watched as it raced away. My heart almost stopped. The vampire was wearing what appeared to be a ripped and dishevelled-looking police uniform. Without having time to comprehend what I’d seen, the vampire leapt into the air, corkscrewed around, landed and raced back towards me. It was like it raced over the surface of the snow instead of sinking into it.

Knowing I had nowhere to run or hide, I covered my face with my hands and prayed my death would be quick. With the sound of its screaming coming out of the dark at me, I closed my eyes and waited to be taken. Then there was another sound, almost deafening. It was like the loudest thunderclap I’d ever heard.

“What was that?” I shouted in shock, snapping open my eyes. I caught a fleeting glimpse of a winged creature soar across my eye line, snatching away the vampire who was just about to take hold of me.

Pulling myself out of the snow, I looked up to see what it was. But it moved with such speed and agility, it looked like nothing more than a fluttering blur of shadows. The vampire in the police uniform was yanked this way and that in the sky just above my head.

It tried to fight back against whatever it was that had hold of it. Shielding my eyes against the snow, I could see that whatever it was appeared to be stripped to the waist. The creature’s skin was as pale as the snow that fell all around it. Its hair was black, just like the wings that protruded from its back. But it moved too fast for me to really see it. Not knowing if this creature were my saviour or if it had its own plans for me, I turned and fled.

With my heart racing like a trip hammer, I stumbled, got up, stumbled again, until I was near exhaustion. Looking back over my shoulder, not wanting to lose sight of the other two vampires, I saw the one in the police uniform arch its back and throw its arms wide as it became consumed by the creature in the sky. With an ear-splitting scream, one of the other vampires chased after me.

“Get away!” I screeched, stumbling backwards into the snow, landing on my arse and knocking the wind from me. Covering my ears with my hands, I looked past the approaching vampire and saw the shadowy creature rip out the throat of the vampire in the police uniform. Blood sprayed into the night and spattered the snow around me in crimson streaks. Then my rescuer – *if that’s what it was* – soared away in a fluttering blur, tossing the second vampire, who was almost upon me, through the air like a rag doll. This one was female and from where I lay in the snow, I could see she was wearing a floral-patterned dress. Her bright auburn hair fanned out in the wind.

To the right of me, I heard the gut-wrenching sound of screaming as the third and final vampire took their chance and raced towards me. Turning, I tried to run away, but the creature was too quick. And by the time I’d felt its hot breath against my neck, it had snatched hold of me with its talon-like hands and leapt into a nearby tree.

Kicking out frantically, my stomach lurched as I watched the ground disappear beneath my feet at an incredible speed, as the vampire scrambled up the trunk of the tree with me clutched in its arms. Within seconds, I was looking down at the tops of the trees. Looking left and right, I could see that the vampire had its claws hooked into my jacket.

“Get the fuck off me!” I roared. “Put me down!”

Glancing up into its face, it looked white and contorted as if in constant pain. Just like the others, its eyes burned red as if its brain was on fire in its misshapen skull. The vampire's forehead was pronounced and its brow appeared to almost hang over its eyes like a ledge. Its nose looked more like a snout and its mouth was like an open wound, fleshy lips pulled back, revealing a bloody set of gums, crammed full of razor-sharp teeth.

Dragging me higher into the tree, I screamed. Ahead, I could see the flutter of white and black as the flying creature tore the female vampire in two, casting the remains of her body in opposite directions.

"Let me go!" I screamed, kicking and struggling wildly.

Hearing my screams, the winged creature flew towards us and again, the night was torn open by the sound of that thunderclap. Within an instance, it was upon us, its form shimmering so much as to make it impossible to truly see who or *what* it was.

As the shadowy form attacked the vampire who had hold of me, its claws dug deeper into my jacket and flesh. The pain was excruciating. Reaching into my pocket, my fingers brushed against the small bottle of holy water given to me at breakfast by the old woman. Crying out in pain, I unscrewed the cap. Reaching round, I poured some of the water onto the vampire's claws. Almost at once its flesh began to bubble and blister. Tendrils of smoke started to rise from its white flesh.

Shrieking in agony, the vampire let go of me and I tumbled out of the tree and towards the ground. Over the sound of the wind whistling in my ears, I heard the vampire howl one last time as the winged creature tore it apart.

“Help me!” I cried looking down as the snow-covered fields raced towards me. Closing my eyes, and for the second time that night hoping my death would be quick and painless, I felt myself soaring upwards and away from the ground.

Opening one eye, I peered out and could see I was in the arms of the creature that had saved me from the vampires. My face was pressed against his naked chest, which felt as cold as the night air that rushed past me. Glancing up to get a peek at its face, whatever it was, arched its wings so that it fell into shadow, masking its identity.

“Hold tight.” Its voice was a deep growl.

Locked in the creature’s muscular arms, we raced through the night and back towards The Ragged Cove. I looked down and could see the snow covered fields and treetops whizzing past in a near blur. Glancing right, desperate to see the face of the creature, I saw that its wings were tattered-looking and worn. They rippled in the freezing night air that rushed over us. He flew through the night at such speed, my hair whipped about my face. Out of sheer instinct to survive, I gripped the creature’s hands that held my

waist. But they weren't hands – not really. They were long strong claws. Each finger was pointed like a blade.

“Where are you taking me?” I asked over the roar of the wind.

But instead of answering my question, the winged creature suddenly plummeted out of the sky with such speed that my stomach lurched. I began to feel dizzy. That ear-shattering thunderclap came again and everything went black.

Chapter Twelve

Opening my eyes, it took a moment for me to realise I was lying on the bed back in my room at the Crescent Moon Inn. The lamp on the desk had been switched on and my room was bathed in a warm, orange glow. I didn't know how long I'd been unconscious, and my shoulders felt raw. Touching them, I remembered the vampire digging his claws into me. I remembered being rescued by that winged creature and I sat up. It was then I noticed someone sitting in the shadows in the corner of the room.

"Who's there?" I asked, and my throat felt sore from all the screaming I'd done earlier that night.

"It's just me," the figure said, standing up and moving into the light.

Watching Luke step from the shadows, I groaned, "What do you want?" I still felt angry towards him for what had happened at the police station.

"I just popped by to see if you were okay," he said, coming closer.

Laying back down and turning away from him, I said, "Well, now that you can see I'm fine, you can go. I have nothing to say to you."

"I thought you were leaving town?" he said.

"It didn't quite work out that way," I said, my back still facing him. "Anyway, how did you know I was here?"

"I drove past and saw the lamp on in your room, so I thought..." he started.

Rolling over to face him, I said, "How did you get in here?"

"Your door was open," he told me.

"Well if you don't mind," I said, "you can go now and close the door behind you."

"What's wrong with you?" he asked, looking down at me.

"What's wrong with *me*?" I hissed, sitting up on my bed. "You lied back there at the station. You could've got me out of trouble."

"How?"

"You said you didn't see anything," I started. "You claimed that you only saw me drive away in the police car, and then you came running after me once I'd crashed the car."

"That's right," he said, trying to hold my stare.

"You didn't run anywhere that night," I told him. "You must have been right on top of me when that car crashed, which means you must have

seen that vampire.”

Luke shook his head in denial.

“It was raining that night, Luke,” I reminded him. “There were mud and puddles everywhere. If you’d ran down that road like you claimed to have done, then the bottoms of your trousers would’ve been splashed with mud.” Looking down at the hems of his trousers, I added, “See, there’s not a fleck of mud on them.”

“These are a different pair of trousers,” he said.

“Liar,” I snapped. “They’re the trousers you had on last night up at the graveyard.”

“How do you know that?” he asked me.

Pointing to his right thigh, I said, “Egg and ketchup, that’s how I know!”

“What?” he asked, sounding baffled.

“Last night in the police car, I said I knew you had an egg sandwich for your dinner because you had dripped egg and ketchup down the front of your tie and trousers,” I reminded him. “The stains are still there, Luke, but I can’t see any mud.”

Glancing down at the stain, then back at me, he said “You don’t miss a trick, do you, Kiera?”

Thinking for a moment, I said, “Perhaps I do.”

“What do you mean?”

“Well, if you didn’t run down that lane, how did you get to me and the car so quickly?” I said. “That’s what I can’t figure out.”

Staring at me with his pale green eyes, Luke said, “Kiera, I can’t lie to you anymore.” Then taking off his jacket, he unbuttoned his shirt and let it flutter to the floor.

Holding up my hand, I said, “I’m flattered, Luke, but I’m not sure if this is such a good idea.”

Staring at me with such intensity, it felt as if he were looking into my very soul, he said, “No, Kiera. You don’t understand.”

“Understand what?” I started, trying hard not to notice his well-defined chest and flat stomach.

“This,” he said turning around.

Shrinking back on my bed, I watched as Luke’s shoulder blades rippled beneath his pale skin. The tissue and muscles on his back shifted and stretched as what looked like a series of black bones grew from his back. Luke rocked forward as if in pain, the black bones reaching up out of his ribcage and shoulders. A thin, silky membrane hung beneath the bones and I could see that he was growing a pair of wings.

They reminded me of the pterodactyl dinosaurs my father had shown me in picture books as a girl. Each wing seemed to have a long bony

shoulder and arm that was about six feet in length. Beneath this arm hung the wing, which was a see-through, stretchy-looking membrane. At the end of each arm protruded a wrist and attached to these were three skeletal fingers.

Covering my mouth with my hands, I watched in disbelief and wonder as Luke shook from head to foot, the metamorphosis complete. His huge, black wings stretched out on either side of him. Turning around, his arms by his sides, Luke looked at me.

“Please don’t freak out,” he said.

“Whoa,” I breathed.

“Is that all you have to say?” he asked me, and it was as he spoke I noticed his two front incisors had grown into two, long sharpened points.

“What do you want me to say?” I whispered in awe. Although I should’ve been terrified by the creature that stood before me, I wasn’t. Luke looked like an angel – a *dark* angel. If it were possible, his eyes glowed greener than before, his skin looked as smooth and as white as marble, and his lips were a dark, blood red. His jet-black hair shone like an onyx stone.

“How long have you been able to do that...that *thing* with the wings, exactly?” I asked.

“Forever,” he said. There was a moment’s silence, neither of us not knowing what to say next.

“How do I look?” he suddenly asked with a nervous smile, still unsure of what my reaction was going to be at seeing him like this.

“You look stunning,” I breathed.

“Stunning?” he smiled. “Shouldn’t that be *handsome*?”

“No, you look more than that,” I told him, a warm sensation flowing over me. “It was you?”

“What was?”

“It was you who saved me from those vampires tonight?” I asked.

“Yes, it was.”

Curious as to what that made him, I said, “So are you like them? A vampire, I mean?”

Coming towards me, Luke sat on the edge of my bed, and I couldn’t help but notice how his wings seemed to tremor as he moved. Looking into my eyes, he said, “Some would call me a vampire, but I’m a Vampyrus.”

“A Vampyrus?” I asked, confused.

“The Vampyrus are what humans would commonly call *Desmodus Rotundas*.”

“The what?”

“Vampire bats,” he said.

Trying to understand what he was telling me, I said, “So where do you live – *hang out*? Where do you come from?”

“I come from The Hollows,” he said, and his voice sounded distant as if he were picturing it in his mind. “The Hollows are the caves and the caverns beneath us.”

“So you live underground then?” I said, confused. “So like there’s a whole race of you living down there?”

“There always has been,” he explained. “Even before humans, the Vampyrus have lived in the holes, the tunnels, and the caverns that exist beneath the Earth.”

“So why are you masquerading as a police officer up here?” I asked him, and if it wasn’t for the fact that I had a winged man sitting at the foot of my bed, I wouldn’t have believed a word of what I was being told.

“We’ve come to hunt out one of our own,” he told me, and his eyes had grown dark, their spark faded.

“Why? What has this Vampyrus done?”

“Kiera,” he said, “for hundreds of years our race has been travelling up to the surface. Some of us have managed to secretly work our way into the highest levels and positions in your society. But all of us, up until now, have respected your rules, your laws and your world. But there is one who has broken those rules, and instead of returning to The Hollows to satisfy his hunger, he’s given into his desires and taken human blood. By doing

this, he's created a mutant breed, a half-human and half-Vampyrus – they are what your race calls vampires. They are the dead – the *undead*.”

“Who is this Vampyrus?” I asked him.

“We don't know,” Luke confessed. “But we have managed to track him down to The Ragged Cove. It is somewhere here in which he hides.”

“But he can't be that hard to find,” I said. “I mean, you must be able to recognise one of your own when you see them.”

“But how?” he asked. “Didn't you believe me to be human? Could you tell by looking at me that I wasn't like you?”

Shaking my head, I said, “Well no, I guess.”

“Then you can see the challenge that faces us,” he said. “But the longer it takes us to find him, the more he will feed and the more vampires will be created – until one day your world will be infested with them.”

“Why doesn't he just stop?” I asked. “If he can see the damage he is causing, why doesn't he go back underground until his hunger passes?”

“Once tasted, human blood becomes an unbreakable addiction,” he told me. “And that need – *desire* – never goes away. I've heard it described as being like a fire in your soul that can't be put out.”

“So he can't be cured of this craving?”

“There have been others throughout history who have come and fed,” he said just above a whisper.

“And they were cured?” I asked.

“Yes.”

“How?”

“Like me, Vampyrus were sent to hunt them down and destroy them,” he told me, his eyes turning dark.

“So you’re not like a regular vampire – what I mean is, you can go out in the light?” I asked him.

“Our natural habitat is darkness, but some of us can tolerate daylight,” he explained. “As for me, I’m not a great lover of the sun. I can put up with it for a few hours before my skin starts to itch and blister. Others last only minutes before their skin starts to smoke.”

“So are you like those other vampires?” I asked him, remembering how he had reacted to my cut wrist and how I’d seen him sniff the blood stains on the sweatshirt. “What I’m trying to ask is – do *you* need blood – *human* blood to survive?”

“It depends,” he said.

“On what?” I asked, letting go of his hand.

Sensing my concern, Luke said. “You don’t need to be scared of me. Very much like the sun, it’s different for each of the Vampyrus. Some of us hunger for human blood as soon as we come above ground, some of us can last hours, days, or weeks without feeling the hunger – but when it comes,

we have to go back below until the desire for blood fades. Then we can come back again.”

“So what about you?” I asked him. “How long can you last, before your *hunger* becomes too much?”

“About six weeks,” he said.

“So how long before you have to go back?”

“About a week,” he smiled, “so you’re safe for the moment. I felt it the other day when you cut your wrist. The smell of it made me feel crazy for a moment. That’s why I didn’t want to get too close to you.”

“I saw you sniffing the bloodstains that I’d left on your sweatshirt,” I confessed.

Looking embarrassed, Luke looked away and said, “I couldn’t help myself. The smell of your blood was beautiful – *intoxicating*.”

Wanting to know more about him and his life below ground, I asked, “So how do you come above ground – how do you get here?”

“We come up via wells dug by humans, the potholes and drains. Luckily for us, you don’t yet have the ability to reach the thousands of miles and network of tunnels and caves beneath your feet. But mostly, we burrow our own way out and protect it with a trapdoor, which we lock, until we’re ready to go back. Then we fill it in again.”

Sitting quietly for a moment, trying to absorb everything he had told me, I looked at him and said, “Who’s we?”

“What do you mean?” he asked, looking as if he had slipped up in some way.

“You said, ‘We lock it.’ Who’s we?” I asked again.

Looking me straight in the eyes, he smiled, “Murphy, Potter, and Rom.”

I couldn’t believe what I was hearing. “So you’re telling me that Sergeant Murphy, Chief Inspector Rom, and that dickhead, Potter, are all like you – *vampire bats*?”

Laughing, Luke said, “I know it’s hard to believe but they’re not really all that bad.”

“They seemed pretty bad today,” I reminded him.

“Believe it or not, they were just trying to protect you,” he told me.

“Protect me!” I scoffed. “They had a funny way of showing it.”

“We knew that once you’d killed that vampire last night, they might come after you,” he said, and this time he took my hand in his. “We were sending you away from The Ragged Cove for your own safety. We knew we had to get you away from here.”

“I don’t need your protection,” I said. “I can look after myself.”

“And what about tonight?” he reminded me. “If I hadn’t of shown up, you would be dead now - or one of *them*.”

Sitting silently for a moment, I looked at him and said, “Well, I’m staying. I can’t go back now.”

“That’s your choice, Kiera. But what lies ahead will be dangerous. Not only for you but for my people as well,” he warned me. Then reaching out and brushing a wisp of hair from my face, he said, “You know you don’t have to stay, I could get you out of here if you really wanted me to.”

Cupping my hand around his, I smiled, “You need me.”

“How do you work that out?”

“Like I said, you, Murphy and Potter couldn’t solve a game of Cluedo,” I smiled.

Staring at me as if he was about to say something, he suddenly let go of my hand and stood up.

“What were you going to say?” I asked him, a nervous feeling passing through me.

“It doesn’t matter,” he said, turning his back towards me, his wings making a soft whispering sound.

Standing, I went to him. I wanted to reach out and touch his shoulder, but I didn’t know if I should. To do so, meant I would have to touch his wings.

“It does matter,” I said.

Turning around, Luke moved closer, his naked chest inches from me. “I was wondering if there was another reason why you might want to stay?”

Knowing exactly what he meant, I lied, “I don’t know what you mean,” and leant in towards him.

“I was hoping...” he said, but didn’t finish.

“Hoping what?” I pushed.

“You’re trembling,” he smiled, bringing his face closer to mine.

“Am I?”

“Are you afraid?” he whispered, his lips hovering over mine.

“No,” I smiled. “But you should be.”

“And why’s that?” he asked.

“Because I’ve got a bottle of holy water and a crucifix in my pocket,” I whispered.

“They only work on vampires, I’m a *bat*,” he smiled, then taking me in his wings, he kissed me.

For such a fierce creature, his kiss was soft as his lips pressed over mine. I closed my eyes as he held me close. But in the darkness, all I could see was Luke tearing those vampires to shreds with his razor-like claws. I saw the jets of blood turning the white snow crimson. I had only been

kissed by one man before and he had been human at least. And although Luke's kiss was tender and made my skin tingle and heart race, he wasn't like...

"I'm sorry," I said, easing myself from his arms.

"No, it's me who should be sorry," Luke said. "I shouldn't have kissed you."

"No, it's not that..." I said, struggling to find the right words. I broke his gaze, looking away. His stare could be so intense sometimes.

"Is there someone else...another...?" Luke started.

"No, not really," I tried to explain, those feelings I'd once had for my friend, Tom, threatening to break my heart again. "His name was Tom, but he's gone now."

"What happened?" Luke asked, his voice soft – comforting.

"I promised I would never say," I said. Then, looking back at him, I added. "What about you? Is there no one..."

"There was...once...a long time ago now," he said, wings almost seeming to hum about his broad shoulders. "But I try to forget."

"Does that help?" I asked him, knowing deep in my heart that I would never be able to love another unless I forgot what I had once shared with Tom.

“I could help you to forget,” Luke whispered, taking me in his arms again.

“How?” I asked, looking up into his eyes.

He answered my question by kissing me again.

Chapter Thirteen

Luke left me just before dawn. As I had been wrapped in his wings, I'd asked him where he lived. He explained that he slept during the day, along with the other Vampyrus – Murphy and Potter – in the cells at the station. He told me it was close to their hatch, should they need to go back beneath ground in a hurry. When I asked about Chief Inspector Rom, he said that Rom spent most of his time below ground, but didn't explain why.

I'd asked where this *hatch* to The Hollows was and Luke reminded me of the padlocked grate in the corridor that led to the small cellblock back at the station. I was surprised by this – not about its location – but by its ordinariness. It was nondescript, black metal, with a big rusty-looking padlock. Leaving me feeling sleepy and the most at peace I'd felt since arriving in The Ragged Cove, Luke told me to meet him at the police station at seven that night.

“But I thought I was banned?” I said, feeling half asleep.

“I'll speak to the others,” he assured me.

Then taking my face in his hands, he kissed me. His lips were full and soft, and they lingered over mine. Kissing him back, I could feel his fangs, but in a strange way it didn't seem unnatural. When he kissed me, the feelings I felt were so intense, they almost consumed me. It was as if he had cast me under some kind of spell. With his soft wings around me, I felt protected – *safe*. Enclosed in them, my skin against his, I felt as if everything outside of them didn't exist. It was that moment that mattered – nothing else. My feelings for him felt very sudden and intense and I had no real understanding as to why. All I knew was that these new emotions were in some way intoxicating.

Not wanting him to leave me, I clung to him. “Stay,” I whispered.

Brushing his lips over mine, he said, “I can't, Kiera, I need to get back.”

Releasing him from my grasp, I watched as he rolled back his shoulders and his wings disappeared back between his shoulder blades. Putting his police shirt back on and buttoning it up the front, it seemed hard to believe what he kept hidden beneath it. Back in his uniform, he looked like any regular cop. He headed towards the door. Luke opened it an inch, then stopped and looked back at me.

“How do you feel about your friend Tom, now?” he asked.

“Tom?” I frowned. “Who's Tom?”

“The guy you told me about – the one you once loved,” Luke said.

“I’ve never been in love before,” I frowned. I had no idea as to what he was talking about. “I’ve never had a friend called Tom.”

“It must be my mistake,” he half smiled at me. “See you tonight, beautiful girl,” Luke added, and then he was gone, closing the door behind him.

Rolling onto my back and pulling the covers over me, I drifted into sleep imagining those soft and powerful wings all around me, brushing against my skin and making me feel safe.

I found myself running along the shore of the cove. I was out of breath. The sea crashed against the sand in thick, black, oily waves. Smashing against the rocks, giant sheets of freezing cold water sprayed into the night. Ahead, there were two huge cliffs stretching up into the sky like deformed monsters. Behind me there was a noise and it sounded like a frantic heartbeat. Gasping for breath, I could see a cloud. It was dark and moved across the night sky at a great speed. The sound of the racing heartbeat came from it.

Turning, I ran hard, clambering over the rocks that jutted from the sand like broken gravestones. Seaweed covered them like black veins. I lost my footing and slipped, falling face-first into the sand. Waves rushed at me,

soaking my clothes, face and hair. The heartbeat sound grew louder.

Looking back over my shoulder, I could see the cloud was getting nearer, as if it were following me.

Dragging myself to my feet, I ran on, a stitch burning in my side like a stab wound. Giant waves rushed me again, as if wanting to drag me under. Reaching a huge, slick-looking rock, I climbed on top. Looking into the distance, I could see a cave set between the two cliffs ahead of me.

The sound of the heartbeat was louder, almost deafening now. Glancing back again, I screamed. The cloud was almost above me, and I could now see that it wasn't a cloud at all, but a thousand winged creatures racing towards me. The heartbeat was the sound of their wings beating together as one.

Scrambling down the other side of the rock, I raced as fast and as hard as I could towards the cave. Sand kicked up from beneath my trainers, and my jeans felt heavy and wet against my legs, making any movements sluggish. I pushed on, my lungs burning inside me. Looking back, I could see thousands of vampire bats swooping out of the sky. But they weren't normal vampire bats—they were men and women with black wings that looked as if they were made of stretched leather. They were so close I could see their green eyes and the saliva dripping from their razor-sharp teeth.

Turning my back on the Vampyrus, I rushed towards the mouth of the cave. My heart felt like it was going to explode, but I pushed myself harder, faster! The safety of the cave was within touching distance, but as I reached it, I could see it had been sealed over with a metal grate. I yanked on it, but it was locked fast and wouldn't open.

"Please!" I begged. "Please let me in!"

Peering over my shoulder, eyes bulging in fear, I could see the Vampyrus racing towards me, soaring just inches above the sand. Turning to face the grate, I pulled on it with what little strength I had left.

"Please open!" I screamed.

Sand and seawater sprayed up all around me under the force of the beating wings of the vampire bats that were now within touching distance of me. Pulling on the grate one last time, it opened and I stumbled through it and into the waiting arms of my...

"...mum!" I yelled, bolting upright in my bed. My heart was racing in my chest, and I felt breathless. A thin layer of sweat covered my brow and my black hair clung to my face in damp streaks. Throwing back the covers, I swung my legs over the side of the bed and stood up. They felt shaky and unstable. Going to the bathroom, I poured myself a glass of water from the tap and drank it down without stopping until the glass was empty.

The dream about my mother had upset me, and as I looked in the mirror above the bathroom sink, I brushed away the tears that were rolling down my cheeks. I hadn't dreamt of her for a while now and if at all possible, I tried not to think about her. It wasn't that I hated her – it was the opposite – I loved her deeply. But to be reminded of her was agony.

The last time I'd seen my mother had been as she'd left the house to go and buy me a birthday cake for my seventeenth birthday party, three years ago. Wearing her favourite summer dress, her black hair swishing about her shoulders, she had waved goodbye to me as she passed through the front garden gate.

“See you later, alligator,” she had smiled.

“In a while, crocodile,” I smiled back and then added, “I love you!”

Blowing me a kiss, she said, “I love you more.” Then she was gone, never to be seen again. By ten o'clock that night, after my father had made several frantic phone calls to friends and family, he called the police. At first they treated her sudden disappearance as a missing person's inquiry, but the longer she stayed away, the more suspicion fell upon my father. She was a cop after all, and they looked after their own. He was taken in for questioning and they kept him there for nearly three days. While he was away, police officers in white suits came to the house and I watched them quietly as they examined every inch of our home. Police officers in black

boiler suits turned over the back garden, pulled open the drains, and confiscated our trash. But they found nothing.

My father returned home, looking tired and drawn, white whiskers protruding from his chin. With my arm around him, he sat and sobbed into his hands and I will never forget that. Apart from the disappearance of his wife, he hated being under suspicion of harming her in any way. My father had been devoted to her and as far as I can recall, they had always been close. But more than that, I knew he was hurt by how the police had been so quick to doubt him. For years he had worked alongside them, helping to shed light on the murder victims that so often ended up in his lab.

It was after this that my father was never quite the same. He was often quiet and he seemed to have lost his appetite and passion for his work. Sure, he still talked about his cases when I asked him, but I could feel his passion for it had gone.

One day as we sat and watched the T.V. together, I looked up at his tired-looking face and said, “You know how you say I can see things?”

“Your *gift*,” he half-smiled. “What about it?”

“Well it would be a shame if I didn’t ever put it to some good use, wouldn’t you say?” I asked him.

“It sure would,” he said. “What are you planning on doing with it?”

“I’m going to be a cop,” I told him, and I’d never been more serious about anything in my life.

“A cop? Just like your mum...*was*?” he said, raising an eyebrow. “She would’ve been proud of you. Why do you want to be a cop?”

“Because when I do, I’m going to reopen mum’s case and I’m gonna find her for you,” I told him.

For a moment or two, my father looked as if he didn’t know what to say. At first he looked kind of angry and then his face softened and he just looked sad. “That’s a wonderful idea, Kiera, but if all those detectives haven’t been able to find her after – what’s it been now?”

“Eleven months and six days,” I said.

“How do you imagine you will be able to find her?” he asked. He wasn’t belittling me, he was trying hard not to raise my hopes – and his own, I think.

“Those other detectives might have missed things,” I told him. “They might not have seen all of the clues.”

“What clues?” he asked. “There were no clues.”

Sitting next to him on the sofa, I said, “There are always clues. You taught me that.”

“I know, but this is different -” he started.

Cutting over him, I said, “I know that mum went missing before she even reached the end of our street,” I told him.

Pulling away so he could look at me, he said, “Oh come on, Kiera, how could you possibly know that?”

Looking him straight in the eyes, I said, “Mum left the house in her summer dress that day.”

“So?”

“Well I remember that day as clearly as if it were yesterday,” I told him. “Within a minute or so of her leaving the house, the heavens opened and there was a terrible storm. It lasted a good hour or so. I hadn’t seen such heavy rain for a long time. Then there was this really loud thunderclap followed by lightning. It was so loud that I was worried for mum because I knew how scared she got during thunderstorms.

“So knowing that she had only been gone a minute or so and couldn’t have even got to the end of the street, I guessed she would’ve come running back to the house. You know, to either get changed into something waterproof or wait for the storm to pass. But she didn’t come back. And taking into account how fussy mum was about keeping her hair nice, the least I would’ve expected her to do was to come back for a hat. But she didn’t. Mum would’ve never stayed out in that thunderstorm – she would have come back home,” I said, looking at him.

Staring back at me, with a sudden look of realisation on his face, he said to me, “My god, Kiera, you’re right. So whatever happened to your mum, happened before that storm started?”

“Exactly,” I said. “That’s how I know she went missing on our very street – just yards from our front door.”

“But what could’ve happened? Where could she have gone in such a short space of time?” he asked.

“That’s what I plan to find out,” I insisted. “When I become a cop, I’m going to check out her case and read all the statements that were taken from the neighbours in our street. Then when I’ve read them, I’m going to go visit the neighbours and re-interview them. I know I will *see* something – some small piece of detail – *inconsistencies* – that those other cops didn’t *see*. God is in the detail.”

“God is in the detail,” he repeated, then added, “Did I tell you that?”

“No, mum did,” I said and hugged him. “And I promise I will find her for you.”

But my father never saw me become a police officer. He died of pancreatic cancer two months before I joined police training school. And that hurt more than everything – it felt as if my heart had been ripped out of my chest. But I intended to keep my promise to him, however long it took

me, I would find out what happened to my mother. She was out there somewhere, I knew she was, and my dream only reminded me of that.

Washing away my tears, I left the bathroom. I had to be at the station within two hours. How well Murphy, Potter, and Rom would take my return I didn't know. I would just have to put my trust in Luke.

Remembering that my car still lay in the ditch up on the road, I went to the window to see if the snow had stopped. It had, but it lay in thick drifts along the road and fields that stretched out in front of the Inn. Leaving my police uniform hanging off the back of my chair – not knowing whether to wear it or not after being kicked off the team – I wrapped up warm in a sweatshirt, jeans, and boots. Hitching on my coat, I left my room and immediately noticed the envelope tacked to my door. Taking it down, I opened it and pulled out the folded piece of paper from inside. It was written by the same hand as before. This is what it said:

Luke Bishop is not to be trusted, Kiera.

Folding the note in half, I tucked it into my pocket and headed downstairs.

Chapter Fourteen

I reached the bottom of the stairs, and as I passed the dining area, I heard raised voices coming from the small office behind the bar. Stepping into the shadows by the door, I tried to listen to what was being said. The voices were that of the old woman and her son, Roland, and they were arguing.

“I’ve had enough, Roland,” the old woman croaked. “I can’t take it anymore.”

“Mother, I’ve already told you, I can handle it, okay?” Roland snapped.

“We need to leave here,” she said, almost seeming to plead with him.

“How many ways have I got to tell you, ma? I’ve got everything under control!” Roland shouted.

“But what if they come for *us*?” she said, and she sounded frightened. “What if we’re next?”

“They won’t,” he said. “We’re safe here.”

“There are only so many cloves of garlic I can put up, only so many crucifixes and bottles of holy water I can sell before -” she started.

“Before what, ma?” he cut over her.

“Before there aren’t any more people left in this town to protect from -” she hissed.

“I’m done talking about this with you!” he barked. “I know what I’m doing.”

Without warning, the office door flew open, and he stormed from around the bar, heading straight towards me. Slinking back into the shadows, I made myself as small as possible. He passed within a few inches of me. He was so close; I could smell the sweat leaking from his pores.

Once I was certain he’d gone, I crept from my hiding place and headed towards the door. Pulling it open, I heard the old woman’s voice behind me. “Don’t be forgetting this,” she said, tossing me another bottle of holy water.

Snatching it out of the air, and not knowing if she was aware that I’d been eavesdropping, I said, “Thank you.”

“You never know when you might need it,” she whispered, without smiling.

Turning back towards the door, I heard her say, “If you had half the sense I think you have, you would leave this town and never come back.”

Without looking at her, I pushed open the door and sneaked out into the snow with the old woman’s warning ringing in my ears. She was right, I should leave, run and keep running and never look back. But I couldn’t, and that reason was Luke. Everything he had told me last night had turned my world on its head. Everything that I had learnt – everything I *thought* I knew – was now gone. It was like I was learning from scratch. What I’d seen last night was the stuff of horror movies and fairy tales. But I now knew it was all real. I had been a part of it. I had *become* part of it. Luke was a vampire bat or a *Vampyrus* as he liked to be known. But was there really a difference? There was so much more I needed to find out about him. But wasn’t that what had hooked me, the fact that he was a mystery?

When I’d been with Luke the night before, as he had revealed his true self to me, and told me about his world, it was like he had me under a spell, and I kind of just accepted everything he had told me. But now that I was alone and he was away from me, that spell had been broken – a little at least.

Trudging through the snow, hundreds of questions now spiralled through my mind and I didn’t have the answers. Was Luke immortal? If not,

did he age like a human? Was I safe with him? The note, which had been left for me, came to the forefront of my mind. Could I trust Luke Bishop?

Not knowing the answers to any of these questions, I struggled on towards the town. The pale winter sun was setting, and wanting to be at the police station before nightfall, I quickened my pace. I'd walked a mile or so, when in the distance, I could see something black running towards me in the snow. Stopping, I crouched low, immediately on guard. With my heart racing, I burrowed into a nearby hedgerow. Whatever it was, it was panting as if exhausted and out of breath. With my curiosity getting the better of me, I peeked from my hiding place and almost gasped in relief when I realised what it was coming towards me. Crawling from the snow-laden bush, I stood up and said, "Here boy! Come here!"

Seeing me, the Labrador came bounding forwards, its huge pink tongue lolling from the corner of its mouth. Recognising it as belonging to the old man I'd spoken with the day before, outside the police station, I took the dog by the collar and patted him. The dog whined and pulled away from me.

"What's up, boy?" I asked it.

Again it whined and pulled in the direction that it had appeared from. Then pulling free of me, it ran back down the road. I chased after it, taking each step as carefully as I could, not wanting to slip and break an

arm, or worse, a leg. I didn't fancy lying out in the snow with a broken leg as night started to fall. I thought of those vampires again, and my skin crawled.

Catching up with the dog by a gate in the wall, it stood and barked at me. As I neared it, the dog bounded off again, as if it wanted me to follow. So I did. Making my way across the field, I could see the dog had stopped by something lying in the snow. As I drew near, the Labrador was prodding at it with its snout. He looked back at me and whined.

Approaching the dog, I could see that it was its owner lying face up in the snow. At first, I thought that perhaps the old man had lost his footing while out walking and had collapsed. But as I drew closer, I could see that the snow around him was stained crimson. Following the bloody splash marks, I made my way towards the dead man. I could see tracks around the body, and I was careful not to destroy them. Placing my hands over my mouth, I looked down at the mutilated body. Straight away, I could see that this attack had been far more frenzied than the attack on the Blake boy. That had been bad enough, but this was something else. At least the boy had been left with his face.

The old man lay spread-eagle in the snow. Most of his face and neck had been ripped off. I could see the sinews and muscles that his face had once been attached to. His eye sockets were empty, just two black holes

looking back at me. The man's teeth were still intact, but without any lips, he looked as if he were grinning. His jacket and shirt had been slashed in two, revealing his torn-open chest cavity. Several of his ribs had been broken and they stuck out of his chest like white-coloured fingers. His lungs had been half eaten and what was left looked like a pile of pink blancmange. The dog looked at me and whimpered. Reaching out for it, the dog licked what was left of his owner's face, and then ran off into the distance.

Kneeling down, I ran the tips of my fingers over the corpse, my eyes flitting back and forth – unconsciously taking in every minute detail. I dabbed at the blood around the main wound, then the blood further out around the edges, and then the blood that had sprayed over the snow. I got up and paced around the man. Looking left and right, up and down, noting every little thing I could see, almost without knowing that I was doing it. Within seconds, I knew how long ago the killing had taken place, four *people* had taken part, the same three as before, but this time there had been someone new. And the tracks they had left were different – somehow odd. But it wasn't just that. There was something missing. With the light fading fast, I set off back across the field and towards town.

Pushing open the door to the police station, I rushed in. Stamping the snow from my boots, and brushing it from my hair and shoulders, I

looked up to see Sergeant Murphy and Constable Potter standing in the office, on the other side of the counter.

“Bishop told us you would come back,” Potter said. “He also confessed that you know about...*us*.”

“I don’t have time for that now...” I started, still out of breath from my hike across the fields to the station.

“He hasn’t done you a favour revealing himself to you,” Murphy said, coming towards me in that lopsided way of his. “In fact, he’s put you in even greater danger.”

“I’ll worry about that later,” I said, trying to catch my breath. “I’ve found another one.”

“Another what?” Potter spat, coming closer.

“Victim,” I wheezed. “This one’s bad though. It’s not like before.”

“How?” Murphy asked, his concern undeniable.

“They took his face. I’ve never seen anything like it. The attack was frenzied – *savage*,” I said, and just recalling that mutilated man lying in the snow, made my legs want to buckle beneath me.

Pulling up a chair, Murphy told me to sit down and calm myself. Potter handed me a cup of water and I noted that this was the first kind thing he had done for me since taking up my post in The Ragged Cove.

Once I'd caught my breath, I looked at Murphy and Potter. "There were four of them. They left tracks in the snow. I could have only just missed them."

"By how long?" Potter asked.

"Five minutes," I said, looking at him. Again he rolled his eyes as if dismissing what I'd just said. "Look, blood behaves like many other salty solutions and freezes at between minus two and minus three degrees Celsius," I explained, not wanting to sound as if I were patronising him. "Blood starts to coagulate after less than ten minutes outside of the body, although if you had a shallow pool of blood, it would start to congeal more rapidly around the edges. Temperature also plays a big part. The warmer it is, the slower the coagulation. The colder it is, the faster the coagulation."

Potter and Murphy looked blankly at me.

"It's freezing out there, right?" I said, exasperated. "So if we know that blood clots in less than ten minutes, but more quickly in the cold, the blood on that man was still tacky. My guess is that he couldn't have been murdered more than five minutes before I found his body."

"Where did you learn all this shit?" Potter said.

"It's not shit." I glared at him.

"What else did you *see*?" Murphy asked me, glancing at Potter as if to tell him to be quiet.

“Like I said, they left footprints – four individual sets. But there was something wrong with one of them, I think they had an injury but I can’t be sure,” I told them.

“Could you see where the tracks led to and from? If we’re quick enough, we might be able to track them,” Potter said, pulling on his jacket.

“No, it was like before,” I said. “There were only tracks around the body – so they must’ve flown in and out of the crime scene.”

“Vampires!” Murphy seethed.

Then looking at the both of them, I said, “Who said anything about vampires?”

“What are you talking about?” Potter said, fixing his utility belt around his waist.

“That man wasn’t killed by vampires,” I said.

“What then?” Murphy snapped, desperate to find out what I knew.

“Vampyrus,” I said. “That man was murdered by *bats*.”

“Ridiculous,” Potter scoffed. But I noticed the look of concern that flashed between him and his sergeant.

“How can you be certain?” Murphy asked, and I detected a tremor in his voice.

“Like I told you, that man was murdered not long before I discovered him,” I started to explain.

“So?” Potter said.

Standing and slapping the palms of my hands against my brow in frustration, I said, “My God, you just don’t see it, do you?”

“See what?” Murphy shouted, sounding pissed at me all over again.

“It was still daylight when the killing took place!” I almost screamed at them. “Vampires can’t live in the light, but *Vampyrus* can. But not only that, vampires can’t fly!”

“But there was only meant to be the *one*!” Potter said, looking at Murphy. “We were here to track just the one!”

Sergeant Murphy looked at Potter and seemed to be taking in what I’d just said. He was quiet and thoughtful for a moment, and then said, “If the girl is right and we have more than one *Vampyrus* addicted to the blood of humans, then we’ve got problems.”

“*Problems*?” Potter roared. “If we don’t find them – we could have an epidemic!”

“The matter is far worse than I first thought,” Murphy said, sucking on the end of his pipe. “Where did you find this body?”

“Do you have a map?” I asked.

Without saying anything, Potter pulled one from a desk drawer and spread it out flat.

Looking at the map, I got my bearings, then tracing my finger across it; I stopped at a field about a mile and half from the Crescent Moon Inn.

“There,” I said. “That’s where the body is.”

Pulling on his jacket and taking some large flashlights, Murphy and Potter made for the police station door.

“Hang on!” I said to them.

“For what?” Potter asked, looking back at me.

“Where’s Luke?”

Glancing at one another, Murphy turned to look at me and said, “He’s gone under.”

“Under where?” I asked, my heart beginning to race.

“To the caves,” Murphy said, sloping back towards me.

“Home?” I asked, realising that they were talking about The Hollows. “But why?”

“When Rom discovered he had told you everything,” Murphy explained, “he sent Luke back below ground.”

“But he saved my life,” I said.

“He broke the rules,” Potter cut in.

“What rules?” I snapped. “That he shouldn’t have helped me – *saved me?*”

“He shouldn’t have told you about us,” Murphy said. “He had no right.”

“But he did what he thought was right,” I snapped, trying to defend him.

Then, coming towards me, his eyes fixed on mine, and his voice low, Potter said, “Don’t be fooled to think that Luke Bishop loves you, Kiera.”

“What’s that supposed to mean?” I asked staring back; trying not to let the hurt I was feeling show.

“He saved your life to ease his guilty conscience,” he said, and half-smiled.

“What’s he got to feel guilty about?” I asked, now feeling confused.

Before Potter had a chance to reply, Murphy barked, “Enough Sean! Enough already!”

Slinking away from me as if he’d been bitten, Potter went back to the door where Murphy was waiting for him. “Let’s go and sort this mess out,” Murphy said.

“What about me?” I asked as they went to leave.

“What about you?” Murphy asked.

“Aren’t I coming with you?”

“No,” Murphy said. “You’ll only slow us down.”

“I can lead you straight to the body.”

“You don’t really think we’re going to walk in this weather, do you?” Potter asked, giving me a knowing wink.

God, I hated that guy. “But what am I meant to do here, all on my own?”

“Turn off all the lights and lock all the windows and doors,” Murphy said, stepping out into the night. Racing around the counter, I yanked open the door, but the street was deserted, they’d already gone. In the distance, I heard what sounded like two loud thunderclaps.

Chapter Fifteen

Locking the station door behind me, I went back around the front desk to the office. Going to the hatch that led beneath ground, I stood and looked at it. I could see that the hatch had been fastened with a rusty-looking padlock. Was there really another world on the other side of it? A world thousands of years old, where these Vampyrus lived in the utter darkness of caves and caverns?

Stepping away, I saw something glint on the floor just beside the hatch. Bending down, I picked up something small and silver. Half expecting to find another small crucifix, the hairs on the nape of my neck stood on end as I looked at the tiny silver pair of metal wings in my hand. My skin flushed cold as I realised where I'd seen that little parachute regiment tiepin before. It had belonged to the old man I'd met in the street the day before – the old man who now lay dead and mutilated beyond recognition in the field.

But how had it ended up in the police station, just outside the hatch that I had been told led to The Hollows? It was then I realised what had been missing when I'd examined the body – the tiepin. But how then, had it ended up here? Who had brought it to the station and why? Knowing that the four creatures who'd butchered that poor man had all been Vampyrus, my list of suspects wasn't very long.

Then almost stumbling up the corridor, my heart racing in my chest and my stomach clenching, the final missing pictures of that crime scene fitted into place. Not only had the old man's tiepin been missing, so had his walking cane, the one I'd seen him carrying the day before. But why would anyone want to take that? They would've only taken the walking stick if they had needed it to help them...*walk!*

"The footprints! How could you not have seen it, Kiera?" I shouted at myself. That's what was so odd about them. The right footprint of the fourth person present was different because he had been limping!

Hitting me like a flashback, I remembered all of those times I'd seen Sergeant Murphy walking about the office with his right hip sloped down, as if he were limping. Feeling as if I were going to collapse, I gripped the wall. I felt panicked – *scared*. Would Murphy suspect that I knew? And what would he do to me if he did? The same as he'd done to the other cops who had been posted here.

Spinning round as if almost dazed, I knew I had to get as far away as possible from the station – from The Ragged Cove. But how was I to escape and where was I to go? I had no car and the roads were blocked. The phones didn't work, so I couldn't even make contact with the outside world and let them know what was happening. The only place I could go was back to the Inn and lock all the windows and doors – as Potter had said.

But what about him? Had Potter taken part in the killings? My mind turned to Luke, locked beneath that hatch. Was he like them too – just a killer? My head wasn't sure, but my heart told me no. He had saved me. He'd had plenty of opportunities to kill me if he'd really wanted to, but he hadn't. And I didn't care what Potter had insinuated about him, I knew Luke had feelings for me. Admittedly last night had been weird, but it had been magical, too. I'd never felt those feelings before, like I had with Luke, wrapped inside his wings, my head rested against his chest. The touch of his lips against mine, and the way he had looked into my eyes, as if he were looking into my soul. What were these feelings now burning inside of me? Perhaps if I had ever been in love before, I might have recognised them.

But Luke wasn't going to save me now. I would have to do that myself. Without a way out of The Ragged Cove, I would have to stay and fight. But to do that, I would need as much information as possible about

the vampires that had infested the town, and the Vampyrus that worked the vampire shift.

Hurrying around the station, not knowing how long I had before Murphy and Potter returned, I pulled open the desk drawers and filing cabinets. I wasn't sure what I was looking for, but my instincts told me I would know when I found it. I didn't have to wait long; pulling open a set of drawers beneath Sergeant Murphy's desk, I found a bunch of brown cardboard files. Taking them out and placing them on the desk, I thumbed through them. The first had the name 'Police Constable Cooper' typed across the front. Opening it, I found a small picture of a police officer stapled to the paperwork inside. There were some reports and notes written about his service history, but at the back I discovered another sheet of paper that had 'MISSING' stamped across it in blood red letters.

Opening another, I found the same written about an officer named 'Police Constable Munro.' Again, he had been reported missing. Another folder entitled 'Police Constable Ford' contained a picture, and looking at it, I thought I recognised him – but from where? Then, dropping the file as if it had stung me, I realised I had been looking at the human face of the vampire that had attacked me last night, the one in the tattered police uniform.

Gathering the files together, I was just about to put them back where I'd found them, when I saw a folder with 'Police Constable Reeves' written across the front. Picking it up, I opened the folder expecting to find a picture, reports, and service record. But to my surprise, the file was empty. I placed the folders back in Murphy's drawer, exactly as I'd found them.

Turning around, I crossed the office to a set of beat-up looking filing cabinets. Opening them, I found another set of folders, but these were red in colour. Taking out the first, I opened it to find a series of disturbing photos, of a woman whose throat had been shredded. She lay sprawled in a ditch, her hair splayed across her face, eyes open and staring up into the camera lens, as if posing for some grotesque picture. In the file, I found some brief details about her, her name, address, and date of birth. Also recorded was the date and location of her death. The next file contained photos of another murdered victim. This one male, thirty-four years-old. Again I noticed the date and the location of the murder. There were twenty-three files in all, too many for me to read thoroughly. So taking a piece of note paper from a nearby desk, I scribbled down the date of death for each victim, and the location their body had been discovered. Placing the folders back into the filing cabinet, I folded the piece of paper, along with the map, and placed them both into my coat pocket.

Heading back down the corridor, I went to the female locker room. It was more of a cupboard really, as it only had the one locker and the rest of the space was filled with old bikes and other bits of lost property. Reaching into my locker to make sure I'd left nothing behind, as I had no intention of coming back here, I checked each shelf. As I stretched my fingers into the furthest corners, I felt something. Pulling it out, I could see that it was a hairbrush. Knowing it didn't belong to me, I tossed it back onto the shelf, guessing it had been left behind by a previous female officer based at the station.

Turning away, I suddenly stopped. Taking hold of the hairbrush again, I held it up into the light and inspected it. The brush had several blonde hairs snagged around its bristles. Using my fingernails like a set of tweezers, I removed one of the hairs. Looking at it closely, I could see that, just like the hair I'd found in the hand of Henry Blake, this hair had also been dyed peroxide blonde and there was about half an inch of black hair leading from the root.

There was a noise. My heart leapt into my throat and I froze. Fearing that Murphy and Potter had returned, I put the hairbrush back where I'd found it and tiptoed towards the locker room door. Closing it over, leaving just a gap for me to spy through, I looked back down the corridor.

The noise came again, but it wasn't coming from the office – it was closer than that. Pressing my ear to the gap, I listened. The noise sounded like metal clicking, similar to a lock being unpicked. Staring back through the gap again, I could see that it was the padlock on the hatch where the noise was coming from. It jiggled back and forth, making a clunking noise, as if it was being picked open from the other side. With a clink, it fell away from the hatch.

Spying from my hiding place, I watched the hatch swing up and open. There was a sound like a rush of air, as Chief Inspector Rom climbed out and into the corridor. He was naked to the waist, and from his back protruded a set of prehistoric-looking wings. A see-through looking membrane hung from beneath them. His silver hair was swept back from his forehead and he looked up and down the corridor as if checking to see if the coast was clear. Once he was content that he was alone, he looked back into the hole and said, "C'mon, climb up."

Looking in my direction, he held his hand up to whoever was about to appear from the hole, and said, "Wait a minute." Taking several powerful strides, Rom came towards the female locker room. Had he seen me? *Sensed* me? I didn't know, but I had to hide. Glancing around the locker room, I spied the open door of my empty locker and ran towards it. Diving inside, I pulled the door shut as Rom strode into the locker room.

With my heart racing so loud and fast I feared he would hear it, I held my breath. From the other side of the locker door, I could hear the sound of footsteps crossing the room. He stopped, and I didn't know why. Wishing I was someplace else, I closed my eyes and willed him to go away.

Please! I screamed inside my head. *Please don't look inside the locker!*

The sound of his footsteps came closer.

Please no! I begged.

Closer still. My heart was thumping. I held my breath. The door rattled as he took hold of the handle on the other side.

"Rom!" I heard another say, the voice sounding distant. "Rom!"

"I told you to wait," Rom said, his voice sounding angry on the other side of the locker door. I heard the sound of his footsteps heading back across the room.

Covering my mouth with my hands, and closing my eyes, I dropped my head in relief. But I was still in trouble. I had to get out of the police station before Murphy and Potter came back and joined them. Hearing the locker room door close, I waited just to make sure that Rom had gone. When I was certain I couldn't hear him, I eased my way from the locker, being careful not to make any noise.

With my heart pounding in my chest, I crept over to the door. Placing the side of my face against it, I listened. The sound of muffled voices came from the other side. Scraping my long black hair behind my ear, I tried to make out what it was they were saying.

“Bishop has complicated matters,” Rom said.

“But he will be dealt with?” the other asked.

With my ear pressed flat against the door, I hoped I might recognise the voice.

“Yes, it is in hand,” Rom almost seemed to growl at the other.

There was a pause, then the unknown voice said, “If she were to discover the truth, what then?”

“She already knows about us,” Rom said.

“Not that,” hissed the other. “I’m talking about if she really knew what happened.”

I’ve already figured it out, wise guy, I thought to myself. *I know it’s you who killed the boy and the old man.* But then Rom said something that almost made me drop to the floor in shock.

“This Kiera can’t ever find out what happened to her mother,” he said.

“Leave that to me,” said the other, his voice fading as they walked away down the corridor to the custody block.

Sliding to the floor and pulling my knees up beneath my chin, I sat in numb shock at what I'd just heard. It was as if I'd just woken from a deep sleep – dazed and confused. What did my mother have to do with what was taking place in The Ragged Cove? She had disappeared three years ago on her way to buy me a birthday cake, she had nothing to do with this, I told myself. Perhaps I'd misheard what had been said. But in my heart I knew I hadn't. Why had she come to The Ragged Cove? Who brought her here? But the one thought that ate away at me more than any of the others, was: What had happened to her?

Pulling myself to my feet, I felt sick and frightened. Not for me, but for her. Where was my mother? I felt more determined than ever to uncover what was happening in The Ragged Cove, however dangerous that might be. But I knew I had little time left before the Vampyrus, the vampires, or both came for me.

Listening against the door to make sure Rom and his companion were not on the other side, I slowly turned the handle. Opening it just a fraction, I put my eye to the crack and peered out. The corridor was empty and the hatch was closed, fastened again with the rusty padlock. In the distance, I could hear the sound of voices. Opening the door another inch, I listened. It was the sound of them talking. Their voices hollow and coming from the custody block.

Sneaking from behind the door, I stepped into the corridor. With their voices fading behind me, I glanced down again at the hatch. Through its metal grating, I could see only darkness as it spiralled away into hell. Reaching the main office, I crept around the front counter, unlocked the door, and left the police station.

It had started to snow again, and with no other option but to return to the Crescent Moon Inn, I set off towards it. I just prayed I could reach it before either the vampires or Vampyrus took me.

Chapter Sixteen

With the Crescent Moon Inn within sight, I ran as fast as I could towards it. It had taken me over an hour to walk from the police station and every minute had seemed like an eternity. It hadn't just been the freezing snow that had made my journey so miserable; it had been the constant fear that at any moment, I would be rushed at by screaming vampires or snatched into the air by flying Vampyrus. With Luke banished to The Hollows, I felt exposed and unprotected. I wondered now if he could be trusted, and although I'd refused to dwell earlier on Potter's comments about Luke's guilt, I now feared what he might have to feel guilty about.

Ever since overhearing Rom mention my mother, I knew that whatever had happened to her, the Vampyrus had been involved and I feared Luke had played a part in that.

Reaching the Inn, I pushed open the door and stepped inside. The bar area had the usual number of locals clustered around the tables, warming themselves by the fire, cradling a neat whiskey in their hands.

Again, they all looked up at me and the room fell into a hushed silence. I felt like screaming at them, *WHAT ARE YOU ALL LOOKING AT?* But I didn't. I skulked across the bar with my head down, just wanting to get tonight over with. As I reached the foot of the staircase leading up to the bedrooms, Roland appeared in the doorway of the small back office. I jumped, his sudden presence making me gasp. He looked at me, his jowls glowing red, as he wiped his meaty hands against his stained apron.

"I'm sorry, I didn't mean to alarm you," he blushed.

"It's okay," I said, forcing a smile.

"Well if you are sure..."

"I'm sure," I told him, just wanting to get to my room.

"It's just that you look washed-out – *ill*," he said.

"It's been one of those days." I knew he was only trying to be nice, but I wasn't in the mood for him.

"Perhaps, I could fix you up with something to eat?" he smiled. "A sandwich, perhaps?"

"I thought your mother was strict about eating times?" I said, unzipping my coat. It had been freezing outside, but with the heat from the roaring fire coming from the bar, the Inn felt hot and oppressive.

"Don't take any notice of mother," he smiled. And then leaning in towards me, he whispered, "She has her odd little ways."

I hadn't been so close to Roland before, and as he stepped forward, I could see beads of sweat lining his brow and glistening on his upper lip. His eyes looked puffy and his lips tinged blue. Seeing that his circulation was obviously bad, I guessed that he would be dead of a heart attack by the time he was fifty. It was hard to tell how old he was as his plumpness consumed any wrinkles or lines his face might have. His dark, wavy hair was messy and dirty, combed back, and greasy-looking. His chubby hands were flecked with blood from where he had been preparing raw meat in the kitchen. His breath smelt bad and the thought of him preparing any food for me was repulsive.

Inching my way up the stairs, I looked back at him and said, "It's really sweet of you to offer, Roland, but I just want to get some sleep."

"If you're sure, young lady," he called after me. "I really don't mind."

"Thank you," I called back over my shoulder, "but I'm sure. Goodnight, Roland."

Closing my bedroom door behind me, I threw off my coat, and taking the map and the list of the dates and locations of the murders, I sat on the floor. Spreading the map before me, I took a pen and made a mark on the map, highlighting where the murders furthest apart had taken place. I'd often heard my father talk about studies he had read of murders committed

by serial killers. There were several theories stating that most serial killers committed their murders close to their home address. It often took less effort on the part of the killer if they committed their crimes close to home, and they liked to be a minimum distance away from their home so they could return there quickly once the crime had been committed. I heard dad say once that if you took the two furthest locations of the killers crimes, marked them on a map and drew a circle around them, somewhere in that ring you would have your killer.

So with my pen, I drew a large circle on the map. But I knew that I wasn't dealing with just one killer, I was dealing with several – possibly more. But I had a theory of my own. Luke had told me that when the *hunger* was upon them, it was like a burning sensation in their very souls, which couldn't be satisfied unless they gave into it or returned back to The Hollows and waited for it to subside. They were like drug addicts or those who were starving. And in either case, would an addict walk miles for a fix if they knew they could get one close by? Would someone who was starving walk past several restaurants, or go and eat at the first one they came across? The same rules applied to the Vampyrus and the vampires. When they woke and their craving was at its height, they would kill and eat from the first available source of food they came across.

So taking my list, I marked on the map every location and the date that a victim had been found. Once I'd finished, I sat back and looked at the map. In the centre, there was a cluster of tiny crosses. These marked the killings furthest back in time. Then as I reached the most recent murders, the crosses spread further out over the map until they touched the edge of the circle that I'd made.

But why would the killings be taking place further and further away from the centre of the ring, I wondered. Then thinking of the little old woman downstairs and her bottles of holy water, crucifixes, and decorations made of garlic, I realised why the murders had been taking place further out of town. As the news of the body count had grown, and with it the rumours of vampires, the residents of The Ragged Cove had taken precautions by stocking up on holy water, crucifixes, and decorating their homes with cloves of garlic. So as more and more of the terrified villagers had done this, the further away the Vampyrus and vampires had to go to find victims and sedate their hunger. Thinking of how I'd been attacked on the town's border, it suggested to me that my hypothesis was right. How many homes would those vampires had to have passed, all of them filled with humans and their delicious blood, before they came across me? There would have been hundreds, but each night they had been pushed further and further afield in search of food. But as they did, they were spreading their net

beyond the reaches of The Ragged Cove, and with every killing, another vampire was born.

Realising that time was running out if I were to...to do what exactly? I didn't know. But to know the location of their lair would be a start. So looking back at the map, I stuck the tip of my pen in the centre of the group of concentrated crosses. Pulling it away again, I looked at the mark it had made on the top of St. Mary's Church. Reeling in shock and disbelief, I slumped backwards onto my butt and stared down at the map. Before I'd had time to fully comprehend what I'd discovered, I noticed a shadow beneath my bedroom door as if someone were standing outside it. Believing Roland had ignored my refusals to take up his offer of something to eat; I got up and went to the door.

Yanking it open, I said, "Look, Roland, it really is very sweet of you but -" Before I'd had a chance to finish, I realised that it wasn't the Innkeeper standing outside my room, but the hooded man who had been leaving me the envelopes and crucifixes.

We both gasped at the same time, me in shock and him as if he really didn't want to get caught. Sensing this, I grabbed for him, desperate to know who had been following me since my arrival at The Ragged Cove. He jumped back away from me, but he wasn't quick enough and I had hold of his hoodie. He pushed me in the chest, and I fell backwards into my

room, crashing to the floor and taking him with me. Rolling onto my back, I watched him get up and bolt for the door. Reaching out with both arms, I wrapped them around his legs. Toppling over like a stack of children's bricks, he slammed into the floor again. Kneeling on his chest, pinning him down, I pulled back the hood. Recognising the face that stared back at me, I jumped back and gasped, "What are you doing here?"

Chapter Seventeen

“Covering your back,” Sergeant Phillips groaned, looking up at me from beneath the hood.

“Why?” I asked, still shocked at discovering the hooded man was my sergeant from training school.

“Why do you think?” he said, getting up off the floor. “You might have noticed that this town ain’t exactly normal.”

“Then why send me here?” I asked, sitting on the edge of my bed.

“No one sent you,” Phillips said. “You volunteered, remember?”

“With plenty of persuasion from you,” I reminded him as he sat down at the desk.

“Okay, okay,” he said, “However it happened, you’re here now and in incredible danger.”

“I’ve worked that out for myself,” I told him.

“You only know the half of it,” he said, his voice lowered.

“What do you mean, Sarge?” I said, fearing what he had to tell me.

“For starters, stop calling me Sarge,” he half-smiled. “We’re not at training school now.”

“Sorry, Craig,” I said, feeling odd calling him by his first name. He was kind of handsome, in his mid-thirties, but had gone prematurely grey – white - if I were to be honest. But it kind of suited his rugged looks and gave him a look of authority, almost imposing. I hadn’t exactly had a *thing* for him as a recruit, but I had made a complete fool of myself on graduation day. I’d been upset and hurt that my father had died just a few months before my joining the police force. At the evening function, the women dressed in their gowns and the men in their tuxedos, I’d consumed one too many glasses of wine and my grief had overtaken me.

Wanting to be held and comforted, I’d smooched up to Sergeant Phillips and draped my arm around him. The rest is kind of a blur, but I did have vague memories of trying to entice him onto the dance floor. When he’d refused, I told him how hot he looked in his tuxedo and asked if he had a wife. The next thing I remember was waking the next morning in my small room, lying on top of my bed, still wearing my ball gown and cradling a picture of my father to my chest.

Embarrassed, I’d asked my colleagues what had happened and they told me that I’d collapsed in the middle of the dance floor, where I’d sat and cried for my father. Swooping me up into his arms, they told me how

Sergeant Phillips had carried me back to my room and put me to bed. For the next few days, it was hard looking him in the eyes, but he had been decent about it and hadn't mentioned it since.

"How much do you know?" he asked, yanking me from my memories of him.

"I know that this town isn't *normal*," I told him.

"What do you mean?" he asked, leaning forward in his seat.

"The cops in this town – how can I put this?" I said, knowing what I had to say would seem unbelievable. "Well they're not like regular cops. They're not like you and me."

"Of course they are," he said. "I've known Sergeant Murphy, Potter, and Bishop for years."

"You don't know them as well as I do then," I assured him. "And besides, if you know and trust them all so well, why did you leave me a note telling me that I shouldn't trust Luke?" I asked him, needing to know what it was that Luke had to feel guilty about. But more than that, I needed to know if my trust in him had been misplaced, and if his feelings for me had been real.

Shifting in his seat, Craig leant into me, as if what he had to tell me was such a grave secret he couldn't afford to let anyone else overhear it.

"It has to do with your mother," he said, just above a whisper.

Believing I'd misheard him, I said, "Sorry, what did you say?"

"It is believed that Luke Bishop played some part in your mother's disappearance," he said, searching my eyes to gauge my reaction.

"But how?" I mumbled, desperate to make sense of what he was telling me. Knowing that Luke was a Vampyrus, I said to Craig, "Did he murder her?"

"Not exactly," he said.

"What's that supposed to mean?" I snapped, jumping up from the edge of my bed. "What was my mother doing in this town anyhow?"

Sensing I was getting stressed, Craig looked at me, and in a calm and almost soothing voice, he said, "Please, Kiera, sit down and I'll tell you everything I know."

Sitting again, Craig said, "There have been killings taking place in this town for a few years now. At first they were sporadic and believed to have been committed by wild animals, the wounds inflicted on the victims all suggested that. Then the grave desecrations started occurring and people started to go missing. The stories started to get a lot of media attention and the whole thing turned into some kind of circus for a while. Rumours started to spread that the town was infested with vampires, but of course this theory was never taken seriously.

“Murphy and his small team were posted here. It became obvious they weren’t making much progress. So it was decided that some of our most brightest and resourceful officers should be posted here to help investigate the crimes. But one by one, they went missing, seeming to disappear off the face of the Earth. Headquarters was at its wits end. Your mother had gained herself a reputation as being a maverick who had the uncanny intuition to solve crimes that had left other officers – often more experienced and senior in rank – baffled and confused.

“Many times your mother had been approached to join the National Crime Squad, but each time she had declined, saying that although she loved her job, her main love was for you and your father and she didn’t want to do anything that might cause her to spend too much time away from you both.

“But with pressure on us to solve the murders in The Ragged Cove, a certain amount of pressure was put on her to change her mind,” he said.

“What sort of pressure?” I asked him.

Looking down at his feet as if he were ashamed of what he had to tell me, he said, “Some drugs that had been recovered from a raid a few weeks before were found in her locker.”

“But my mother wouldn’t have ever taken drugs -” I shouted in her defence.

Before I'd the chance to finish, Craig said, "You don't have to try and convince me. Your mother was set up – blackmailed into coming down here. It was explained to her that if she came to The Ragged Cove, then the drugs found in her locker would magically disappear and nothing more would ever be said about them. But if she refused, then she would be arrested and charged, leaving her career in ruins. Your mother was switched on enough to know that if she were imprisoned for drug possession, not only would it have had a damaging effect on your father's reputation, but it would have also destroyed you."

"So having no real choice, she agreed to go to The Ragged Cove, but on the condition that it would be for two weeks only. It was agreed, and knowing your mother's ability to solve the most complex of crimes, two weeks was considered to be long enough. But she was sworn to secrecy. Your mother was to tell no one where she was going or what she was doing," Craig explained.

"Why not?" I asked.

"Each of the other officers sent here had gone missing as you know," he said, "so we wondered if there was some link between force headquarters and whoever was committing the murders in the town. We needed it to look like she had just been sent as part of a routine attachment. We changed her name and collar number, and she even changed her

appearance. No one was to know that she'd been sent as part of the investigation team. That's why your mother had to vanish that day three years ago," he explained.

"So if you knew my mother had gone on some undercover assignment here, why was my father arrested, our home and garden searched?" I asked, growing evermore angry in the knowledge that we had been lied to for all these years.

"Only a few people knew at headquarters," he said, "so your mother's disappearance was treated just like any other."

"But they *arrested* my father!" I almost screamed at him. "He was never the same man after that. My father had been a proud man, but after the finger-pointing and accusations, he changed. And I think it was that stress and not knowing what had happened to my mother – *his wife* – that led to him dying so young."

"You've got to understand, Kiera, it wasn't my decision," Craig said, and he didn't look me in the eyes.

"No, but you knew about it!" I hissed at him, any respect that I'd previously had for him, fast disappearing. "You went along with it!"

"No one could've known what would've happened to your mother," he said.

“Oh, come on!” I snapped. “You must have had a pretty good idea! After all, every other cop you sent to this godforsaken place had gone missing.”

“But we believed it would be different this time around – your mother was *different*,” he insisted, looking up at me.

“So what did happen to her?” I asked.

“We’re not exactly sure” he confessed.

“Not exactly sure?” I roared. “This just keeps getting better and better!”

“We suspect Luke Bishop was involved,” he said.

‘How?’ I snapped, part of me not wanting to hear that Luke could have somehow been involved in my mother’s disappearance.

“He was crewed up with her the night she vanished,” Craig said. “He was interviewed but could give no explanation as to what had happened to her. He said they attended the scene of one of those murder victims. Apparently, he had gone off into the woods on his own to investigate some noises he’d heard, leaving your mother at the scene. He said he returned a short time later, only to find that she had gone,” Craig said.

Remembering how Luke had suddenly disappeared on the night we’d been at the graveyard, my heart sank. “He did the same to me,” I told

Craig. “We went up to St. Mary’s Church to investigate a grave that had been desecrated. I climbed down into the hole to take a better look, but when I came up he’d gone. In his place was a young girl. I called over the radio for him, but he never answered. Time and time again, I called for him to back me up, but he was nowhere to be found. Not until it was all over did he reappear.”

“Why were you calling for backup?” Craig asked.

“The girl was a vampire,” I told him, not caring if he believed me or not.

“Did I hear you right?” he said. “Did you just say *vampire*?”

“You heard right the first time,” I replied. “Believe it or not, Craig, this town is teaming with them.”

“Half of me had begun to suspect the rumours were true. That’s why I left you the crucifixes, but...” he started, and then trailed off as if lost for words.

“I know, it’s the stuff of horror movies and nightmares. I didn’t believe it myself at first, but when you have one climbing all over your police car trying to rip your face off, it gives you a different perspective on things,” I said.

Craig must have seen the haunted look in my eyes as I recalled what happened at the graveyard, because he looked at me and said, “You’re not

kidding, are you?”

“Why would I want to lie about something like that?” I asked. “I risk my whole career just by telling you.”

Craig slumped forward on the chair and studied my face. The silence seemed to stretch out forever. When I thought he was just about to get up and leave, he said, “Kiera, if anybody else had told me such a thing, I’d be taking their badge and telling them to get themselves some therapy. But I know you, I know how methodical your mind works and how you are only ever interested in the facts, in what you can see and touch.”

“I’ve seen and touched things that I would never have believed possible,” I told him. “But it’s not only that; I have some feelings for Luke.”

Craig didn’t say anything. He just sat and stared, leaving me to come to my own conclusions. “If you don’t trust him,” I said, “If you think that in some way he is involved in the killings, why is he still a cop?”

“We have no proof,” Craig said. Then staring me straight in the face, he added, “That’s where you come in.”

“How?”

“You weren’t just chosen to come to The Ragged Cove because of the abilities you share with your mother,” he said.

“Why else then?” I asked him.

“Kiera, you’re a beautiful woman. Most men would give up their souls to be with you,” he said. “Take a look at yourself. You’ve long, jet-black hair, eyes the colour of honey, and a mouth that most men would happily die trying to kiss.”

His compliments didn’t embarrass me or make me blush, they made me angry. “So what you’re saying is – I was nothing more than bait!” I said, through clenched teeth. “You got me down here to flush him out. You hoped we would fall for each other and he would open up to me?”

“And has he?” Craig asked. “Is he the link between the disappearing officers and these *vampires*?”

Looking at Craig with a wistful smile on my lips, I said, “Oh yeah, he opened up alright but not in the way you think.”

“What do you mean?” Craig asked, looking confused.

“Luke Bishop isn’t human!” I shouted at him. “He’s a Vampyrus!”

“What’s that?” Craig asked. “Some kind of vampire?”

“No, he’s not a vampire. He did tell me the proper name, desmondus something-or-another – I can’t remember now,” I said. “But anyway, translated it means the Vampyrus are a breed of vampire bat!”

Standing, Craig laughed, “You’re joking, right? I mean, you’re making this up?”

“Look, I don’t have time to stand here making up fairy tales,” I snapped. “He showed me his wings -”

“*Wings?*” Craig cut in.

“*Listen to me!*” I yelled at him. “He can fly at incredible speeds, he’s strong – I mean I saw him tear vampires in half like they were scraps of paper!”

“Look, I’m getting lost here,” Craig said. “So what’s the difference between a vampire and whatever you say Bishop is?”

“The Vampyrus have always been here,” I tried to explain. “What I mean is, they were here before us humans. They live beneath us in caves and caverns. But during the course of human history, some have come above ground and have decided to live among us. Like vampires, they do crave human blood, but usually they go back beneath ground whenever the hunger is on them and sweat it out.”

“Like a drug addict going cold turkey?” Craig asked.

“I guess,” I said. “Anyway, some of them have given into those cravings and have started to kill and feed off humans. But the humans they kill don’t really die; they come back as vampires – like a mutant form of the Vampyrus. They don’t have wings like Luke...”

“Kiera, how can I put this,” he said, “I’ve never seen Luke Bishop with wings. I’m sure I would’ve noticed –”

“You’re not listening to me!” I yelled, slamming my fists against my thighs with frustration. “They change! You can’t always see their wings. Most of the time they look just like us.”

“*Their* wings?” Craig said.

“Luke’s not the only one.”

“There are others?” Craig asked, as if he were trying to catch up with what I was telling him.

“Murphy, Potter, and Rom, they’re all vampire bats.”

“Rom?” Craig gasped. “You must be mistaken.”

“I’m not,” I insisted. “I saw him only a couple of hours ago and he looked like he had wings to me.”

“But Rom is the one who sent your mother here,” he told me, his eyes growing wide. “He was the one who blackmailed her...”

“Believe me now?” I asked, as everything seemed to fall into place for him.

“I don’t want to,” he whispered. “It’s just that...”

“What?”

“This is a lot worse than I could’ve ever imagined,” he said and looked at me.

“It gets a lot worse,” I told him.

“How?”

“I think I’ve worked out where the vampires’ lair is,” I replied. “It’s at -”

But before I could finish, Craig cut in and said, “The church?”

“How did you know that?” I asked.

“I’m one step ahead of you, Kiera,” he half-smiled. “You saw me up at the graveyard the other day, right?”

“Right.”

“Well, while I’ve been down here keeping an eye out for you, I’ve been doing some investigating myself,” he told me. “After I learnt about the girl’s grave being desecrated, I decided to stake it out, just in case there was any truth in these vampire rumours. The priest, Father Taylor, caught me in the graveyard and asked what I was doing. I told him I had an interest in church architecture. I asked him if I could have a look around, but he said it was inconvenient as he was about to attend mass. Anyway, he agreed to show me around today, but never showed up. I waited for an hour or more. His rapidly depleting parishioners showed up for afternoon mass, but he didn’t. I’m beginning to fear that he has become another victim or one of these vampires.”

“Or Vampyrus,” I added.

“Fancy checking it out?” he asked, his eyes wide.

“One step ahead of you, Sarge,” I said, pulling on my coat. “I’d already decided to go up there just before you showed up.”

Chapter Eighteen

Entering the bar area of the Inn, I could see that most of those who had stared at me earlier had now drifted back out into the cold to make their way home. There were just a couple of barflies sitting by the fire.

“You know, I don’t have any of my equipment on me,” Craig said. “If things start to turn ugly up at the church, we should have our -”

Cutting over him, I said, “Forget it. CS spray and Tasers aren’t going to be any good against vampires.”

“What then?” he asked. “We can’t go unprotected.”

Then, turning towards the little table that housed all the old woman’s bottles of holy water and crucifixes, I scooped some up and handed them to Craig. “Fill your pockets with these,” I told him. “Believe it or not, the crucifix you left for me worked.”

“You’re kidding me,” he said.

“Do I look like I’m joking?” I said, holding out my hands that were visibly shaking at the thought of what had happened that night with Kristy

Hall.

“I guess not,” he replied, and began to stuff his pockets with the religious items.

Taking all of the old woman’s supplies, I filled all of my coat pockets and headed towards the door. The cold outside hit me like a slap in the face. Burying my head low and thrusting my hands into my jeans pockets, I looked at Craig and said, “Ready?”

“Ready,” he answered, pulling his hood over his head as we set off in the direction of the church.

Snow came down so hard and fast, it was like we were walking in a blizzard, and I couldn’t help but think back to the night I’d become disorientated in the fields and been attacked by the vampires. I thought of Luke again and my heart ached. Despite what Craig had told me about him, a tiny part of me didn’t want to give up on him. All I could think about was how he had rescued me that night. I could feel that warm sensation pass over me again, as I remembered his touch, his kisses, and how he had held me so close to him. Reminding myself of all of that, I couldn’t – *or didn’t* – want to believe he had played any part in my mother’s disappearance. If he had, then he had cheated me – used me – cast me under some kind of spell so that I hadn’t been able to *see* his treachery.

“What are you thinking about?” Craig asked over the howl of the bitter wind.

Not wanting to tell him about the confusing feelings and misgivings I had about Luke, I lied. “I was wondering what you were doing outside my room tonight.”

“Just checking up on you,” he said, waving snow away from in front of his eyes. “I take a drink some nights in the bar, then pretending I need to use the bathroom, I sneak upstairs and just listen, you know, to make sure you’re alright.”

“So why the disguise?” I asked him.

“I didn’t agree with Rom’s decision to send you here,” he said. “I asked him if I could come with you, you know, just to keep an eye on things, especially after what had happened to your mother. He refused, so I took a few weeks annual leave that were due to me. I couldn’t risk being discovered by anyone, because if it had gotten back to Rom that I’d disobeyed his orders, I would’ve been in all kinds of crap.”

Discovering Craig had put so much at risk for me, I gently squeezed his arm and thanked him.

“No problem,” he smiled, as the snow swirled all around us.

We walked in silence for a time; the only sound was the wind screaming in off the fields. I would be lying if I said I wasn’t scared of what

might lay ahead for us, but I knew that whatever danger faced me, I would have to confront it. I'd made a promise to my father and I intended on keeping it. Thinking of my mother again, I said, "So what was my mother's secret name?"

With his head turned against the falling snow, Craig glanced sideways at me and said, "Police Constable Jessica Reeves."

Hearing him say the name 'Reeves', I thought of the empty file I'd discovered back at the police station, along with all the other records kept about the missing police officers. But all of the others had reports and a photograph inside. Why had my mother's file been empty? Perhaps it was because there were no reports to send. After all, *Police Constable Jessica Reeves*, didn't really exist. But wouldn't the whole scenario have been more believable if they had created some fictitious records for her? If Rom had gone to the trouble of planting drugs in her locker, then surely he could've taken the time to write up a few fake reports?

Looking sideways at Craig, I said, "You told me my mother had to change her appearance."

"That's right," he nodded.

"She dyed her black hair blonde, didn't she," I said.

Glancing at me through the falling snow, he asked, "How did you know?"

Thinking of the hairbrush I'd found in my locker with the dyed blonde hairs and black roots, I said, "It doesn't matter." But the hairbrush hadn't been the only place I'd found those hairs. I'd found them in Henry Blake's tiny, dead hand. That was only two days ago, which meant my mother was still alive and somewhere in The Ragged Cove. Realising this, I wanted to scream, dance, and punch the air with joy. But then another thought came to me, and my heart felt as if it were being crushed within my chest. What were strands of my mother's hair doing in the hand of that dead boy? Before I'd had the chance to consider how the hair had got there, Craig, was tugging on my sleeve and pointing into the distance.

"See the church?" he asked.

I looked ahead, and through the blizzard, I could see the steeple of the church spiralling upwards like a black scratch on the overcast sky.

"Do you think this stuff will work?" Craig asked, patting his pocket containing the holy water and crucifixes.

"It did last time," I mumbled, my teeth now chattering with the cold.

"Ok then," he said, setting off towards the church. I followed him through the gate and up the gravel path. Reaching the doors at the front of the church, Craig pulled down on the handle and pushed. With a wailing sound, the door creaked open and we stepped inside.

Chapter Nineteen

The draft from the open doorway caused the candlelight to flicker, sending long, dark shadows up the inside of the church. The church was silent, and its thick stone walls muffled the sound of the howling wind outside. From inside, the wind sounded like children weeping.

The smell of wax was sweet and seemed almost intoxicating. Taking my hands from my pockets, I blew warm breath over them. Wiggling my fingers, I tried to get some feeling back. My nose and ears felt numb as well, and my hair was wet with melting snow. Walking between the rows of pews, my boots made a whispering sound against the hard stone floor. I looked over my shoulder to see where Craig was. He was taking two candles from beneath a statue of the Virgin Mary.

“Take one of these,” he said, holding out the candle towards me, and even though he had whispered, his voice echoed around the church.

Weaving between the pews, I made my way towards him. Taking one of the candles, I said, “You can take your hood off now.”

“You must be joking,” he said. “It’s freezing in here.” Then holding a candle out before him, he said, “Let’s see what’s down here.”

I followed Craig to a set of grey stone steps that spiralled downwards into the darkness beneath the church. “What do you reckon?” he said, looking back at me over his shoulder.

“About what?” I asked him.

“Does this seem the sorta place that vampires would hang out?” he said from beneath his hood.

“How should I know?”

“I thought you were the expert,” he whispered.

“If what you’re trying to tell me is that you’re scared, sergeant, then I’ll go first,” I said, brushing past him and making my way down the spiral staircase.

“That’s not what I was saying at all,” his voice echoed, followed by the sound of his footsteps as he rushed after me.

Taking one step at a time, I made my way down into the darkness. Even though I held the candle with both hands, it still shook from side to side as I trembled in fear at what might be hiding below. The stairs seemed never-ending, spiralling around and around like a corkscrew, burying itself into the earth. Craig was right behind me and he took short, shallow breaths. I guessed we were nearing the bottom of the stairwell, as not only

had the air grown colder, it was damper, too. In the candlelight, I could see mould growing down the walls and the *plink-plink-plink* sound of water dripping in the distance.

Looking down, I could see the last couple of steps levelling out into a narrow tunnel. Like everything else around me, the tunnel had been chiselled out of the rock and earth below ground. Without enough room in the tunnel to walk side by side, we had to walk single-file, with me leading. We hadn't been going long when the light from my candle seemed to fade. It hadn't gone out – it had dimmed. It took me a few seconds to realise that we had stepped from the tunnel into a huge, open chamber. It was so vast and black that the darkness surrounding us seemed to be sucking up the light from our candles.

Craig came and stood next to me, and even with the light from both of our candles, it did nothing to penetrate the black wall of darkness in front of us. The blackness almost seemed to reach out and touch me. It was like it wanted to smother me, suffocate me. The silence was deafening and the only noise I could hear was the frantic beating of my own heart.

“Craig,” I whispered.

“Yes?”

“Where are we?”

“In my lair,” said a voice, but it wasn’t Craig’s. The voice came from in front of me, only a few feet away. It was so sudden and unexpected I flinched and screamed all at the same time.

“Craig, are you there?” I called and reached out into the darkness.

“I’m here,” he said, sounding only inches away and taking my hand.

“Did you hear that?” I whispered, my voice broken with fear.

“Of course he heard it, my child,” the voice came again, and it sounded soft and soothing – the sort of voice you would like to read you a bedtime story as a child.

“Who’s there?” I asked, my voice wavering.

Almost as if in reply to my question, there was a scratching sound, as a match was scratched into life. It flared for a moment, its sudden brightness blinding me in the dark. The light winked back and forth as a candle was lit. The flame steadied and in its orange glow, I could see a face staring back at me out of the darkness. It was the eyes that I recognised first, the fierce sparkle of blue in them.

“Welcome, Kiera Hudson,” said Father Taylor. “You are very welcome in my church.”

“What are you doing down here?” I asked, some of my fear ebbing away on realising that it was just the old priest I’d met on my visit to the graveyard with Luke.

Ignoring my question, he said, "I'm sorry it's so dark down here. Let's see if I can remedy that."

I watched his flame flicker to and fro as he lit several other candles. As light seeped into the crypt, I could see that there were candles on tall, silver stands all around him. Father Taylor was seated in a high-backed cushioned chair. Although he had lit several of the candles, it wasn't bright enough to penetrate the darkness that surrounded him.

"That's better," he smiled, settling back into his chair.

"What are you doing down here?" I asked again.

"Waiting," he smiled, his drawn cheeks looking even more hollowed than I remembered them to be.

"Waiting for what?" I asked, glancing at Craig in the hope he might know what the priest was talking about.

"Why for you, of course," Father Taylor smiled again.

Sensing there was something terribly wrong about all of this, I let go of Craig's hand and started to edge backwards towards the tunnel.

"You don't have to be afraid," the priest smiled again, holding out his hand for me to take. "You're in a church. Where could you be safer?"

"Craig, something's wrong here," I whispered into the dark.

"I think he's okay," he whispered back. "He's just an old guy."

“Tsk, tsk, Sergeant Phillips,” the priest grinned. “You haven’t explained to her yet why she is really here?”

“Craig?” I said my heart beginning to race all over again. “What’s he talking about? What haven’t you explained to me?”

“I’m sorry, Kiera,” Craig said, turning towards me.

“For what?” I asked, now utterly confused.

“He’s not really sorry,” Father Taylor answered for him.

Looking back at the priest, I watched as he got up from his seat. He wobbled just slightly as if trying to catch his balance. It was then I remembered him limping away from Craig the day I spied on them both from behind the gravestone. Then, taking a walking cane he had rested against his chair, he shuffled towards me. My heart skipped a beat and my stomach tightened, for even in the darkness, I knew the cane belonged to the old man I’d discovered mutilated beyond recognition in the field. Its silver ornate top twinkled in the candlelight.

“It wasn’t Murphy,” I whispered to myself.

“What did you say, my dear?” he smiled, edging his way closer towards me.

“It was you all along,” I gasped, realising the mistake I’d made.

“Get away from me,” I hissed, stumbling backwards.

“Wait, Kiera,” Craig said, turning towards me.

“For what?” I said, backing into the tunnel.

“To see what you could become,” he half-smiled at me.

“To see *what?*” I asked.

Then something strange happened. Behind Father Taylor I could see shapes. How was that possible? There was only blackness behind him, solid blackness. But somehow I could *see* into it – *through it*. It was like I was *seeing* for the very first time.

You have a gift, I remembered my father telling me. *You can see things others can't*.

Looking into the darkness behind the priest, I could see shapes coming closer. They were people. I blinked and when I looked again it was like flashbulbs popping on and off in the darkness. I was seeing quick, blinding glimpses of those who were hiding in the blackness all around me. And in each of those snapshots, I saw their white, misshapen faces, their dead eyes, and drooling fangs. I was surrounded by vampires.

As quickly as they had come, those snapshots were gone and it was like I couldn't see anymore. Dazed and confused by what had just happened, I steadied myself against the mouth of the tunnel. Father Taylor and Craig were coming towards me, the candles they were holding lighting up their faces like Halloween pumpkins.

Looking at Craig, I said, “I trusted you! I thought you were my friend! You didn’t leave those crucifixes because you cared – you just didn’t want the vampires to get me before you did!”

Turning, I raced into the tunnel. Within seconds my candle had snuffed out and I ran blindly into the darkness. Behind me, I could hear the sound of running feet and screeching. Snatching a quick look back over my shoulder, there was only blackness again. Facing front, I raced on, my hands stretched out before me as I felt my way out. The sound of racing footsteps and screaming got closer and I pushed on. My lungs felt as if they were ablaze inside of me, and my heart pounded against my chest.

Faster! I screamed inside my head. *Faster!*

Adrenaline surged through my whole body as the sound of those chasing me grew ever nearer. But it wasn’t just the sound of feet and shrieking I could hear echoing through the tunnel behind me. There was a scratching, scuttling noise too, as if some of those racing after me were crawling along the walls and the ceiling of the tunnel.

Something struck my foot and I fell forward onto the ground. Blindly reaching out with my hands, I felt the first step of the spiral staircase. Realising it was that which had tripped me, I scrambled up them. Trailing my fingers along the wall to keep my bearings in the complete darkness, I headed upwards. The sound of feet on the stairs coming after me

grew ever closer. My calf muscles throbbed as I tried to leap two steps at a time. But I was slowing, and those behind me sensed it and sped up.

Fingers curled around my ankle and yanked me backwards. Spilling forward, I slammed into the stone steps, squeezing the air from my lungs.

“Kiera,” I heard Craig whisper from out of the darkness.

Kicking out frantically with my legs, I screamed, but my lungs were still empty and the noise I made sounded as if I was being strangled. My foot connected with something in the darkness and I heard Craig shriek out in pain and anger. His fingers loosened around my ankle, and seizing my chance, I pulled away and started back up the stairs on my hands and knees.

Feeling my way around the curved wall of the stairwell, my heart raced at the glimmer of light coming from above me. Knowing it was the church, I made one last desperate surge upwards. As I got nearer to the light, the darkness around me began to fade, and illuminated the true horror of what was behind me.

Looking back over my shoulder, I could see Craig charging up the stairwell, followed by a hoard of frenzied-looking vampires. Some of them ran, but others scurried up the walls like freaky-looking spiders, their jaws snapping open and closed, spraying the walls with spit and froth which hung from their razor-sharp teeth. Their hair was matted with blood and grime and they looked crazed. With eyes seething red in their hideous faces

they lunged for me, claws just inches from my exposed flesh. I launched myself up the last few steps and bounded into the church. Racing towards the door, I heard the sound of the creatures pouring out of the stairwell behind me. Pews were pushed out of the way and reduced to splinters, the sounds of their screams deafening.

Reaching the church door, I fumbled for the handle. Yanking on it with all my remaining strength, I stumbled out into the graveyard. Looking back over my shoulder, I saw Craig and the vampires appear in the open doorway. I raced away from them. Before I knew what had happened, someone had taken hold of me. Snapping my head round, I looked into the face of Potter. With a cigarette dangling from the corner of his mouth, he smiled and said, “What’s the rush?”

I blinked. When I opened my eyes, I saw fleeting memories of cigarette ends lying beneath a tree next to the dead body of Henry Blake. Glimpses of Potter’s mouth as he blew smoke from between his lips. Holding me tight, Potter grinned at me as if he knew what I was thinking.

Chapter Twenty

“Get off me!” I roared, throwing a punch at Potter. But with lightning speed, he snatched hold of my wrist and pulled my arm down by my side.

“That’s no way to treat a friend and colleague,” he said, blowing cigarette smoke into my face.

“You’re no friend of mine,” I spat. Trying to yank myself free of him, I could see he was in his police uniform and I thought how he wasn’t fit to wear it.

“But *he’s* your friend, right?” Potter asked, looking over my shoulder. I looked back to see Craig just outside the church door, twenty or so vampires standing behind him.

“I thought he was,” I whispered to myself.

“Sergeant Phillips isn’t your friend,” someone said. I turned around to see Murphy. “And he certainly isn’t a friend of ours.”

Looking between the three of them, I said, “What’s going on here?”

“Phillips went missing three years ago,” Murphy said. “He used to be one of my constables.”

“But that’s impossible,” I said. “He was my sergeant at training school.”

“So that’s where you’ve been hiding?” Murphy called out to Craig.

“Had someone looking after you, Phillips? Protecting you?” Potter said, over my shoulder.

Stepping away from the front of the church and coming towards us, Phillips smiled and said, “Not protecting, more like guiding me, showing me how things should be.”

“So what did you do with her?” Murphy asked. “I mean, that’s why you went missing, wasn’t it?”

“Who are you talking about?” I asked them. I didn’t mind who provided the answer, I just wanted to know what was going on.

“Your mother, Kiera,” someone said from behind me, and glancing back over my shoulder, I watched as Luke stepped from the shadow of a large tree and into the swirling snow.

At the sight of him, my heart leapt, but I fought the urge to go to him. Out of everyone here, he was the one I wanted to trust. But could I? I remembered what Phillips had told me about him, how suspicion had fallen on him after my mother’s disappearance.

“Phillips told me it was your fault my mother vanished,” I shouted.

“I should’ve been there for her,” Luke said coming towards me. “I was meant to have been crewed with her that night, but I was sent back beneath ground on a false errand. I now know it was your friend over there that sent me back,” and he looked at Phillips. “When I realised I’d been tricked, I rushed back above ground, but I was too late. Phillips had vanished and taken your mother with him.”

With my head spinning and not knowing who or what to believe, I looked at Craig and asked, “Is this true?”

“Poor, beautiful Kiera,” Craig smiled. “Can’t you see the truth for once?”

“Tell me!” I snapped.

“Your mother was the best,” he said. “Her ability to see was so superior to yours – you’re almost blind compared to her. She had me and what was going on in this town all figured out within days of her arriving and we couldn’t let that be.”

“Who’s we?” I shouted.

There was the sound of thunder overhead and we all looked up to see a winged figure falling like a stone from the sky. Snow flurried all around it, making it difficult to see who it was. The creature landed with a thud, huge, black wings drawn around him like a cloak. Then, as if

shuddering, the wings unfurled to reveal Rom. Stepping forward, Craig came to stand beside him, and it was then I realised it was them I'd overheard in the corridor at the police station earlier that night. Pulling off his coat and tearing his shirt away, Craig threw back his shoulders and as he did, his wings sprang from his back.

Understanding how cruelly he'd tricked me and had tried to lead me to my capture at the church, I sprang forward, wanting to get at him. But Potter had hold of my arm and yanked me back.

"Easy, tiger," he whispered in my ear. "All in good time."

"Rom?" Murphy breathed, and he sounded genuinely shocked and hurt. "So you are one of them?"

"If you mean by *them*, the Vampyrus that are sick and tired of living beneath the ground while the humans tread on us under foot, then yes, I'm one of *them*," Rom said, and his voice was calm but stern.

"But you've fed on humans. Look at the result of your actions!" Murphy said, pointing to the vampires that crowded behind Rom and Phillips. "Look what you've done!"

"You've broken the Vampyrus' rules of coming above ground," Luke said.

"Oh the *rules*," Rom said. "Stupid me."

“Why don’t you join us?” Craig grinned. “You really don’t know what you are missing.”

“No thanks,” Potter said, behind me. “I hate the sight of blood.” And without having to look back at him, I knew he would have that wise guy smile of his spread across his face.

“You’re pathetic, Potter,” Rom almost seemed to growl. “You’re all pathetic. How long do you think it will be before the humans invade The Hollows? Look at what they’ve done up here. Look at the chaos and devastation they’ve caused.”

“And by feeding off them and turning them into some half-breed of us is making things better, is it?” Luke asked.

“For centuries there have been what the humans call ‘vampires’,” Rom said, as if justifying his actions. “Since the dawn of civilisation, Vampyrus have come above ground and fed, creating these vampires.”

“And they’ve had to be hunted and destroyed,” Murphy said. “Our history has proven that this is not the way. We have to find unity with the humans, find a way of living together.”

“What, by sneaking around?” Phillips hissed. “Secretly living among them and scurrying back beneath ground every time you hunger for one of them? You’re a disgrace to the Vampyrus if that’s what you think. We should be able to fly and soar through the air. We should be *free*.”

“And what about them?” Luke said, pointing at the vampires. “Are they free?”

“We’ve given them new life,” Rom said. “They are better than they were before. They are like us.”

“They’re nothing like us,” Murphy said. “They’re mindless animals. Their only want and desire is to kill and destroy. We are better than that.”

“Then join us,” Rom spat. “Let us be the most powerful race on the planet.”

“No thanks,” Murphy hissed, unbuttoning his shirt.

Sensing that Murphy was readying himself to do battle, Rom and Phillips arched their wings high above them. “Give us Hudson and we will go,” Rom said, as if suggesting a truce, using me as some kind of peace offering. “That’s all we want. Let us have her.”

“Never!” Luke roared, running towards them, tearing his shirt away in torn strips. Leaping into the air, his back twisted as his wings ripped through his flesh and fanned out on either side of him. I watched as he swooped upwards, racing towards Rom at a terrifying speed. In a blink, Rom shot from the ground and flew into the sky, clattering into Luke.

I looked at Murphy, who was now also stripped to the waist, and was neatly folding his police shirt in two.

“Don’t you think you should go and help him or something?” I shouted.

“Okay, don’t rush me,” he grumbled. “I’m not as young as I used to be.” For his age, like Rom, he was in pretty good shape. He wasn’t exactly muscle bound, but he was toned. The only thing that gave his age away was the silver hairs that covered his chest. Placing his shirt on top of a nearby grave, he looked at me and said, “Make sure that doesn’t get dirty.”

Before I’d had a chance to say anything back, he was gone, his giant, bony, black wings propelling him through the night sky towards Luke and Rom. From behind me, I heard a roaring sound. Spinning around, I watched Potter spring into the air, and while airborne, he flung away his police jacket and shirt as his wings ripped out through his back. Within an instance, he was on Phillips. They spun and tumbled through the air as they grappled with one another.

There was a swooping sound above me and I looked up to see Rom plummeting through the sky. He had hold of something and whatever it was, it was thrashing about. As Rom whisked closer, I could see it was Murphy who was struggling with him. Then in a spray of shadows, I saw Luke appear as if from nowhere. There was another sound similar to that of thunder, and he spun through the air at Rom, his wings pinned back making him look like an eagle. Snatching hold of Rom’s wings, he yanked him back

and upwards into the sky. Rom lashed out with his fists, and in doing so, he dropped Murphy, who fell towards the ground. He dropped at such an incredible speed I feared he would smash straight into the gravestones beneath him. But within inches of hitting them, he spread his wings open like two black sails and soared upwards again.

Twisting around, I could see the vampires charging towards me. Stumbling backwards knowing I only had seconds to react, I grabbed two bottles of holy water from my coat pocket. Snatching off the lids, I held a bottle in each hand and squeezed. Jets of water shot from the ends of the bottles and straight into the faces of two approaching vampires.

They were running at me so fast that they didn't have time to stop or react. The holy water splashed off their faces, and at once they threw their claw-like hands over their eyes. The vampires screamed, and above their cries, I could hear the sound of hissing and spitting. The most disgusting thing I'd ever seen, happened. Their faces started to dribble through their fingers in thick, gloopy streams. One of them pulled its hands away, and I could see its left eye ooze from its socket and slide down its cheek.

"What have you done!" this one screeched.

"Have some more," I shouted, and emptied the bottle at him.

Within seconds his face, ears, and nose were nothing more than a crimson red mess that was now sliding off its neck and down its chest.

Clutching at the air, the vampire collapsed onto its knees, then went down completely.

Looking up, the second vampire still had its face covered with its hands. Taking my chance, I sprayed the last of the holy water at him. I could see the skin on his face bubbling and sizzling, and he pushed his hands against his head as if trying to hold it together. But within seconds it had collapsed inwards like melting putty. Staggering for just a moment, the vampire stumbled over and was still.

But there were more, and they leapt and bounded over the gravestones as they charged at me. Chucking the empty bottles away, I fumbled for two more.

“Come on!” I screamed, willing myself on.

“Hungry!” one of the vampires cried, pouncing off a nearby gravestone at me. With its arms outstretched, its long ivory nails slashed at my face. But then they were gone. I looked up to see the vampire cartwheeling through the air. My rescuer swooped in, and hovering just feet above me, Potter yelled, “Get out of here or you’re gonna die, Kiera!” Then he was snatched away by Phillips as he swooped in and almost seemed to rugby tackle Potter in mid-air.

I raced across the graveyard, weaving myself amongst the gravestones. But the vampires were relentless, and once again started to

hunt me down. I could hear their screeching and shrieking just feet away. But I had taken a wrong turn and was now heading towards the back of the graveyard and the stone wall that reached up into the night.

With my heart racing, I started to panic.

“There must be a gate...a door...*anything*,” I mumbled, but I knew I had nowhere to go. Looking back I could see several of the vampires striding towards me, their speed and agility terrifying. They were gaining on me with such speed I knew I wouldn’t have time to get a crucifix or bottle from my pocket. They were within touching distance, so close the spit from their fangs splattered my face. I closed my eyes, then my stomach lurched and I felt the sensation of rising upwards off the ground. I opened my eyes, looked down. The church was just a pinprick below. Glancing upwards, expecting to see either Murphy or Potter but hoping for Luke, I screamed as Father Taylor grinned down at me.

Chapter Twenty-One

I was struck by how bony and repulsive the priest looked. His body was sickly white and sinewy-looking. The skin that held his bones together looked waxy and taut. The wings that arched from his back were black and leathery. They looked torn in places and the membrane was tattered and frayed. With his arms around me, he dragged me upwards through the freezing night air. Snow bombarded my face like ice cold pellets.

“What do you want from me?” I screamed over the howl of the wind.

“You’re unique,” he roared, his eyes, bright and knowing.

“How?” I yelled, as we swooped left and right.

“Like your mother!”

“Where is she?”

Father Taylor grinned, opened his mouth as if to answer, then screamed in anger. Before I’d realised what was happening, I was falling, rushing down through the night, my clothes rippling and my hair fluttering

wildly. Spinning over and over, I caught a glimpse of what had caused the priest to release me. Murphy had dived in towards Taylor and punched through his wings. Losing control and altitude, the priest spiralled back towards the graveyard, his wings looking broken and limp.

Screaming, I fell behind him, the pressure of the wind crushing my chest. The church's steeple came into view and I raced towards it. With every second it got bigger and bigger until at the very last minute, I felt two powerful arms snaking around my waist. Looking around, I could see it was Luke who had me. Soaring away from the steeple, Luke smiled down into my face, his fangs gleaming.

"Okay?" he asked, holding me tight, making me feel safe at last.

"I've been better," I said, looking into his face. "I thought you'd been banished?"

"Not exactly," he said, banking right, sending my stomach into a series of somersaults. "We knew if I went away, it would flush Phillips out. He wouldn't have come for you with me hanging around."

"Why does everyone keep using me as bait?" I shouted over the wind.

"It must be those pretty eyes," he smiled back at me.

"So where did you go that night," I asked, "when I was calling for backup?"

“At the graveyard?”

“Yes.”

“I saw Taylor fall on the way back to the church,” he explained. “I was just about to go and help, when I saw Phillips step from the dark. Not believing it could be him, I went to take a closer look. Then I heard all hell breaking loose, so I came back to help and that’s when I found you in the car wreck.”

Pressing my face against his chest, I felt safe, and those intense feelings I’d experienced the night we had shared together came flooding back. My whole being seemed to tingle. I felt this sudden urge to tell him that I loved him, but why? I didn’t even know him. He wasn’t human. No one falls in love so quickly, especially not me. But deep down, in that place where you go at night – the place where you keep your innermost feelings – I was feeling something different. Something I couldn’t remember ever feeling before.

Swooping to a sudden stop, Luke hovered by the branches of a tall tree. Lifting me gently into them, he said, “Stay here, you’ll be safe.”

“Don’t leave me,” I said.

“I’ll be back for you.” He kissed me. Easing himself away, Luke said, “I’ve got to go and help my friends. Wait for me.” Then he was gone, corkscrewing up into the night, wings rippling in the wind.

“I’ve got nowhere to go,” I breathed, watching him speed towards Murphy, who was soaring after Rom.

From the treetop, I saw Luke and Murphy race after Rom in a flicker of black shadows. They moved so fast through the sky, both Murphy and Luke seemed to blur out of existence. Looking ahead, I could see Potter and Phillips tumbling over and over through the air as they fought with each other. Holding my breath, I watched as they plummeted towards the church roof, then through it. Roof slates and chunks of masonry and stone exploded up into the night. Within seconds, the door of the church burst outwards in a spray of splinters as Phillips came crashing through it and into a nearby gravestone, which cracked in half under the force of him colliding into it.

Potter appeared in the church doorway, and wasting no time, he launched himself at Phillips who lay momentarily stunned in the snow. Just as he was about to get up, Potter was on him, his wings shimmering in the candlelight shining from within the church. Potter thrust his head forward and I could hear his teeth tearing and biting at Phillips who lay screaming beneath him. Potter’s attack was frenzied, black jets of blood pumping from wounds on Phillips’ face and neck. The snow all around them started to turn crimson and I looked away. Even though Phillips had lied to me and had

something to do with my mother's disappearance, I still didn't want to watch him die, being ripped to shreds in a bleak, barren graveyard.

From my hiding place, I saw the remaining vampires, speeding amongst the gravestones towards Potter who had his back turned to them. Knowing they were only seconds from him, I screamed, "Potter! Get out of there!"

Potter drew away from Phillips and looked up, the lower half of his face dripping with blood. Seeing the approaching vampires, he sprang into the air, leaving Phillips lying lifeless in a crimson mound of snow. Potter looped in the air, and then came racing back towards the vampires. But like Potter, some of the vampires had heard my scream from high up in the tree and this had drawn their attention to me. Splitting, three of them raced towards the foot of the tree and started scrambling up the trunk. They climbed like spiders, the sound of their long fingernails scratching against the rough bark. Within seconds they were clawing their way over the snow-laden branches and scuttling towards me. Reaching into my pocket for the crucifixes and bottles of holy water, I nearly fell from the tree when I realised that they were gone.

"Where are they?" I cried.

I patted both pockets to make sure, but they were empty. Realising they must have fallen out while falling through the sky, I frantically backed

away up the branch from the approaching vampires.

Hissing and spitting, they came forward, their eyes glowing red and orange. Leaning back, I kicked out at one of them.

“Get the fuck off me!” I screamed.

The heel of my boot smashed into the jaw of the lead vampire. There was a cracking sound as his jaw broke, jutting out at an odd angle. With a crooked smile, he snapped his jaw back into place.

“Is that the best you can do?” he screeched, continuing forward, sniffing the air like an animal on the scent of its prey.

With nowhere left to go, I prayed that perhaps one of the Vampyrus would come and save me. But as I said my silent prayer, I heard the roar of Luke’s and Murphy’s wings as they screamed past me in pursuit of Rom. I glanced down, and through the branches of the tree, I could see that Potter was enthusiastically ripping to pieces the vampires that had gone after him.

Knowing that if I were to survive, it would be down to my own wits and courage, I had an idea. Reaching out, I ripped two solid-looking branches away from the trunk. Both were about twelve inches in length and were splintered and ragged at each end. Placing one over the other, I made a cross. Holding it out, I waved the makeshift crucifix desperately in front of the vampire’s face. It recoiled as if in fear, its lips rolling back and revealing its fangs.

“It works,” I whispered with relief.

Then the vampire looked at me and gave a knowing smile as if it had been tricking me all along. “It hasn’t been blessed,” the vampire spat, lunging at me.

Recoiling in horror, I pulled my arms against my chest to protect myself, the branches jutting out from my hands. The vampire landed on top of me, its teeth snapping inches from my neck, its breath hot against my flesh. It jerked violently against me.

“No!” it spat, and lurched back away from me, the glow in its dead eyes fading. Looking down, I saw one of the branches I’d been holding, protruding from a bloody hole in its chest. The vampire looked down at the jagged piece of wood sticking from it. Sensing its fear and revulsion at the sight of the makeshift stake, I dared to lean forward, and gripping the branch, I drove it further into the vampire’s heart.

“Away!” it screamed, clutching frantically at the branch with its claws.

“Just die!” I screeched, twisting the piece of wood deeper into the pumping red wound. Almost at once, its claws began to turn grey, then crumble like the ash on the tip of one of Potter’s cigarettes. The vampire’s fingers seemed to snap and break, the wind snatching them away in small, broken particles.

Looking down at its dissolving fingers, the vampire howled, “Look what you’ve done to me!”

Reaching out, I thrust the branch with the heel of my hand, so far into its heart, that the piece of wood disappeared.

Just like its hands, its face began to crumble away, like smashed plaster. First its jaw went and its swollen, black tongue rolled down onto its chest. It made a disgusting flopping sound and I turned away. Covering my face with my hands, I peeked through the fingers that still held the second branch. Within moments the vampire had disintegrated into a pile of smoking ash that swirled away on the snow.

Undeterred, the second vampire came forward, scuttling along the branch towards me. I brandished the ragged piece of wood at it and screamed, “Come on then!”

Crazed by its lust for blood, it leapt through the air at me. Steadying myself against a fork in the branches, I rammed the makeshift stake into its chest. Shrieking in pain, it shot backwards out of the tree, its claws clutching at the air. As it fell, it hooked its ivory-coloured fingernails into the hem of my jeans and dragged me out of the tree with it.

“Please don’t let me die!” I screamed, wrapping my arms around a branch, and clenching my teeth. Looking down, I could see the vampire swinging from my leg.

“LET...GO...OF...ME!” I screeched. And in between each word, I kicked out, desperate to shake the vampire loose. It wailed in agony, and with its free hand it tried to pull the stake from its chest. But as it did, the vampire’s fingers started to fall to pieces in little powdery chunks.

Bit by bit, the vampire slowly began to disintegrate like a sandcastle being swallowed up by a wave. The hand that was holding onto my leg separated from the vampire’s wrist and it fell from the tree, smashing into a powdery mess against a gravestone below. Kicking out my leg, I shook the vampire’s hand free and it blew away.

“Thank you, God,” I breathed.

Hoisting myself back up into the tree, the third vampire came scuttling towards me through the branches. But my heart ached and tears welled in my eyes, when I saw it was Henry Blake looking back at me. His tiny, broken body, neck, and torso ripped apart.

“Henry,” I whispered.

Ignoring me, he advanced, his eyes burning red, lips twisted up into a snarl baring his pointed teeth.

“Please, Henry,” I whispered again. I just couldn’t bring myself to destroy him. Still he came forward, and I knew in my heart that he wouldn’t show me the same compassion I wanted to show him.

He was then upon me, knocking me back into the branches of the tree where I became entangled. I twisted beneath him, trying to keep my neck and face away from his lunging bites.

“No, Henry!” I screamed, but he was deaf to me.

Then he was gone, flying backwards through the branches, his tiny, broken, hands snatching for anything to take hold of. He seemed to dangle in the air. Potter came into view. He was holding the kicking, spitting boy out at arm’s length.

“Going soft, Constable Hudson?” he said in his cocky manner.

“He’s just a child,” I said back.

“He’s a monster,” Potter said, this time his voice was low and serious.

“I can’t watch,” I told him.

“Don’t then,” he said.

I looked away, and even though I covered my ears, I could still hear the screams of the boy – the monster – as Potter ended it for him.

“Are you coming or are you going to play around in this tree all night?” I heard Potter say once he’d finished with the boy.

Looking back over my shoulder, I could see Potter hovering on the other side of the tree branches. His wings flapped steadily up and down, his arms down by his sides, his stomach muscles taut.

Shame about the personality, I thought to myself as I looked at his muscular body. Placing one hand over the next, I climbed towards him. Lifting me into his arms, he held me close as we raced back towards the ground. Potter was travelling so fast that it didn't seem like he'd given us enough time to stop and land safely.

"Slow down!" I shouted, my heart in my throat as the ground raced up to meet us.

Opening his giant, black wings, we slowed and landed as gently as a feather upon the ground. Seeing that he had shaken me, Potter smiled and said, "There's no need to get excited."

Pulling myself free of his grasp, I looked at him and said, "I can promise you, Potter, that there is nothing you could ever do that would excite me."

Smiling, Potter lit a cigarette. He winked at me and said, "Well, see about that."

Then he was gone, soaring back up into the sky. I watched him go as he headed towards Luke and Murphy, who were struggling with Rom.

From behind me, there was a noise. Spinning round expecting more vampires to be rushing me, I saw Father Taylor come limping from the shadows of the church. The tips of his battered wings were trailing in the snow. Crouching down behind a gravestone, I watched him approach

Phillips' broken, bleeding body. Kneeling beside him, he leant over and seemed to study his friend's injuries.

Part of me wanted to step from my hiding place and ask him what he meant when he had told me I was 'unique'. But more than that, I wanted to ask him what had happened to my mother. But before I'd the chance to muster up the courage, there was the sound of beating wings above me. Looking over my shoulder, I could see Luke, Murphy, and Potter dragging Rom between them from the sky. Taylor must have heard them too, because as I looked back, he had lifted Phillips into his arms, then with a struggle, he flapped his wings in a series of jerky movements and flew away into the night.

Stepping out from behind the grave, I approached the others who now had Rom captured between them. He struggled, but it was pointless. Looking at them he said, "Just get it over with, but know, there are others like me."

"Who?" Luke snapped.

Rom just smiled at him. Coming closer, Murphy saw me and said, "Kiera, go away, this has nothing to do with you."

"It has everything to do with me," I told him. "He knows what happened to my mother." Then going toe to toe with Rom, I looked into his eyes and said, "Where is she?"

Looking back at me, Rom smiled and said, “If you can’t *see* her, then I’m real sorry about that.”

“What do you mean?” I asked.

“Look and you will *see*, Kiera. But be careful of what you *look* for, you might not like what you *find*!” he said, lowering his head, resolute to his fate.

I knew he would say nothing more. It was as if his final pleasure would be to torment me. Taking me by the shoulders, Luke looked deeply into my eyes and said, “Kiera, you don’t need to see this.”

“But -” I started.

“He can’t be changed or cured,” Luke said. Turning away from me, he spread his wings, along with Murphy and Potter, to shield me from what they were about to do. But I could still hear the sound of biting, ripping, and tearing.

Chapter Twenty-Two

“Is that the last of them?” Murphy asked, and I watched him wipe Rom’s blood from his chin with his forearm.

Still turned away from Rom’s remains, I couldn’t bring myself to look, Potter strode forward and said, “Phillips’ body is over there.”

“It’s not,” I told him. Potter looked at me, running his tongue over his lips, mopping up the red gunge that was there. “I saw Taylor fly away with the body,” I told him.

Luke came towards me, but didn’t make eye contact, and I wondered if he thought I was repulsed by him for what he had just done. In a way I was, but I understood the reasons why. Rom and the others weren’t like Luke, Murphy, and Potter, and if they hadn’t been destroyed, then they would’ve only continued to feed off humans and create more vampires. So understanding his shame, I went to him and took his hand in mine.

“This isn’t good,” Murphy said, picking up his shirt. “We should’ve destroyed them all.”

“Do you want me to go after Taylor?” Potter asked, lighting another cigarette.

“No,” Murphy said, arching his back, which made an audible cracking noise. His wings shrunk back beneath his flesh and he pulled on his shirt. “It will be dawn soon and we need to get rid of any remains. We also need to make sure all of those vampires have been destroyed.”

Pulling a cigarette lighter from his pocket, Potter flipped it on. Waving the flame in front of his face, he looked at Murphy and said, “The usual way?”

Nodding, Murphy buttoned up the front of his shirt and put on his police jacket. He looked at Luke, and said, “Take Kiera back to the Inn and get back here as quickly as possible and give us a hand in sorting this mess out.”

“But I want to stay,” I said.

“No,” Murphy insisted.

“But -” I started.

“Constable Hudson, despite everything that has happened, I’m still your sergeant,” he growled,” and I’m telling you to get out of here.”

Before I’d the chance to say anything back, Luke had wrapped his arms around my waist and I felt myself soaring upwards. Looking down, I could just make out the outlines of Murphy and Potter as they walked

towards the church. Then they were gone, hidden by a cloud. With the wind whistling through my hair and Luke's wings beating slowly up and down, we rose over The Ragged Cove. To be so high above the town felt tranquil and my shredded nerves started to soften. Luke pulled me close and it felt as if I were being carried away by an angel. Circling around in the sky, we soared through the clouds and began to lose altitude. From above, I could see the town stretched out before me and it looked peaceful and somehow beautiful with its ragged coast line, white beaches, and miles of woodland. Looking down at it, it was hard to believe the tiny town had hidden such nightmares. Then, in the distance, like a giant torch, I saw St. Mary's steeple raging with fire.

Landing a short distance from the Inn, Luke uncurled his wings from around me, but didn't let go.

"Are you okay?" he asked, his voice soft and caring.

"I'll be fine," I told him, looking up into those bright green eyes. Holding me against him, he brushed his cheek against mine, and I could feel the tingle of his black stubble.

"I'll come back," he whispered in my ear.

"You'd better," I whispered.

"Tonight," he said. "Once we've taken care of everything back at the church."

“What about the others?” I asked.

“The others?” he asked, looking down at me.

“Rom said there were others just like him,” I reminded Luke.

“Later,” he said. “Murphy will know what to do.”

“Come back then,” I said, not wanting to let go.

“In a flash,” he smiled, and then pulling me close again, he kissed me. But this time it was different. His previous kisses had been soft, but these were urgent and had a passion I could only describe as bordering on hunger. Kissing him back, I matched his intensity and a wave of deep desire washed over me. Not wanting to break the spell, but not wanting to lose myself either, I pulled gently away from him. Staring up at him, I said, “Later.”

Smiling, Luke arched his back, and spreading his jet-black wings, he was gone. Turning towards the Inn, I heard the sound of a thunderclap way off in the distance.

Roland was behind the bar and was drying some beer glasses with a filthy-looking towel. Seeing me step in through the door, he rushed over.

“Kiera, you look awful,” he said, sounding concerned.

“Thanks,” I half-smiled.

With his pink-coloured jowls flushing red, he said, “I didn’t mean it like that.” Then looking me up and down and noticing the dried vampire blood on my clothes, hands, and face, he added, “You look like you’ve been to hell and back, my poor dear.”

“You don’t know how close to the truth you are,” I told him, feeling the first aches and pains of my adventure.

“Why don’t you go and freshen-up?” he smiled. “I’ll bring you up a nice warm mug of cocoa and something to eat. You look half starved.”

I could see the willingness to please in his eyes and I didn’t have it in my heart to knock back his kind offer again. So smiling back at him, I said, “That would be really sweet of you, Roland. Thank you.”

I watched him rush back to the kitchen, and then I made my way up to my room. Wincing, I pulled off my clothes. I looked at my body and was shocked to see how many cuts and bruises covered it. Pulling on my bathrobe, I ran myself a bath. While I waited for it to fill up, I went and lay on my bed. Listening to the water splash and tumble into the bath, I closed my eyes. I thought of Luke returning later and a wave of nervous excitement covered me from head to foot. With my skin tingling at the thought of him touching me, I tried to push him from my mind. The feelings I sometimes had for him scared me, but I think that’s what I secretly liked – the fact that he could make me feel this way.

Remembering the events of that night, my mind kept returning to what Taylor had said. What had he meant when he told me I was unique? We're all unique aren't we? But I knew he had meant something more than that. Then the voice of Rom entered my head as he told me I could look for my mother but I might not like what I *see*. Those images of the hairs in Henry Blake's dead little hand swam back before me, followed by pictures of the hairs I'd discovered caught in the teeth of the hairbrush I found in my locker – the locker I guessed had once been used by 'Jessica Reeves' – my mother. Had she really been at that crime scene? I'd accounted for everyone else who had been there. Taylor, Phillips, and the smoker. But who had that been? Not Potter as I'd thought, so who then?

The sound of tapping at my door dragged me from my thoughts. Pulling my bathrobe tight about me, I went and opened it. Roland stood on the other side, and I could hear his chest wheezing from his climb up the stairs. In his chubby hands he carried a silver tray. On it there was a steaming hot mug of cocoa and a plate of neatly cut sandwiches. Stepping aside, I waved Roland into my room.

"You're very kind," I said to him as he placed the tray on the desk.

"It's no bother at all," he said, turning around and looking at me. I noticed his eyes wander down, and following his gaze, I could see that my

bathrobe had come open slightly, revealing my right leg up to the thigh. Feeling uncomfortable, I pulled the robe closed.

Sensing my discomfort, and without looking back at me, Roland shuffled towards the door and said, “Goodnight, Kiera.”

“Goodnight, Roland,” I said, closing the door behind him.

Crossing back to the table, I took a sip of the cocoa, and it tasted warm and sweet. Taking it with me into the bathroom, I turned off the taps. Fixing my hair into a bun at the base of my neck, I went back to my room and shrieked with surprise. Roland was back in my room, standing with his back against the closed door.

“What are you doing here?” I asked, gooseflesh crawling all over me.

“I just want to talk,” he said, looking at me.

Pulling my bathrobe tight again, I said, “I really don’t have time now Roland, I’m expecting a friend any minute.”

Stepping away from the door and coming towards me, he said, “What I have to say won’t take long.”

Backing away from him, I said, “Please, Roland, if you wouldn’t mind saving this for tomorrow.”

“What I have to say can’t wait until tomorrow,” he said, unbuttoning his shirt.

Realising I was in serious trouble, I clenched my fists and shouted at him, “Roland, will you please leave my room!”

Pulling off his shirt and dropping it to the floor, he didn’t take his eyes off me for a moment. His huge stomach was white, which made the wiry black hairs that covered it stand out even more than they should have. Once free of his shirt, his belly hung down over the top of his trousers like a mountain of white dough. Backing away towards the bathroom door, I looked for anything I could use as a weapon against him. Glancing down at the floor, I could see that something had fallen from his shirt pocket as he had disregarded it. Screwing up my eyes, I could see it was a pack of Marlboro cigarettes. Almost at once I saw the base of the tree in the woods next to the body of the Blake boy. I saw glimpses of those cigarette butts left by the killer who had waited for the others in the woods.

As if to prove my *visions* and instincts right, Roland threw his head back and wailed like an animal in pain. I looked at him. Roland’s whole body wobbled, as two black wings grew from his back. Unlike the other Vampyrus wings I’d seen, Roland’s were covered in a coat of greasy, black hair. They glistened in the light from the desk lamp. Rolling his head forward, he looked at me, and I could see that where he had once had a neat row of stained, yellow teeth, he now had a set of discoloured fangs.

“Surprised, are you?” he asked, his voice low, like a growl.

“Luke will be here anytime now,” I threatened him.

“Bishop doesn’t scare me,” he leered.

“Murphy and Potter will be with him,” I said, trying anything to get him to flee.

Holding his belly with both of his meaty hands, he released a throaty chuckle. “Oh please, Kiera, you’re really scaring me now.”

“You should be scared,” I told him, my voice wavering. “I saw what they did to Rom tonight.”

“Rom?” he laughed again. “Rom was nothing compared to those that come next. We were sent just to pave the way.”

“We?” I asked, now backed into the bathroom with nowhere to run or hide.

“Rom, Taylor, Phillips, and me,” he smiled. “We are just mere disciples.”

“For who?” I said.

“Roland!” a voice shouted from behind him.

He turned, and looking past him, I could see his mother standing in the doorway of my room. Her wrinkled-looking face and eyes seething with anger.

“Mother, this has nothing to do with you!” he barked at her.

“Enough, Roland!” she screeched back. “Haven’t you done enough damage?”

“It’s only just starting,” he said, turning back towards me.

Roland grabbed for me, and as he did, he was yanked sharply backwards, crashing into the wall on the opposite side of the room. Believing Luke had arrived, my heart leapt and I raced from the bathroom and into the bedroom. But he wasn’t there, just the old woman and her son.

Getting up from the floor and flapping his wings in anger, he leapt towards his mother, landing inches from her. “Mother, go back downstairs and do whatever it is you do and leave this to me!”

Making her short height count, the old woman straightened her curved back and confronted her son. “For too long I’ve covered for you, Roland,” she said. “For too long I’ve sat back and watched you murder the innocent people of this town to satisfy your lust for their blood. But no more Roland – it ends tonight.”

“I won’t tell you again, mother,” Roland shouted. “Now go back downstairs and mind your own business!”

“It *is* my business!” she spat. “We could’ve had a good life above ground. We had something good going here. But instead of going back under when the hunger was upon you, you gave into it. You’re weak, pathetic, and I’m so ashamed of you.”

‘Mother...” he started.

“No, Roland!” she screeched.” I’m sick and tired of having to try and protect the good people of this town from the vampires you’ve created, and from you. For years now I’ve pushed those bottles of holy water and crucifixes onto the people of this town in the hope that it might protect them. But I’m tired of it, Roland. Please stop. If not for yourself, do it for me.”

He looked into his mother’s eyes and for a moment, I hoped what she said to him had made some impact. Snarling, he said to her, “And you say I’m pathetic.” Knocking her to the floor, he turned towards me again. But before he had taken one step in my direction, his mother sprung into the air, a faded set of black wings flapping behind her. Reaching for him, she clawed at his back and pulled him down. Roland rolled over, crushing his wings. The old woman lunged at him, but drawing his knees into his chest, he kicked out, sending her spinning across the room. She crashed into the wall, which shuddered and then cracked, brick dust showering the room. She hit the floor with a sickening thud, and I thought she must be dead or at least have broken all the bones in her body. But no sooner had she hit the floor, she was up again, racing towards her son. Screeching, she clawed at his face, and he covered his head with his large hands.

“Get off me, mother!” Roland roared.

“No more!” she screamed.

Flitting all around him, her delicate and fragile-looking wings humming up and down, she struck out at him, a diagonal gash appearing across his face. Wiping the blood away with the back of his hand, his eyes shone black with hate for her. Launching himself from the floor, he smashed into her, sending her spinning across the room. Again she crashed into the wall, lumps of plaster spraying up from all around her. But this time, she looked dazed and stunned. Seizing his chance, he was upon her. Taking her head in his bulky hands, he twisted it sharply to the right.

“Sorry, mother,” he said, which was followed by a cracking sound. She fell limp in his arms, her neck broken as easily as a stick of chalk.

Letting her drop to the floor as if she had meant nothing to him, Roland got up. Turning to face me he smiled, and said, “Where were we? Oh yes, I remember,” and he threw himself at me. Crashing to the floor, Roland sat on top of me, his colossal weight, squeezing the air from my lungs.

“Don’t kill me,” I gasped, looking into his bloated face.

“I don’t want to kill you, Kiera,” he said. “You’re far too precious for that.”

“What do you mean?” I croaked.

“You really have no idea, do you?” he said. “Didn’t your mother tell you anything?”

“About what?” I mumbled beneath him, the last of the air leaving my lungs. Everything around me started to turn black and I fought to stay conscious. Just as I was about to pass out, the bedroom window exploded inwards in a shower of broken glass. I looked up in time to see Luke perched on the window ledge like a giant bird of prey.

“Get off her,” Luke said, and I had never heard such anger in his voice before.

Glancing back over his shoulder, Roland said, “If I were you, I’d disappear back into The Hollows, boy. After all, that’s what you’re best at.”

Without asking him a second time, Luke reached out with one hand, gripped the back of Roland’s neck, and tossed him across the room as if he were nothing more than a paper kite. At once, I could breathe again and I sucked in deep lungful’s of air. Sitting up, I watched Roland crash through the wall that separated the bedroom and the bathroom. The wall crumpled into a pile of brick and plaster onto the threadbare carpet, and the ceiling above it sagged inwards as if it was going to collapse. Within seconds, Roland had sprung back into the room, brandishing his teeth.

Leaping from the window ledge, Luke snarled back and slammed into Roland. They locked arms, and threw each other back and forth across

the room. Like wild animals, they snapped at one other, their fangs ripping and tearing at each other's flesh. Scrambling out of their way, I huddled myself into the far corner of the room. Roland ducked under Luke's arm as he swung for him. Then with both hands, he thrust out at Luke, sending him crashing through the doorway into the hall outside. The door came away from its frame in an explosion of jagged splinters. Brushing himself off, Luke got up and raced back into the room. Jumping into the air, he shoulder-barged into Roland's chest, lifting him off his feet and sending him smashing through the window from which he had come. Pouncing onto the window ledge, Luke peered out into the dark.

Scrambling from the corner, I ran towards Luke. "Can you see him?" I asked.

Without answering me, Luke curled his arm around my waist and said, "Hold tight!"

Within moments, we were high above The Ragged Cove again, the howling wind and swirling snow all around us. Wrapping my bathrobe around me, I wished I'd had time to change. I looked at Luke's face and it was a mask of grim determination as we flew upwards. Looking down, I saw Roland racing after us, his wings folded by his sides to give him greater propulsion.

"He's right behind us!" I shouted.

Tucking me beneath him, and arching his wings, Luke thrust forward. And then that sound came again – the thunderclap – which I’d heard so often before.

“What is that noise?” I asked, terrified of its deafening rumble and the vibrations it sent through me.

“It’s a sonic boom,” he shouted back.

A sonic boom? I asked myself. Could we really be travelling so fast?

Banking hard to the right, I clung to Luke, my arms and legs wrapped around him, as we dived away from Roland and out to sea. Then plummeting down, we rushed towards the black, heaving waves of the ocean. Racing just feet from its surface, sea water sprayed out behind us like the waves caused by a speedboat, soaking my bathrobe and hair. Glancing back over my shoulder, I could see that Roland was just feet away from us. He snatched at the air, trying to take hold of me, but Luke twisted and rolled to the left and headed back towards land. Within seconds, jagged cliff faces were sweeping towards us. Believing we didn’t have enough time to change direction, I closed my eyes and clenched my teeth, readying myself for the impact. But it never came. Opening my eyes, I could see the jagged cliff face as we soared vertically up it.

Swooping over the top of the cliff, I could see the burning steeple of St. Mary’s in the distance. It was at least three or four miles away. We

reached it within seconds. Darting into the smoke, we came to a sudden stop. The smoke was thick and dark. I couldn't see more than a foot or two ahead of me. It was hot and choking. It filled my nose and made my eyes sting and water.

“Why have we stopped?” I sputtered.

“Shhh!” Luke hissed, looking quickly from left to right. “Here he comes,” he said.

Roland appeared in the smoke ahead of us, and he just seemed to hover.

“Give me the girl,” he said, “and this will all be over.”

“You want her?” Luke roared. “Come and get her!” Then he let go of me.

Screaming, I dropped like a deadweight through the blistering hot smoke. “Luke!” I cried, unable to believe he had let go of me. Looking down, I could see the seething flames of the burning steeple racing towards me. Glancing up one last time in the hope it had been a mistake and I would see Luke coming to my rescue, all I saw was the gleaming yellow fangs of Roland as he lunged for me. Hoping the flames would take me before he did; I closed my eyes and felt myself being suddenly yanked sideways, away from the fire. Snapping open my eyes, I was staring into the face of Luke. He kissed me, and then threw me away like a rag doll.

“Catch her!” he roared, as Potter appeared from nowhere and caught hold of me.

Glancing back, I briefly saw the look of horror on Roland’s face as he realised how he had been tricked. Having me snatched from his clutches at the very last moment, he had no time to slow his descent and he shot into the seething flames like a bullet. But to my horror, he grabbed hold of Luke and pulled him down into the raging inferno with him.

“No!” I screamed, kicking against Potter.

Holding me tight, Potter plunged towards the graveyard. Setting me down, I looked at him and shouted, “You’ve got to save Luke!” But he didn’t seem to be listening to me. Instead he was looking up at the top of the burning steeple. With tears flowing down my cheeks, I followed his stare to see Roland shoot from the flames high above us. His wings glowed orange with fire and he spun over and over in the air as the flames consumed him. From the ground, I could hear his agonising shrieks, as he fought to put himself out. He fluttered left and right, until he finally fell still and dropped out of the sky like a blazing meteorite.

Pulling my robe tight against the freezing cold, I took hold of Potter’s arm and shook it. I looked into his eyes and pleaded with him. “You’ve got to save Luke. He’s in there!”

Looking back at me, Potter said, “For someone who doesn’t get excited, you’re doing a pretty good impression.”

Stunned by what he’d said, I shook him again and screamed, “That’s your friend in there!”

Popping a cigarette between his lips, he smiled at me and said, “Easy, tiger, we’ve got everything under control.”

“Who’s *we*?” I asked as Potter pointed over my shoulder. Spinning round, I saw Murphy sweep from the burning doorway of the church, carrying Luke in his arms. Racing towards me, Murphy landed and gently laid Luke in the snow at my feet. His wings were folded over him like a blanket. Tendrils of smoke rose from them as they smouldered.

“Will he be okay?” I asked Murphy.

“I don’t know,” he said, staring down at his friend. “I was in there as soon as I saw him fall into the flames. But the smoke and heat were so intense. It was hard to see him.”

Kneeling down, I gently peeled back the edge of Luke’s wings so I could look at him. His face was black with smoke and soot. I brushed his thick hair from his brow and kissed him.

“Wake up!” I whispered.

Nothing.

“Please, Luke,” I cried. “You can’t stand me up like this. We were meant to be having a date tonight, remember? I’m out here in the cold with nothing on except my bathrobe, my hair’s a mess, and my feet are freezing. Just take me home so I can get ready, okay?”

Nothing.

Looking up at Murphy and Potter, I pleaded with them, “Don’t just stand there, do *something!*” And for just the briefest of moments, I was sure I saw a flicker of concern in Potter’s eyes.

“There’s nothing we can do,” Murphy said, squeezing my shoulder with his hand.

Knocking it away not wanting to be comforted by him, I leant over Luke and hugged him, my body shuddering with grief. Planting the softest of kisses on his perfect mouth, I whispered, “I’m going to miss you.”

“I know,” Luke whispered back, the faintest of smiles tugging at his lips.

Chapter Twenty-Three

We never did get to spend that night together. Luke was seriously injured and close to death. Murphy said he would only heal if Luke were taken back down into The Hollows. So carrying him in his arms, Murphy flew him back to the station. Potter took me, and for once, there were no wisecracks or cocky remarks. Stopping to collect my belongings from the Inn, Potter was silent, almost sombre. While I changed out of my bathrobe and into some warm clothes, Potter took the body of the old woman and placed her in the fire that was still raging at St. Mary's church.

By the time Potter had returned, I'd gathered together all of my belongings and it was like I'd never been there. Swooping up into the night, Potter raced us back to the station.

Luke had been laid on a cot in one of the cells, and I found Murphy leaning over him.

"Is he okay?" I asked, stepping into the cell.

“For now,” he said, turning to look at me. “But we need to get him underground soon.”

Moving towards the cot, I knelt down beside it. Luke was pale all over, blisters covered his face, and it looked raw in places. His wings had folded away, and he lay with his hands across his chest. I felt a hand on my shoulder and I looked up. “I’ll leave you with him, while Potter and I clear this place out,” Murphy said.

“What do you mean?” I asked. “Are you all going back?”

“Our work is done here,” he said. “It’s time we moved on. Taylor and Phillips, if still alive, are dangerous. They will go someplace else, another town or city and start all over.”

“But -” I started.

“There can be no buts, Kiera. We have to go after them. Taylor and any others who join him can’t be reasoned with and they can’t be cured now that they’ve fed off humans. Like Rom, the only way of putting an end to this is...well, you know the rest,” he said, turning away. At the door, he stopped and said, “You’ve got five minutes to say your goodbyes.” Then he was gone, shouting orders at Potter to destroy any evidence they had ever been at the station.

Turning to Luke, I stroked his hair from his brow. With a flutter of his eyelids, he opened his eyes and looked at me. He half-smiled and said

my name.

“Shhh,” I told him.

“Kiera,” he said again. “I’ve got to go back,” he whispered.

“I know,” I told him. “I’ll wait here for you.”

Momentarily closing his eyes in pain, he opened them again and said, “I won’t be coming back here. When I’m better, I’ll be going with Murphy and Potter to track down the others.”

“Where will you go?” I asked him, a sudden sense of regret that I might never see him again.

“Wherever they go, so will we, until it’s over,” he whispered. “I don’t know how long that will take or where it will lead. Come with us. You’re a great investigator and you can see things we can’t. You could help us.”

All of my instincts urged me to agree – to say yes. Not to help hunt Taylor and Phillips, but so I could be with Luke. Leaning in close and kissing him on the mouth, I whispered, “No.”

“No?” he said, looking confused.

“However much I want to come with you, Luke, I can’t,” I told him, my heart aching as I said those words.

“Why?”

“I have a promise to keep,” I said, thinking of my father.

“To whom?” he asked, closing his eyes again.

“It doesn’t matter,” I said. Then picturing Henry Blake’s tiny, dead hand clutching those hairs, I added, “I need to find my mother.”

“But she could be dead,” Luke said, his eyes still closed as if trying to control the pain he was in.

“I don’t think she is,” I told him.

“But how can you be sure?”

“It was something I *saw*,” I whispered.

Murphy appeared in the cell doorway. “It’s time,” he said, coming over and scooping Luke up into his arms. He carried him out into the corridor and I followed. The hatch was open, and the filing cabinets, lockers, and desk drawers lay open and empty.

“Where’s Potter?” I asked.

“He had to do one last thing before he could leave,” Murphy said, glancing back over his shoulder at me. Then laying Luke on the floor by the open grate, he looked at me and said, “Take good care of yourself, Constable Hudson. It’s been a pleasure working with you.” Taking me by surprise, he threw his arms around me and held me tight. I hugged him back.

“None of you are real cops, are you?” I asked him.

“Not the way you think,” he whispered in my ear. “But in The Hollows we are – kind of. We want to stop the bad guys just like you do.”

Letting go of me, he pulled his pipe from his back pocket and popped the end of it between his lips. Then patting down his pockets in search of his matches, he said, “Where has Potter got to? We should be gone already.”

“Stop panicking, sarge,” someone said, and I looked up to see Potter coming down the corridor from the direction of the police station door. Shaking snow from his hair and bare shoulders, he shuddered, but not with the cold, it was his wings folding away.

Murphy climbed into the hole. Holding out his hands, he said to Potter, “Pass Luke down to me.”

I watched as Potter scooped Luke up and lowered him into the hole. With my heart feeling like it was being crushed in my chest, Luke opened his eyes and looked back at me. “I’ll miss you,” he said.

“I know,” I smiled, and he was gone.

Potter climbed into the hole.

“What about me?” I said.

“What about you?” he asked, looking back at me.

“How do I get out of this town? The phones don’t work, my car is stuck up that road and -”

Cutting over me, Potter said, “That’s your problem, Hudson. You figure it out.” Pulling the grate closed over him, he swung it shut. Then poking his hand up through the grating, he locked it with the padlock, taking the key with him.

Standing over the grate and looking down, I could hear a rumbling sound as the walls of the tunnel collapsed, hiding any evidence it had ever been there.

Turning away, I walked back into the office, picking up knocked-over chairs and straightening disarranged cabinets and drawers. With no idea as to what to do next, I knew that until the weather changed, I was trapped in The Ragged Cove. Crossing to the window, I looked up into the dawn sky and to my relief I could see that the snow had stopped falling at last. Then I saw something that raised my hopes even more. Rushing from the police station, I went to my battered old Mini which now sat by the curb. *Who had brought it here for me?* I wondered. Spying a folded piece of paper tucked beneath one of the wipers, I reached for it. Pulling it free, I unfolded the piece of paper and read what had been scribbled on it.

You really need to get yourself a new car – this is a piece of junk!

Potter

Smiling to myself, I screwed up the piece of paper and went back into the station, locking the door behind me.

Vampire Wake

(Kiera Hudson Series One)

Book Two

By

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For Lynda, who puts up with me!

Chapter One

“What about the nightmares, Kiera?”

“What about them?” I asked.

“Are you still having them?”

“Yes,” I told her.

The doctor sat opposite me, her thin hands holding my case file across the lap of her tweed skirt. Her pale, grey eyes stared back at me from behind her glasses. She wasn't unattractive, but her fair hair was pulled too tightly into a bun at the base of her neck, which gave her face a pinched, almost angry look. She couldn't have been any older than thirty-five but the glasses and the way she fixed her hair made her look more like forty-five. She appeared very prim and proper – but I could see that there was more to her than that.

“Are they always the same?” she pushed, her eyes fixed on mine over the rim of her glasses.

“About my mother?” I asked, although I knew what she meant. “Yes they are mostly about my mother,” I answered.

“Mostly?” she fired back, keen to pick up on every word that I said.

“Mostly,” I repeated.

“What else then, if not about your mother?” she asked, opening my file and taking a pen from her desk.

“Doctor Keats, I’ve been coming to see you every week now for the last six months. You know what else,” I replied.

“The vampires?” she asked.

“Yes,” I said, not breaking her stare.

“Tell me about them,” she pushed, pen poised above her notes.

“Why? What’s the point?” I asked, trying not to get frustrated with her. “You don’t believe me – no one believes me. That’s why I’m here, isn’t it? The force wants to know if I’m mad – wants to know if I’m fit to go back to policing the streets. Isn’t that what this is all really about?”

“Can you blame your employer for doubting you, Kiera?” Keats asked with that patronising tone in her voice.

“Of course I blame them,” I said. “They were the ones who sent me to The Ragged Cove.”

Thumbing through my case notes, she said, “From what I can see, you volunteered to go, Kiera.” Then looking up at me she added, “No one forced you.”

“But if I’d known...” I snapped, then stopped myself from going on.

“Known what?” she said in that tone again.

“That the place was infested with vampires. I wouldn’t have taken up the post,” I explained.

Smiling at me, like a mother who knows best for her wayward child, Doctor Keats shook her head from side to side and said, “But Kiera, there were no vampires.”

“How do you account for all those incinerated bodies in the church?” I asked, meeting her gaze again.

“A terrible tragedy. Those poor souls caught in a horrendous fire while celebrating an early morning mass,” she said.

“Oh please,” I groaned. “You don’t really believe that, do you?”

“What else could’ve happened?” she asked.

Knowing that I was never going to convince her that those burnt remains were really the skeletons of vampires, I said, “So what about all the cops that went missing from that place?”

“Lots of people go missing from time to time, Kiera,” she smiled. “It doesn’t mean that they became vampires.”

I looked around the blank colourless walls of her office and I didn’t know for how many more days or weeks I could keep coming and going over the same old thing. She was never going to believe me and I was never going to change my story. So picking up my bag that rested against the leg of my chair, I stood up.

“I really can’t keep doing this, so goodbye Doctor Keats,” I said and turned towards the door.

“You know you can’t just walk out of here,” she said, and there was a tinge of smugness in her voice.

“Why not?” I asked, glancing back at her.

“Not if you want your badge back, Constable Hudson.” Then staring me straight in the face, she smiled, “Not if you want to find your mother.”

Lingering by the door, I said, “What do you know of my mother?” I breathed.

“Only what you’ve told me,” she said. “But I know the only way you’ll ever get your hands on her missing person’s file will be to get back on the force. And the only way that’s ever going to happen, is if I sign you Fit For Duty.”

“That sounds like blackmail to me!” I hissed.

“No, it’s not blackmail, Kiera,” she smiled and pushed her glasses back onto the bridge of her nose. “It’s called ‘protecting the public.’ They pay a lot of taxes for their police force and I’m sure they wouldn’t want -”

“Want what?” I demanded.

“Somebody policing their streets and towns who -”

“Who was mad enough to believe in the existence of vampires?” I finished for her.

Holding out her hand towards me, I looked down at it as she ushered me back towards the chair. “Come Kiera, sit back down. Let’s talk.”

Taking my seat again, I asked, “Talk about what?”

“Luke Bishop,” she half-smiled.

“We’ve’ already been over this,” I said, taking my seat again.

“Humour me,” she said, pen poised over her notes again.

“What do you want to know?”

“He was a vampire, right?”

“A Vampyrus,” I corrected her.

“So what’s the difference?” she asked, peering at me over the rim of her glasses.

“You know what the difference is,” I said, starting to feel frustrated again. “The Vampyrus are a breed of vampire bat. They’re not like normal vampires – they don’t have to kill -”

“But you said some of these Vampyrus did kill,” she cut over me.

“That they killed some of the townsfolk from The Ragged Cove.”

“There are some Vampyrus that don’t want to live underground anymore. They want to live above ground, like us,” I started.

“But you’ve previously told me that some of these Vampyrus do live amongst us,” she said thumbing through her notes as if to refresh her memory. “You told me that some of them have managed to work their way into some of the most senior positions in society.”

“That’s right,” I told her. “But that isn’t enough for some of them. Others want more than that...”

“So, Bishop, what does he want?” she asked, looking straight at me.

“He wants to live like us,” I said.

“So how come we...I mean us *humans* aren’t aware of these Vampyrus?” she asked as she scrawled some notes across the pad on her lap.

“Because they look just like us,” I said, tired of going around and around in circles with Doctor Keats.

Then looking up at me she smiled and said, “But Kiera, you said that Luke Bishop had wings,”

“Look, I’m really bored of this...” I started.

“Did you have a relationship with this Bishop?” she asked, the tip of her pen hovering over her notes.

“What’s that supposed to mean?”

“Were you in love with him?”

Looking away from her, I stared at the long windows behind her. The sky looked dreary and overcast and it reminded me of those wet and miserable days spent in The Ragged Cove. I thought of Luke, and it was hard sometimes to even recall his face in my mind's eye. All I could see was Potter lowering Luke's burnt body into Murphy's arms, then disappearing into the hole in the floor at the police station. Although it had only been six months since I'd left The Ragged Cove, it seemed more like a lifetime ago.

"Kiera?" Doctor Keats said.

"Huh?" I whispered looking back at her.

"Were you in love with this Luke...?"

"I thought I was," I said, my voice low, just above a whisper. "But now I'm not so sure. When I was with him – it was like he had me under a spell. I had feelings that I'd never known or experienced before. They were so intense at the time. But now that we've been apart, it's like those feelings have started to fade."

"Did you have a physical relationship with him?" Keats asked, her eyes fixed on mine.

"Oh please," I groaned. "Why does it always have to come back to that?"

"It's important," she said.

“How?”

“Kiera, you claim to have met and fallen in love with a species not known to mankind,” she said, “a species of bat that looks human but has the ability to grow wings and fly. You also tell me that for hundreds, possibly thousands of years, these creatures have been sneaking from below ground to live amongst us. So isn’t it possible that like you and Bishop, humans and these Vampyrus would have fallen in love and perhaps produced children? If that were the case, don’t you think it would be worth investigating?”

“I’m not pregnant if that’s what you’re wondering,” I snapped. “I’m not going to give birth to some mutant half-breed if that’s what you’re scared of!”

“You might not be,” she smiled again, “but who’s to say that others in the past haven’t? How do we know that living right amongst us aren’t the children born out of relationships between humans and these ‘Vampyrus’ as you call them?”

“Look, Doctor, I don’t know anything about that,” I hissed. “It’s not like Luke and me sat around chatting all day long, we were too busy -”

“Doing what?” she jumped in.

“Fighting for our lives!” I felt like screaming.

Realising that she was pissing me off again, and I was close to getting up and leaving for good, Keats closed the folder on her lap and folded her hands.

“Okay Kiera, I can see that you find talking about Luke upsetting, so I’d like to talk about something else.”

“Like what?” I sighed.

“The blood,” she smiled.

“Blood?” I asked, but knew where she was heading.

“You’ve told me at length how you often *see* things,” she said.

“Yes,” I nodded.

“But you say you see more than...well more than I would, let’s say.”

“It’s like I absorb every detail that I see,” I tried to explain all over again to her. “It’s like I see stuff that most people wouldn’t even notice.”

“But it’s more than that now?” she asked.

Nodding, I said, “Sometimes I see things that I shouldn’t be able to see. Things that haven’t happened yet.”

“Like a psychic?” she said, and I couldn’t help but notice the smile tugging at the corners of her lips.

“No, not like a psychic,” I cringed. “I can’t explain it...”

“But you said that you’ve started to bleed from your left eye when you have these visions. Is that right?”

“I’m not sure if the two are connected,” I said. “It could be caused by something else.”

“A brain tumour?”

“You tell me, you’re the doc, Doc,” I grinned at her.

“Kiera, you had all the tests, there is nothing wrong with you,” she said.

“I’m not lying,” I insisted.

“How about another kind of test?” Keats asked.

“What sort of a test?”

“Okay, you say you can see things about people,” she smiled again.

“Tell me, what did I have for my breakfast?”

“Give me a break,” I sighed. “It doesn’t work like that.”

“How does it work, then?” she said. “Go on, tell me something about me that you couldn’t possibly know.”

“You really don’t want me to do that,” I said, and looked straight at her.

“Why not?” she asked in that tone again.

I looked at her sitting across the room from me, back straight, legs together, hands folded on her tweed skirt. She looked like a headmistress who thought she was in some way superior to me.

“Are you sure?” I asked her, almost as a warning.

“I’m sure,” she smiled, not believing for a moment that I would be able to see anything about her at all.

Without taking my eyes off hers, there was a small part of me that was going to enjoy this.

“You’re married, but not happily and you don’t have any children. You find your husband boring, and despite your sober appearance, you crave excitement and adventure. You find this in the affair that you’re having with a male who is about ten years younger than you. He is tall, lean, and strong-looking. His hair is blonde and he has blue eyes, the complete opposite of your husband. Your lover isn’t married and you want him to believe that you aren’t either. But I don’t think he really cares about that. He would probably like it if you were – he’d find it more exciting that way. You hide the fact that you are married from him, not to protect your husband, but there is a very small part of you that knows what you are doing is wrong, so you’re not really deceiving him, you’re tricking yourself. You just can’t let go of the austere image that you like to promote.”

I couldn’t help but notice Keats shift uncomfortably in her seat, pulling the hem of her skirt an inch or two over her knee. “Kiera, please could you stop...”

“Oh, I’m sorry, I thought this was some kind of test. I really think I should carry on.” Now it was my turn to smile.

“Kiera -” she started, but I cut over her.

“You spent your lunch hour today with your lover in a room in the Holiday Inn Motel, just two streets from here. Your sex was quick and rushed, but he had time to...let me see...yes restrain you...”

“Enough already!” Doctor Keats screamed, almost falling forward off her seat. Her face was flushed, and her hands trembled in her lap. “I think that’s all for today Kiera,” she said, sounding out of breath. “You should go.”

“As you wish,” I smiled to myself, gathering up my bag and standing.

“I think we’ve gone as far as we can go with our sessions,” she said, not looking at me. “I’m going to refer your case onto another colleague.”

“Whatever you think is best, Doc,” I said, pulling open the door to her office. Then just as I was about to step out into the corridor, she called after me.

“How did you know all that?” she asked. “It was some kind of trick, right?”

Shaking my head, I said, “No tricks, no magic.”

“But how then?”

“The picture of you and that man on your desk has got to be your husband. If you have a picture of your husband then you’d have pictures of

your children, too. Seeing as there aren't any pictures of sons and daughters tells me the chances are you don't have any. Your bag is open on the floor beside you and on the top are your car keys, compact mirror and a key card with the words *Holiday Inn Havensfield* printed on it. Must have been used today or otherwise it would have been further down your bag. The fact that it's there at all, says that you were in a rush to leave the motel and forgot to hand it back in at Reception. The top two buttons of your blouse have been fastened incorrectly, I can smell aftershave on you and you're not wearing your wedding ring as usual. Again, all signs that you were in a rush getting back from lunch. It's not the only time I've seen you not wearing your ring. You always have it on during my morning appointments, but this is the seventh time I've noticed it missing during my afternoon appointments, suggesting that you often remove it during your lunch break; and why would that be? You don't wear bracelets, but today, like on four other occasions I've noticed red circular marks on your wrists. You forget, Doctor Keats, I'm a police officer, and I'd recognise the marks left behind by handcuffs anywhere."

"Okay, okay," she groaned at me. "You've made your point. But how did you know what he looks like?"

Smiling down at her, I said, "Why, Doctor, that was the easy part. Three weeks ago, I arrived early for my appointment with you, so I sat and

ate a sandwich in the small gardens just across the road. I happened to look up and see you climbing from a taxi. But before you got out, you lent back inside and kissed a young blonde-haired man. He didn't look like the picture of the man in the photo on your desk, and the kiss wasn't like the kiss you give to a friend or a brother – your lips lingered just a little too long over his. He had to be your lover.”

Without looking back at her, I stepped out into the corridor, closing the door behind me. The thought of never having to sit opposite her again and face another of her interrogations felt wonderful – it felt like freedom. And as I left the building and stepped out into the grey afternoon sun, I guessed that she was glad that she would never have to see me again, too.

Chapter Two

Despite the overcast sky, I made my way on foot through Havensfield town centre. A cool breeze swirled litter along the gutter and I pulled the collar of my jacket up about my neck. The streets with their rows of Victorian-built shops were just beginning to close for the day, and most of the shoppers had started to head home for the evening. Being a coastal town, seagulls squawked overhead and the mouth-watering smell of fish and chips wafted on the air.

It was just short of five in the afternoon, and I was annoyed that I'd wasted yet another afternoon being analysed by Keats. I hadn't meant to hurt her, and there was a small part of me that felt bad for saying what I had. *But hey, she asked for it right?* I told myself. She wanted to know what I could see about her – so I'd told her – but had I needed to be so smug about it? Whatever, it was done now and so were my weekly afternoon sessions with her, I hoped.

Quickening my pace, I made my way across town towards the newsagents. I wanted to buy a copy of each of the national newspapers

before they closed up shop for the day. Since leaving The Ragged Cove and my suspension from work, I'd taken to buying as many newspapers I could each day. With the T.V. permanently tuned to the news channel, I would sit on the living room floor of my small rented room and search each of the papers for news stories involving any sudden disappearances of people. But what I was really looking for were any stories relating to murder where the victims had been found with injuries to their throats. I would spend hours shut away, my eyes scanning every page looking for anything that might suggest the return of vampires. If there were vampires, my belief was that the Vampyrus would be somewhere close by, and that meant Luke might be with them. Murphy had told me that they were going in search of Taylor and the other Vampyrus that were like him, unable to resist the taste of human blood. If I could find Luke, Murphy, or Potter again, then they would lead me to Taylor and perhaps my old trainer, Sergeant Phillips, if he were still alive.

I wasn't interested in finding Taylor and Philips in order to seek any revenge, or help my old colleagues destroy them – I hoped to be able to convince Luke, Murphy, and Potter to keep them alive long enough, at least, for Taylor and Phillips to tell me what had truly happened to my mother. Ever since leaving The Ragged Cove, the thought of finding out what had happened to her and that image of Henry Blake's grey, cold hand

clutching a lock of her hair wouldn't leave me. Nights had become almost unbearable, as I lay awake on the sofa, staring blankly at the news channel, my dreams and thoughts consumed by images of my mother and the nightmare that I'd lived at The Ragged Cove.

Night and day I thought about her and I wanted so much to keep the promise that I had made to my father. I knew that she was still alive and suspected that Taylor and Phillips held the answers. When I wasn't thinking about my mother, I was thinking about Luke. I wondered if he were alright and if he had managed to survive the burns that he had received saving my life in the sky above St. Mary's Church. On my many walks to see Doctor Keats, I would look down at the paving stones and wonder if Luke were somewhere beneath me in The Hollows. Then I would get to thinking that perhaps he wasn't beneath me at all, that he had recovered and was already above ground tracking Taylor and Phillips like Murphy had said they would.

There was so much that I didn't know, and that was what was driving me mad. Sometimes, after my sessions with Keats, I would question my own sanity. Had I really seen the things that I had in The Ragged Cove? Had I really been working the night shift with men that claimed to be a race of vampire bats? If I had been told such a thing by anyone, wouldn't I have had the same reaction to them as Keats had towards me? I mean this was

the stuff of fairy tales, horror movies, and books. But I knew that it had all been real, I hadn't imagined any of it. And in the darkness at night as I lay awake, the T.V. set flickering in the corner, I would think of Luke and the brief time that we had spent together. Those feelings that I had felt for him would come flooding back and they would feel as raw and intense as they had when he had held me close to him, when he'd kissed me and enclosed me in his wings.

Had I really felt love for him? Or had it just simply been my emotions freaking out due to the unimaginable situation that I had found myself in? Had it just been lust? The guy was a hottie. But when I thought of him, his jet-black hair, bright green eyes, and fit body, I knew it was more than those things that made my soul ache for him. Like everything else that had taken place it, was hard to explain to myself, so how would I ever get the likes of Keats to understand or believe me?

Within days, of leaving The Ragged Cove and returning to my room in Havensfield, the nightmares had started. It was strange, because although I could see more than I always wanted to when I was awake, my dreams were a blur; a mosaic of broken images, distant voices, violence and death. The result was always the same; I would wake in my bed, but more often than not on the couch, with my heart thumping in my chest and gasping for breath. Then one night, as I sat gasping in air, I noticed something warm

and wet trickling down my cheek. Dabbing at it with the tips of my fingers, I was horrified to discover that I was bleeding from my left tear duct.

Leaping from the couch, I raced to the bathroom and looked in the mirror to find a crimson stream of tears running from my eye. Taking a piece of tissue, I wiped it away, leaving a red smear across my cheek. At first I didn't do anything, telling myself that I must have unknowingly rubbed my eye in my sleep and scratched it with one of my fingernails. But it happened again the next night, and the night after that, a stream of blood-red tears flowing from my eye. For weeks I didn't mention this to Keats, I kept it to myself.

Then the red tears came during the day, but it was more than that. I started seeing things. I mean more than *seeing*. Those flash-bulbs would go *pop* again inside my mind's eye. Fleeting glimpses of crime scenes, bodies lying dead and bleeding, their eyes turned towards me. The images became more horrific – terrifying – like waking nightmares. I would get snapshots of catastrophes; buildings reduced to rubble; iron girders twisted out of shape; planes falling from the sky; trains crashing, piles of bodies stacked as high as mountains, limbs entwined like a grotesque puzzle; row upon row of open graves for as far as my eye could see. These images, however quick, came without warning and when I least expected them, they hit me like a blow to the head. They left me feeling confused, dazed, and nauseous.

Then the tears would come, thick and red – almost black. It was as if holes the size of pinpricks had opened in my mind and was bleeding the anguish and suffering of those who I saw in those flashes.

In the end, I had to tell Keats – I had to tell someone. At first I didn't tell her about the visions I saw, just about the tears. Immediately, she sent me for CAT and MRI scans, but they found nothing. Doctor Keats became suspicious and that tone crept into her voice again, whenever I mentioned the tears. So I told her about the pictures I saw in my head. How it was like being in the dark, then suddenly the blackness is lit-up with a flash of white light revealing the gruesome scenes hidden within.

Keats wanted more detail. "Kiera, who are these victims you see?"

"I don't know," I told her with a shake of my head.

"Where are these bodies that you see?" she pushed.

"I don't know that, either," I said.

"What about the planes? The ones you see falling from the sky?"

"What about them?" I asked.

"Why are they falling from the sky? Are these catastrophes that *have* happened or *yet* to take place?"

"I don't know!" I insisted.

"What causes them to crash?" she pushed harder, the gap between her questions getting less, and reminding me of being cross-examined in

court.

I felt I knew the answer to her last question, but I just couldn't say it.

"Well? Who is responsible for these atrocities?" she came at me again.

All I wanted to scream was: *The vampires did it! The vampires made the planes fall out of the sky. It was the vampires that brought those buildings to the ground and it was the vampires that killed all of those people!* But I couldn't say any of that to her – because I didn't know if that were true myself.

With my world seeming to fall apart all around me, I knew that I needed to occupy my mind. It had to be kept busy. I needed a mental challenge – some stimulus, a puzzle to solve to take my mind off what was happening to me. I needed to be back at work where I belonged – but I didn't know when or if ever that was going to happen. So I placed a small add in the local paper, which read:

Got a problem that needs investigating?

I'll solve anything!

Email: Kierahudson91@aol.com

I soon realised that I should have been more specific in my advert, as the first email I received was from a guy who thought he was paying too much for his electricity and wanted me to find out why. The second was from a woman who had lost her cat and the third was from an old gentleman who...well let's just say it was more of a medical matter. The fourth was not a great deal more interesting, it was from an old woman who had misplaced her wedding ring. Mrs. Lovelace was seventy-eight-years-old and had been married for sixty of them. Her husband had died in the last six months. She looked frail and vulnerable so I agreed to help. During one long Sunday afternoon and over several cups of watery tea, I got her to work backwards in her mind exactly what she had done and where she had been on the day that she had misplaced it. Eventually she remembered taking it off and placing it on the kitchen windowsill the previous Thursday morning.

“My fingers are thinner than they used to be,” she smiled. “I always take the ring off when I’m washing the dishes. Don’t want it to slip off and lose it down the plug-hole, you see. But I get so forgetful these days and don’t always remember to put it back on again. Frank was forever reminding me.”

“Frank?” I asked.

“My late husband – his memory was sharper than mine,” she said, a sadness overcoming her face as she thought of him.

“May I take a look in the kitchen?” I asked her, placing my teacup on the table that sat between us.

“Of course you can, my dear,” she said, struggling out of her chair.

Taking her by the arm, I led her into the kitchen, and she pointed to the spot on the windowsill where she had last seen her wedding ring. The window was open and a breeze blew in and cooled the stuffy kitchen. I leant forward and inspected the area where she said she had left her wedding ring.

“Mrs. Lovelace, can you remember if the window was open last Thursday?” I asked her.

“Now let me see,” she said, and scratched her grey wispy hair with her gnarled fingers. “Yes, it would have been. I always have the window open in the warm weather.”

“Can I take a look outside?” I asked her.

“Outside?” she said, eyeing me with curiosity. “Whatever for?”

“Oh, I don’t know,” I smiled at her. “I’m just nosey like that.”

“Go right ahead, my dear,” she said, and shuffled behind me to the kitchen door.

Stepping into the small garden, I could see a pretty-looking flowerbed in the earth directly under her window. Kneeling down, I brushed my fingertips over the Lavender that grew there.

“You’re an excellent gardener,” I said, gently pushing the plants aside so I could inspect the earth.

“Oh it’s not down to me, a local man comes in twice a week and does it all for me,” she said. “He’s a terrific chap.”

I had seen enough, so standing straight, I asked, “When was your gardener last here?”

“Let me see,” she said, and scratched her hair again. “Last week sometime, I think.”

“Nice is he?” I asked her.

“He’s a lovely man,” she said.

“What’s his name?”

“Dave-something-or-other,” she smiled. “I can’t remember, and I only spoke to him this morning.”

“How come?”

“He telephoned to ask if I wanted him to get me some more Fuschias. Apparently they’re on sale at the gardening centre,” she told me.

“You don’t have an address for him, do you?” I asked.

“It’s written down somewhere,” she said, shuffling back into the house. “Now let me see...where did I put it?”

Following her into the kitchen, I watched as she picked up a tatty-looking handbag. Pawing through it she said, “I’m sure it’s in here somewhere – he gave me one of these little card things with his number on it. Oh dear, I can’t seem to find it now.”

“Don’t worry, Mrs. Lovelace,” I assured her, then walked into the hallway where the telephone sat on a small round table. Anyone else called you today?” I asked over my shoulder.

“No, I don’t think so,” she said back from the kitchen.

Lifting the receiver, I pressed the ‘last caller’ button and made a note of the number. Going back into the kitchen, the old woman was still rummaging through her bag.

“Don’t worry, Mrs. Lovelace. It wasn’t important,” I told her.

“Why did you want it?” she asked.

“My garden is a bit overgrown and I could do with a gardener, that was all.” Then changing the subject, I added, “Have you got a picture of your wedding ring?”

Trundling back into the living room, she took a picture from the mantelpiece and handed it to me.

“That’s me and Frank,” she said. “One of the last pictures we had taken together,” and I noticed her pale blue eyes begin to water.

In the picture she had her arms around her husband, both of them frail-looking but happy. Her left hand rested against Frank’s arm, and I could clearly see her missing wedding ring. It was gold, with a yellow transparent-looking stone set into it. I guessed that the stone was citrine. On either side of the stone sat a cluster of tiny diamonds.

“It certainly is a beautiful ring,” I told her.

“Will you be able to find it?” she asked, her voice wavering.

“I’ll do my best,” I said, taking her hand. “Can I hold onto this picture for a couple of days?”

“Yes, but why?” she asked, giving me that curious stare again.

“Oh it’s just a hunch.”

“Ok, if you think it will help, although I don’t see how,” she said, easing herself back down into her arm chair.

“I’ll be back in a day or two,” I told her, heading for the door. “I’ll see myself out.”

Climbing into my beat-up old Mini, I headed straight into town. Parking, I went to the local pawnbrokers. With picture in hand, I peered in through the windows, and there sitting on display, was Mrs. Lovelace’s wedding ring. Without my badge, I would never be able to seize the ring

from the owner of the shop, so heading across the street to a nearby Starbucks, I called the only person that I had stayed in contact with since being *temporarily* relieved of my duties – while I was mentally evaluated by Doctor Keats.

Constable John Miles had joined the police force at the same time as me and not being the brightest of recruits he had soon acquired the nickname ‘Sparky’. But John was a sweet guy, dependable, and a loyal friend. Whereas my other fellow recruits had given up on me, Sparky had stayed in touch. He had been my lifeline back to the police, just updating me with gossip really, but it helped me maintain some kind of contact with the job that I longed to go back to. Sparky had never asked me about the ‘vampire thing’ which had caused so many raised eyebrows, sniggers, and condemnation amongst my peers. In fact, John had been pretty cool, and on the odd occasion that I had needed some information regarding my own enquiries, he had put his job on the line and run checks on the police computers for me. I knew that John wanted more than friendship, but I didn’t have those kinds of feelings for him. The only feelings that I had for anyone like that was Luke, and I couldn’t even be sure what they were anymore. But in return for the odd piece of information that John gave me to assist in one of my cases, I would sometimes cook him dinner or take him to the movies. John was awkward-looking, gangly, and shy and there

was a part of me that I hated because I knew deep down I kind of used him. But knowing this didn't stop me from calling him up and asking him for his help - again.

John was on a day off from work, and joined me in the coffee shop within half an hour of my phone call to him. Nervously kissing me on my cheek, he pulled up a chair and sat opposite me. For someone who was in their mid-twenties he still had a sprinkling of spots on his forehead and cheeks – giving him a constant flushed look. His eyes were a dull grey and his glasses always perched lopsided on the bridge of his nose, giving his whole head a slanted look.

“What is it this time?” he asked, almost sounding excited that I was including him on one of my cases.

“I need you to flash your badge for me,” I told him, with a smile, knowing that I wouldn't have to work hard at getting him to help me out. I then told him about Mrs. Lovelace's missing ring and how I'd found it sitting in the front window of the pawnbrokers across the street. I explained to him that without a badge, I would never be able to convince the owner to hand it over and get a look at the CCTV to see who it was that had brought the ring into the shop.

After finishing our coffees, I followed John across the street and into the pawnbrokers. Flipping his badge from his pocket, John spoke coolly to

the owner and said, "I'm Constable Miles and this is Constable Hudson from Havensfield Police." Without giving the owner the opportunity to ask to see my identification John had started to talk again. I was impressed.

"The ring in the window, the one with the yellow stone, we suspect has come from a burglary," John said.

The owner, a smartly dressed man in his fifties with combed- back greying hair, looked back at John and said, "How can you be so sure?"

Producing the photograph given to me by Mrs. Lovelace, I waved it under the man's nose and said, "This is how we know."

Pulling a pair of spectacles from his suit pocket, he put them on and studied the picture.

"Take a look at the victim," I said. "That could easily be your mother sitting in that picture. Is your mother still alive?" I asked him.

"Well, yes..." he started.

"Lucky you," I cut in. "So she's not alone then, like this poor woman. See the guy in the picture?"

The owner nodded.

"Well that was her husband. Married for best part of sixty years," I told him. "But he died just six months ago and someone steals the wedding ring that he gave her. Now who would do a thing like that?"

"I don't -" the owner said, but this time it was Sparky who cut in.

“So you don’t keep records of who you buy from?” and without waiting for the man’s reply, Sparky said, “That’s very remiss of you.”

Then looking around the shop at all the other display cabinets, I said, “So, if you don’t keep records or receipts, how can you be sure that none of this other stuff hasn’t be stolen? I guess we had better get a warrant and come back and seize the lot. What do you reckon, Constable Miles?”

“Gee, and there seems to be so many pretty items in this shop to go through,” Sparky said looking at owner. “It could take months to work our way through all this stuff – I mean this place could be closed down for God knows how long!”

“Okay, okay,” the man sighed. “He came in last Thursday with it.”

“Who did?” I asked.

“Didn’t give his name,” he said.

“CCTV?” John asked.

The man nodded.

“We’ll be taking that, and the ring,” I said, and held out my hand.

We drove back to my rented room, and while John fixed us both up with a mug of coffee and a sandwich, I watched the CCTV disc on my DVD player. There was a camera right above the counter and it gave a clear view of anyone that approached it. I sped through the disc to the previous

Thursday. At 15:22 hours that day, my man came into the shop and produced Mrs. Lovelace's ring.

"I have him!" I shouted over my shoulder at John.

After a quick call to the number I had taken from Mrs. Lovelace's phone, I sat back in my favourite chair by the window, with John sitting opposite me, and we waited. Within half an hour, the buzzer on the door below sounded. Pressing the intercom button, I told the caller to come up. Leaving my door ajar, I went back to my seat. Moments later, a plump-looking middle-aged man, wearing overalls and muddy boots, stepped into my room. His hands were rough and dirty-looking, with mud under his fingernails.

"Mr. David Evans?" I asked, not getting up from my seat. "Owner of 'Tidy Gardens' who can be contacted via Tidy Gardens dot com, whose business address is fifteen Hayfields Road, Havensfield?"

"Why, yes," he said, looking at both me and Sparky. "You called me about some gardening that you need done?"

"That's correct," I said, not taking my eyes from his.

"But I don't understand," he said, scratching his untidy hair, "you live in a flat – you don't have a garden."

"No, I just like watching people dig themselves holes," I said back at him.

Looking at me totally confused, Evans said, “Is this some kind of joke?”

Placing Mrs. Lovelace’s wedding ring onto the small coffee table that sat between Sparky and me, I said, “I don’t think stealing from a seventy-eight-year-old woman is a joke.”

The gardener looked down at the ring then back at me, his face white – the colour of paper. He opened and closed his mouth like a drowning fish.

“What have you got to say about that?” I asked him.

“I-I don’t know...” he stammered. “I’ve never seen it before.”

Snatching up the ring, I said, “Have it your way, Mr. Evans, but this gentleman over here is a police officer and is ready to take you into custody.”

Hearing this, Evans dropped to his knees at my feet and gripped my ankles.

“Please, I beg you!” he cried. “This will ruin me – my family and my business!”

Kicking him away, I shouted, “Pull yourself together, man. It’s only yourself you have to blame for the situation that you now find yourself in. You have tears of pity in your eyes, now that you have been caught – but where were your tears for Mrs. Lovelace?”

Still on his knees, Evans looked at me and, through his tears, he said, “I’m so sorry. I have been a fool. These last few months or more have been difficult for me. What with the credit crunch, most of my business has dried up. People can’t afford to have their gardens tended to by me. It’s a luxury that most people can now ill afford.”

Showing him no pity, I said, “And so it is hard for millions of people up and down the length of the country, but do they all take to stealing from the elderly to supplement their wages?”

Sniffing, the man wiped his eyes with his dirty hands. “No they don’t – but you must understand, I was desperate. Never before have I stolen anything. But I am behind with my mortgage and the bank is close to repossessing my home. My wife and children will be thrown out onto the street.”

I didn’t doubt that what Evans was telling me was the truth. I could tell that he was no hardened criminal, but still, I was angry with him for what he had done to Mrs. Lovelace. I looked at him; he was pathetic and a very small part of me felt sorry for him.

“Get up!” I snapped at him.

Like an obedient child, Evans stood, while Sparky and me remained seated. Then wringing his hands together, he looked at me and asked, “How did you know I had taken it? What led you to me?”

“Mrs. Lovelace contacted me as I am in the occasional business of solving...how can I put it? Little problems for people. I got her to work backwards in her mind and remember exactly where she had last seen it. She led me to the kitchen windowsill, where she had removed it last Thursday so she could wash the dishes. After a very brief examination of the windowsill, I could clearly see one muddy fingerprint, which suggested that it had been taken by someone with dirty hands. It wouldn't have taken a genius to have worked out that someone who spent much of their time with their hands in soil had removed it. After examining the flowerbed beneath the kitchen window, I found boot prints in the earth.”

“But of course my foot marks would be there, I'm her gardener,” Evans sniffled.

“You do a lot of your work standing on tiptoe, do you?” I asked him. “There were a set of prints that showed you had been standing on tiptoe just beneath her window. This is where you stood and reached in and took the ring.”

“But...but,” he said sounding astounded. “How did you find the ring?”

“The fact that Mrs. Lovelace didn't report any other missing valuables, suggests to me that this was a crime of impulse. Just as you have told us, you are struggling financially and on seeing the ring, you saw a way

of solving your problems – albeit a mere quick fix. But you weren't thinking of the long-term consequences or of the outcome should you be caught for your crime. I knew that this theft was a crime of impulse – to make a quick buck, dare I say. Therefore you would want to get rid of the ring as quickly as possible and convert it into some cash. You wouldn't sell it to friends – they would have wondered where you had come by it – no, you are an amateur – you don't mix in criminal circles and wouldn't know anyone to pass it to. So needing the money quickly, you took it to the only place in town that would be interested in buying such an item – the pawnbrokers. So that was the next stop and there was the ring. You were smart enough not to leave your details, but the CCTV proves that it was you." Then smiling at him wryly, I added, "The chain of events weren't very hard to follow."

"I see," said Evans, sitting slowly into an armchair by the door. "So what happens now? There has been no real harm done, don't you think? Mrs. Lovelace has her ring back."

"Thanks to me and my colleague over there," I snapped. "If Mrs. Lovelace had not contacted me then your hope was that she would believe that she had misplaced the ring. Then what? The following month when you were short of money – would you have helped yourself to her pension money – taken a few notes from her purse when she had her back turned?"

“No!” Evans said, his voice wobbling again as if on the verge of more tears. “I swear. You have to believe me.”

“Why should I take the word of a man that would stoop so low as to take something so precious from an elderly woman such as Mrs. Lovelace?” I scowled.

“Please don’t arrest me!” he begged, sitting on the edge of his seat. “Please don’t make this official.”

Looking at Evans, I could see that his face had drained of all colour and he seemed almost near to collapse. Standing, I crossed the room to him. Looking down at him I said, “You disgust me Evans, but I do believe that you lost your head that day in the garden. You saw the ring and believed you saw a way out of your problems. I believe that you have led a previously good life and it is not my wish to destroy what has, up until this point, been an unblemished life. If my colleague were to arrest you, it would only harm the very people you so foolishly believed you could protect – your wife and children. But my main concern is with my client, Mrs. Lovelace. She could well do without the trauma of having to provide a statement to the police, and perhaps take the stand in court. But would be the realisation that you – someone she speaks so highly of and believes to be her friend – could steal her most precious possession, which would destroy her. I have no wish to break that poor woman’s heart, when it is still

healing from the death of her husband. Therefore, I will not be taking this matter any further.”

Dropping from the armchair, and clasping hold of my trousers, Evans sobbed. “Thank you! Thank you.” Kicking him free, I dragged him to his feet and grabbed him by his dirty overalls. Unable to make eye contact with me, Evans said, “How can I ever thank you enough?”

“There is still the matter of the pawnbroker – he is still five hundred pounds out of pocket thanks to you. You will repay him the money. I will be calling him in the next day or two to see that you have. And you are never to go back to Mrs. Lovelace’s home again. That is a customer you have now lost and by the sounds of it, you need as many as you can get.”

“I promise,” Evans snivelled. “I promise.”

Releasing him, I shoved him towards the door and said, “Now get out of here!”

With his shoulders slumped forward and his head cast down, Evans skulked from my room. From behind me, I could hear the sound of clapping. Turning, I saw Sparky, still seated in the armchair and slapping his hands together. Smiling at me, he said, “I’ve got to give it to you Hudson – you’re a class act.”

“It was nothing,” I said, crossing back to my chair.

“I could see how you followed each step of the case, but how did you know his website and home address? You only had his telephone number.”

“That was easy. It’s written down the side of the van that he arrived in.” Then smiling to myself, I looked out of the window.

I returned the ring to Mrs. Lovelace that evening. Once again, I went back to the flowerbed beneath her kitchen window, and making out that it had been there all along, I handed it to her. Slipping it back onto her finger, she wept with relief at having her wedding ring again.

“Whatever your fee, young lady, it would never be enough,” she sobbed. “How much do I owe you?”

Taking her by the arm and leading her back inside, I told her she owed me nothing. In the following days, I hired another gardener for Mrs. Lovelace, giving him my bank account details so he could charge me directly for his labour.

“She’s is to have the prettiest garden in Havensfield,” I told him.

I reached the newsagents just as it was closing.

“I didn’t think you were coming today,” the paperboy said, as he opened the door to me.

“I got delayed, Jack,” I said.

“Want a copy of each?” he asked, taking the pile of newspapers from the counter.

“As always,” I smiled.

“What I can’t figure out,” the young lad said, “is how come you need so many newspapers every day. They all pretty much say the same old thing.”

“I don’t have a social life,” I said, taking the papers from him.

“Fancy going on a date then, Kiera?” he said, trying to make his offer sound like a joke.

“Maybe in a couple of years,” I winked at him and left the shop. Taking one of the papers, I rolled the others up and tucked them under my arm. Then looking at the headline splashed in thick black letters across the newspaper, my heart almost stopped.

Passenger plane crashes over Atlantic Ocean!

Then, just like so many times before, those bright lights began to flash behind my eyes. And in those bright lights I could see an airline pilot screaming into his headpiece, “*Mayday! Mayday! They are trying to breach the cockpit!*”

As quickly as they had come, those blinding images had gone, leaving me feeling punch-drunk and dazed. Then I heard the pitter-patter sound of raindrops splashing down onto the newspaper in my hands. Looking down at the headline, expecting to see black ink running across the page, I was startled to see that it wasn't rain that had dripped onto it, but crimson-coloured tears from my eye.

Chapter Three

Placing the newspapers on the table along with all the other cuttings and clippings I'd amassed over the weeks, I went to my poky bathroom and ran a sink full of water. Cupping my hands, I splashed some of it onto my face, and wiped away the red streak that ran from the corner of my left eye and down my cheek. Some of it had splashed onto my top, and pulling it off, I threw it into the wash basket.

The dizziness that I felt after these episodes had begun to fade, and I was left with a dull thud throbbing away behind my temple. Rolling my head from side to side on my neck, I rubbed my forehead with the tips of my fingers and went to my bedroom. Pulling a clean top from the wardrobe, I pulled it on. Sitting in my favourite seat by the window, I eased myself into it and turned on the T.V. I would go through the newspapers once my head had cleared. It had become my nightly habit of sitting in my armchair, the news playing on the T.V in the background, and methodically going through every newspaper looking for stories, anything that might lead me to Luke, Potter, and Murphy. With scissors in hand, I would cut out anything

of interest and pin them to the living room wall. There were so many cuttings now attached to the walls, that if you stepped back and at a glance, the room looked as if it had been decorated with newspaper. Faces of the missing and murder victims stared back at me. Sparky said that it freaked him out just a little and he once asked me why they were there. I told him that I was fascinated by serious crime, and that I was writing a study on offender profiling. If Doctor Keats had ever made a house call, then my chances of ever returning back to the force would've been something close to zero. But I didn't have to worry about Keats anymore and she didn't have to worry about me – if she ever had.

The T.V. flashed images of the ocean. Rescue boats were racing towards what looked like the fragmented and broken pieces of an airliner. Cushion seats floated on the waves, along with yellow-coloured life jackets. The strap line running across the bottom of the screen read:

Air Atlantis Flight 281 crashes into sea 80 miles off the coast of Ireland. All 232 passengers and 12 crew feared to be dead.

Leaning forward in my chair, I turned up the volume to hear the reporter speaking over the images being played out on the screen.

“The investigation is still on-going,” the reporter said. “The cause of the crash is yet to be formally determined. A statement by the BEA says that the last verbal contact was made with the aircraft at 11:52 hours BST. It is unclear what was said during that last transmission.”

Slumping back into my chair, I could hear the sound of that voice inside my head. It wasn't like I was hearing with my ears, but like a distant radio signal hissing and spitting inside my mind. Over and over I could hear a voice screaming, “*They’ve breached the cabin...they’ve breached the cabin!*”

Was the voice I could hear that of the pilot from the plane that crashed into the sea? It couldn't be. Why would it be? And who had breached the cabin? But as I sat and tried to make sense of the changes that were taking hold of me, the buzzer on my door hummed, waking me from my thoughts. Placing the newspapers on the floor and turning down the volume on the T.V., I got up from my chair and peered out of the window and down at the street below. It was starting to get dark outside. The long shadow of someone standing at the door stretched up the street like a deep crack in the pavement. The buzzer sounded again.

Pressing the intercom button, I spoke into it.

“Hello?”

“Ms. Kiera Hudson?” the voice asked, and it was female.

“Yes,” I said back, wondering who it could be.

“I was hoping I could speak with you,” the voice crackled through the intercom.

Peering over my shoulder at my room, the piles of old newspapers scattered across the floor and stacked beside my chair, and the news cuttings covering the walls, I turned back and said,

“This isn’t a good time for me at the moment. Couldn’t you come back -”

“You’ve been recommended to me,” the voice cut in. “I’ve heard you’re good at...how can I put it? Solving little problems?”

“Erm,” I stammered.

“Please, Ms. Hudson,” the voice came again. “I’ve travelled a great distance to ask for your help.”

Releasing the latch, I spoke into the intercom and said, “Okay, come on up.”

Hurrying around the room, I kicked some of the scattered newspapers under the chair and sofa, and scraped my hair into a ponytail. Before I’d even had the chance of finishing my hair, there was a woman standing in my open doorway. Closing the door behind her, she stepped in.

Glancing at all the hundreds of newspaper cuttings, she said, “Thank you for seeing me, Ms. Hudson.”

Knocking a pile of newspapers from an armchair, I ushered her towards it. “Please call me Kiera,” I smiled. “Ms. Hudson makes me sound so old.”

“Of course,” the woman smiled back, not taking her eyes from me, “Someone so young and pretty but with a knowledge way past her years.”

“I’m sorry?” I said sitting back in my chair.

‘I’ve heard very good things about you, Kiera,’ she said, smoothing out her trousers with her hands and then pulling down the cuffs of her suit jacket. The woman was dressed all in black, apart from the grey-coloured blouse that I could see beneath her jacket. But that was all I could see – I mean unlike Doctor Keats – this woman gave nothing away. I guessed she was in her early to mid-forties, her skin was pale and in great condition. She had thick auburn hair that flowed onto her shoulders. Her eyes were clear blue and she wore little-to-no make-up, apart from a crimson lipstick she had daubed her full lips with. The woman wore no jewellery – no rings, necklaces, or bracelets.

“Can I get you something?” I asked her. “A cup of tea or...”

“No, thank you,” the woman smiled. “Let me introduce myself. I am Lady Hunt – but I’m happy for you to call me Elizabeth. I find titles so stuffy, don’t you?”

“I guess,” I said, wondering what it was that she could possibly want me to help her with.

“My husband, Lord Hunt, is the owner of Raven Industries. I don’t know if you have ever heard of them?”

Shaking my head, I said, “I’m not sure that I have. What’s the purpose of his company?”

“It has something to do with renewable genetics,” she said. “I don’t claim to really have understood what it was that Michael did, but maybe I should have taken more of an interest.”

“Did?” I asked.

“Michael...how can I put this? Went missing a few months ago,” she started to explain. “He had gone on a business trip to New York and hasn’t been seen since.”

“I’m sorry to hear that,” I told her.

“That’s very kind of you, but I have been left with somewhat of a dilemma,” she said, and stared straight at me. “Since Michael’s disappearance, I have been left to manage the business and as I’ve explained, I know very little about it. There is a meeting of shareholders in New York two days from now which I must attend.”

“I’m sorry, but is it the disappearance of your husband you want me to investigate?” I asked, somewhat confused. “I know very little about

business and even less about the complexities of renewable genetics.”

Covering her mouth to stifle a giggle, Lady Hunt looked at me and said, “Oh no Kiera, I’ve employed someone else to investigate Michael’s disappearance. That’s not the problem I require your services for.”

“What then?” I asked her with a frown.

“My sixteen-year-old daughter, Kayla, she’s the problem,” the woman said.

“In what way?” I asked, wondering where this was heading.

Standing, the woman went to the window and looked out. Without looking at me she said, “How can I describe Kayla? Apart from being exceptionally beautiful, she is also very bright,” then turning to face me she said, “and also out of control.”

“In what way?” I asked her, wondering if this wasn’t going to be a *my-daughter’s-mixed-up-in-drugs-and-I-don’t-like-the-guy-she-hangs-out-with* kind of problem.

“You have to understand, Kiera, that my husband and I have always given our daughter the very best – the very best of everything,” she said.

“No money has been spared. She has gone to the best private schools; she’s had the best of holidays, the best of everything.”

What about attention and love? I wondered but didn’t dare say this.

“But over the last few years, she has become wayward – rebelled against me and her father. Much to her father’s shame, Kayla has been expelled from every school we have sent her to. Even when Michael offered to pay double the tuition fees to keep her at one school, the headmaster refused, stating that it wasn’t the money – it was for the wellbeing of the other students and the sanity of the staff, which was his main concern. The headmaster went on to explain that Kayla’s behaviour had become so disruptive, that several parents had taken their child out of the school and he had a list of several other parents that were threatening to take their children elsewhere if Kayla was not removed. Finally, Kayla had built such a reputation for herself that no school – however much money we offered – would take her. Eventually, she became home-tutored and to my last count we have been through seven teachers in the last year.”

Heading back towards the chair and ringing her pale hands together, Lady Hunt took her seat again. “I am at my wit’s end.”

“But how can I help?” I asked her.

“I heard that you were a police officer,” Lady Hunt said.

“*Still* a police officer,” I corrected her. “Let’s just say I’m on an extended career break at the moment.”

“Well that’s even better, don’t you see?” the woman said, and I detected a note of desperation in her voice.

“For once in my life, I don’t see,” I told her.

“As I’ve said, I’ve got to go to New York tomorrow, and I need someone to keep an eye on -” she started.

Guessing what was coming, I cut in and said, “Can’t you take your daughter with you? She might like to...”

“You must be joking,” she scoffed. “I couldn’t possibly take Kayla with me – what would *they* think?”

“I don’t know,” I said. “But perhaps some time with just you – her mother – might be good for her.”

“But I’ll be so busy in meetings and conferences, I wouldn’t be able to spend any time with her,” she explained. “And I shudder to think of what she might get up to in New York while I was busy all day.”

“So what is it you’re asking me to do?” I said.

“Please come and stay at our home while I’m away and keep an eye on Kayla for me,” she asked. “You’re not too many years older than her and having a police officer around might be a stabilizing influence for her. You will be well looked after by my staff...”

“Can’t they keep an eye on her?” I asked, not wanting to take up the job of babysitting some spoilt brat.

“The Housekeeper has enough to do keeping the house running without having to concern herself with Kayla. Then there is Marshal, the

grounds man, he is quiet and aloof – not the slightest bit interested in some teenager’s rebellion. If left to her devices, Kayla would escape.”

“*Escape?*” I said, imagining a house with bars on the windows.

“Escape is probably too strong a word,” Lady Hunt said. “But Kayla has run away from home on several occasions. She travelled to London. We spent hundreds – no thousands of pounds in private detective fees in tracing her. The last time she was discovered living like a homeless person by the Embankment Tube Station. It was all very stressful and upsetting for us.” Then pulling a handkerchief from her suit pocket she dabbed the corner of her eyes. “No wonder Michael vanished – maybe he just had enough and couldn’t face coming home anymore. I don’t blame Kayla, but she has caused so much stress over the last few years.”

“Why do you think she behaves like this?” I asked her.

“I don’t know,” she groaned. “Like I said, we’ve given her everything.”

And that’s the problem, I thought to myself.

“I’d love to help, but...” I started to make my excuses.

“Please Kiera,” she said, moving to the edge of her seat. “I’ll pay you well...”

“It’s not the money,” I started to assure her.

“Please, all I ask is for you to come to my home for a week and keep an eye on my daughter...”

“It’s not really my idea of problem-solving,” I explained. “And besides, there must be someone else, some family member better suited to watch over your daughter. Somebody she knows and trusts, unless...”

“Unless what?” Lady Hunt asked me.

“Unless your concerns run deeper than just your daughter’s delinquent behaviour,” I said, eyeing her. “Perhaps you haven’t told me everything.”

“Your reputation does you justice,” she said, placing her hanky back into her pocket. “It seems that it is very difficult to get anything past you.”

“To fool me, Lady Hunt?” I said, feeling resentful that she hadn’t told me everything from the start.

“The problem is a little more complex than I first suggested,” Lady Hunt said, her skin so pale that she looked as if she might just faint.

“How complex?” I said, my interest in this case suddenly heightening.

“There is someone watching my daughter,” she said, her voice dropping to a whisper.

“Who?” I asked her.

“That, I do not know,” she said. “But I have seen him, at night, beyond the grounds of our home. He lurks in the dark at night, spying up at my daughter’s room.”

“Grounds?” I asked.

“Yes, we live in a Manor House,” she explained. “It’s a wretched place, really. It’s far too big for us and terribly hard to heat in the winter. Half of it is unused and has been for years, but it has been in my husband’s family for generations and it was his wish to reside in the home of his forefathers. The grounds are surrounded by a moat and there is a drawbridge – this is the only way in and out of the grounds.”

“A moat?” I gasped. “Sounds more like a castle!”

“I’ve probably talked it up far too much,” she said. “It’s not as grand as I’ve portrayed it to be. In fact, much of the manor is in disrepair and the whole place could do with tidying up. But Michael is a traditionalist and wants the manor to stay in the style that it had originally been built. He is very fussy about who he gets to work on the place. If it were going to be renovated, he was insistent that it be done just right. I lost count on how many builders we had visit the place and give quotes on the cost – but he never hired any of them. The whole place needs to be rewired and the plumbing – well don’t get me started on that. The noise those pipes make is just deafening at times. But even in the short time since my husband has

vanished, I have taken steps to have the work done. There are currently some workmen up at the manor carrying out some work for me.”

“How do you know it’s a man?” I asked her.

“Sorry?” she said, almost as if my question had surprised her.

“You said that the person watching your daughter is a man,” I reminded her.

“Marshal, the grounds man, disturbed him one night as he stood hidden in the undergrowth and bushes on the other side of the moat,” she said.

“Could Marshal give a description of this man?” I asked.

“No, it was dark. We live miles from anywhere, deep on the Welsh Moors. Save for the moonlight, the area is in complete darkness come nightfall. Marshal didn’t get a good look at him and he was quick on his feet – disappearing over the rugged landscape and into the night.”

“Do you have any idea who this person might be and why he would want to watch your daughter?” I asked her.

“I suspect that it’s someone she has met on one of her many escapades to London,” she said. “It scares me half to death, the thought of who she may have associated with while she was there. Perhaps she told him of her privileged upbringing and he has come to rob our home. Or maybe he has come to entice her back to London – for what reason I dare

not wonder. But whatever the reason, Kiera, I feel that Kayla is at risk of much harm from him.”

“Have you spoken to Kayla and asked her if she knows the identity of this stranger?” I asked.

“Yes, but she becomes evasive and then angry, throwing the most violent of tantrums,” she said. “With the help of Marshal, we have had to lock her in her room until she calms herself.”

“Tell me, did this stranger appear before or after your husband’s sudden disappearance?” I asked her.

“Just after,” she said, eyeing me. “Why do you ask?”

“No real reason,” I said trying to brush off her question. Changing the subject, I said, “Why haven’t you called the police to investigate this male?”

“As of yet, he has done nothing wrong,” she said. “He has been seen loitering around at night, but as I’ve said, I wouldn’t even be able to describe him. He hasn’t committed burglary or harmed me, my daughter, or my staff. But you have to believe me, Kiera, there is something very wrong and although Kayla seems fearless, my heart is full of dread. We live miles from the nearest town, the manor is remote, and should this man gain access to our home in my absence, I’m terrified at the thought of what might happen to my daughter. So I beg you, Kiera Hudson, please accept my offer

and come to my home and protect my dear Kayla– it will be a week at the most.”

I looked into her eyes, and I could see the fear in them. What else did I have planned? Nights sitting in front of the T.V. cutting out news articles and tacking them to walls of my flat? A trip into the country would probably do me some good; take my mind off Luke, Potter, and Murphy and the search for my mother. But more than that, this was the most interesting case to come along since...since I was posted to The Ragged Cove.

“Okay, I’ll come,” I told her, and for the briefest of moments I thought she was going to faint to the floor with relief.

“Oh thank you! Thank you!” she gasped, clutching her hands together as if in prayer.

“You’ll have to give me your address, so I can drive down tomorrow,” I said.

Then springing to her feet, Lady Hunt said, “You must come tonight, Kiera, as I leave for America first thing tomorrow morning.”

“But I’ll need to pack some stuff together -” I started.

“My driver is waiting outside,” she said, her voice sounding urgent.

“We must leave now!”

Chapter Four

Within five minutes, I'd packed a rucksack with everything that I guessed I might need. If I'd had longer to think about Lady Hunt's offer, maybe I wouldn't have been so eager to go. But things in my life since returning from The Ragged Cove hadn't been the same. Luke had left a hole somewhere inside of me, my dreams were plagued with images of my mother, nightmares haunted me day and night, and apart from Sparky, no one believed what had happened in The Ragged Cove. As I looked around at the piles of newspapers and the thousands of cuttings pinned to my wall, I knew deep down that I had to get away; but more than that, for the first time since leaving the Cove, I had a problem – something to solve – and that to me was irresistible.

With my rucksack hung over my shoulder, I switched out the light in my bedroom and closed the door behind me. Lady Hunt was standing and peering at the newspaper cuttings. Hearing me entering the room, she turned and smiled at me.

“Ready?” she asked.

“I guess,” I said.

“Let’s get going then.”

I locked the door to my flat and followed Lady Hunt down the stairs and out into the street. It was near dark, and parked by the curb was a sleek black Rolls Royce Phantom. Its body glistened like glass in the darkness and in it I could see my own reflection. Parked just in front of my Mini, or *piece of junk* as Potter had called it, the Rolls Royce looked like something from another planet. Lady Hunt was wealthier than I first realised. Oddly, the chauffeur stayed seated behind the wheel as Lady Hunt opened the back door for me to climb in. The interior of the car was upholstered in off-white leather, there were dark navy curtains at the windows, the glass in them was tinted, and a flat-screen T.V. hung down from the ceiling.

Lady Hunt closed the door shut behind me, walked round the rear of the vehicle and got in beside me. The vehicle purred into life

and crawled away from the curb. I looked back at my flat and my little red Mini, and as they disappeared into the distance, I got the strangest feeling that I might not ever see them again. Telling myself that I was just scared of stepping out of the comfort zone that I had entombed myself in, I faced front.

“The cuttings?” Lady Hunt asked.

“What about them?” I asked back.

“Why so many?”

“I’m working on a project,” I lied. “I’m doing a study on offender prof -” I started.

“I thought that perhaps you were searching for someone or some *thing*?” she cut in.

I knew by the way that she emphasised the *thing* that she was possibly referring to vampires. Trying to keep myself composed, I just stared back at her.

“You don’t really think I would leave you in charge of my daughter without doing some research into your background first, do you?” she said.

“What did you find out?” I asked her.

“You tell me,” she smiled.

“I guess it all depends on who you spoke to,” I smiled back.

Glancing out of the tinted windows, Lady Hunt said, “I know about your tales of vampires.”

Looking at her almost perfect profile, I said, “You must have believed my account of what happened to me.”

“What makes you think I believe you?” she said without turning to face me.

“If you believed me to be a liar, you wouldn’t have hired me to babysit your daughter,” I said back.

Then turning to face me she said, “I haven’t hired you for your storytelling abilities, Kiera Hudson. I’ve hired you to protect my daughter from whomever it is that lurks in the shadows at night and watches her.”

“What makes you think I can offer your daughter any protection?” I asked.

“I take it you’re not a liar?” she said, her eyes almost seeming to twinkle in the gloom of the rear of the car.

“Correct,” I said, sounding defensive.

“Well then,” she smiled. “Your account of what happened to you in The Ragged Cove must be true. And if that is the case, who better to look after my daughter than someone who managed to survive the odds against all those vampires!”

Before I’d the chance to say anything back, the car was slowing and pulling into the curb outside Havensfield Railway Station. Lady Hunt pushed open her door and started to climb out.

“We can’t be here already?” I said, knowing that we had only been on the road ten minutes.

“This is as far as I go,” she said, looking back over her shoulder at me.

“What, you’re not coming back with me?” I said feeling confused.
“What about your daughter, the staff at -”

“They’re expecting you,” she smiled back at me. “My staff will welcome you and provide you with anything that you need.”

“How are they expecting me?” I said. “How did you know that I would come?”

“Like I said. Kiera, I’ve done my homework and I knew you wouldn’t be able to turn down such a problem as I’ve got,” she said.

“But where are you going?” I asked.

Standing on the pavement and looking back at me sitting in the huge car, Lady Hunt said, “I’m catching the next train to London where I’m meeting up with a business acquaintance, and tomorrow we fly out to New York. I’ll see you in one week.” Then closing the car door, she was gone.

Leaning across the back seat, I reached for the handle to open the door again, but the chauffeur was accelerating the car away down the street. Peering out of the back window, I was surprised to see that Lady Hunt had already disappeared from view. But at last, despite her immaculate but bland appearance, I had *seen* something about her. She wasn’t going to New York, any more than I was.

Turning front, I looked at the back of the head of the chauffeur. Sliding across the backseat, I tried to get a better look at him. The interior of the car was in darkness and only the glare from the headlights of passing cars offered any light. The chauffeur wore a grey peaked cap, which was

pulled down low over his eyes, bushy white sideburns covered his cheeks, and a pair of glasses with black lenses covered his eyes. He gripped the steering wheel with a brown leather pair of driving gloves.

“So what’s your name?” I asked him, slumping back into the soft backseat of the car.

He made no reply.

Okay, I thought to myself. “So where exactly is this place you’re taking me to? I know it’s on the Welsh Moors but what’s -”

Before I’d the chance to finish what I was saying, he reached forward and pressed a button on the dashboard, raising a glass panel between us – sealing me in the rear of the car.

“What a jerk! So you’re not the talkative type,” I mumbled aloud. “Two can play that game.” Reaching into my rucksack, I pulled out my iPod and turned it on. Listening to ‘*Give Me Everything*’ by Pit-Bull and Ne-Yo, I settled back into the seat, and noted the time of my wristwatch – 20:07 hours. Staring out into the night, I couldn’t help but wonder what lay ahead for me in the darkness. But that was exciting, right?

Chapter Five

I was driven through the night by the nameless chauffeur, and I could do little else but listen to my iPod and stare out the window into the dark. What was I getting myself into? Where was I being taken? And why had Lady Hunt lied to me about going to New York? Most people would be demanding to be let free of the car or to be taken home to safety. But I didn't feel anything like that. Yeah, if I'm to be honest, my innards felt like they were being gripped by an invisible fist, but that feeling of apprehension – of not knowing – made me feel alive, all of my senses tingled with the thought of what might lay ahead.

As I stared out of the window, I made a mental note of the route which I was being taken – just in case. We took routes, A390, A39, and the A30, reaching the M5 at 21:34 hours. We travelled along the M5 until we reached the M49 an hour and fifteen minutes later. After a further five minutes we took the exit onto the M4 and I noted we travelled this for a further twenty-nine minutes until we left the motorway and headed onto the A470 and to a place called Merthyr Tydfil. We reached Brecon twenty-one

minutes later and this is where the chauffeur took a series of unmarked roads that led us away across the Brecon Beacon moors. The roads twisted and climbed, the chauffeur having to slow the car as he navigated his way via a series of slate stone lanes that were shielded each side by low, black slate walls. It was so dark outside, that all I could see was the pale shadow of my face reflecting back at me off the glass. We drove further and deeper across the moors. Every now and then, the barren landscape would be illuminated by the light of the moon as it appeared from behind passing clouds. It was bleak, rugged, and desolate. As I sensed the rest of civilisation disappearing behind me, that invisible fist drew tighter around my guts.

The vehicle climbed again, then the ground beneath us levelled out. In the distance, I could see the shape of a building set against the night sky. The sound of gravel crunching and breaking beneath the wheels of the car seemed almost deafening as the chauffeur headed towards this building – or castle?

The vehicle slowed, and I pressed the button set into the car door to lower the window. It made a buzzing noise, but the window refused to open. Cupping my hands together and pressing them against the glass, I peered out into the darkness, keen to find out why we had stopped. It looked as if we had come to a bridge that had only been half-finished. Then

in the distance, I could hear a grinding and clanking sound, like heavy metal chains being dragged across concrete. Then I saw it, the drawbridge that Lady Hunt had told me about, coming out of the sky like a vast black wing. With an earth-trembling shudder, it fell into place in front of the car, and we slowly crept over it. No sooner had we reached the other side than the sound of those clunking chains came again. I looked back to see the drawbridge rising back into the sky, sealing access to the outside world. Ahead, there was a huge iron gate, and set into the ancient stone wall was what looked like a small gate house. Stepping from the shadows was what looked like some weird creature. But as it came towards the gate, I could see that it was, in fact, a man. In one of his hands he held an old fashioned-looking lamp. In the glow of the light, I could see that his back looked misshapen and twisted as he lurched from the gate house. Even though he was stooped forward, he was tall. He wore a long dark coat, which hung about his knees. The gates wailed as if in pain as he pushed them open. Sitting forward in my seat, I tried to get a better look at him. The chauffeur steered the car forward through the gates and as he did, I peered through the window at the gatekeeper. He wore a large-brimmed hat, which looked tattered and old. The brim was pulled low over his brow. Bending forward, I tried to get a look at the face beneath it and what I saw made me gasp and jump back in my seat. His face was partially covered in a grubby-looking

bandage. Tufts of beard protruded from between the gaps, and only one eye and his mouth were left uncovered. His one eye swivelled in its socket as he looked at me. But it was his mouth. The top lip was twisted upwards and as he stared at me, I couldn't tell if he were smiling at me or snarling.

Looking away, the gates screamed as the deformed-looking gatekeeper closed them behind us. The chauffeur drove forward, and on each side of the car I could just make out the sheer vastness of the estate that the manor was set in. We followed the winding gravel path for what seemed like forever until we reached the entrance to the building.

Coming to a slow stop, the chauffeur killed the engine. I looked ahead, and although he wore those dark glasses, I knew that the chauffeur was watching me in the rear view mirror.

“What?” I said, staring back.

He said nothing.

Then I was aware of a light coming towards the car. I looked sideways to see someone approaching my door. Placing my iPod back into my pocket, I groped for my bag as the car door was swung open.

“Good evening, Ms. Hudson,” said a soft voice.

I looked up into the face of an elderly woman. In the glow of the lamp, her face looked warm, friendly, and kind.

“Can I help you with your bags?” she asked, holding out a hand that was so wrinkled it looked as if it had been covered in papier-mâché.

“No, thank you,” I smiled, as I got it from the car. “I only have the one.”

“Very well,” the old woman said, and I noticed that her silver hair was tied into a bun at the nape of her neck. She wore a plain, grey dress and white apron. “I’m Mrs. Payne,” she said. “I’m Lady Hunt’s housekeeper.”

“Hello,” I said back, feeling overwhelmed by the size of the manor house that loomed above me in the darkness. The Rolls Royce crept away, back down the gravel path.

Turning back to the old woman, I said, “Where am I, exactly?”

“Hallowed Manor,” she said, turning away and guiding me with the light from her lamp to the front door. Following her, I glanced at my wristwatch. It read 00:13 hours. With a quick calculation in my head, I knew that the journey from Havensfield to Hallowed Manor had taken four hours and six minutes and that I was about two hundred and twenty-five-and-a-half miles from home.

The giant oak front door was open, and Mrs. Payne ushered me inside. The manor had a strange odour. It smelt musty but yet, almost kind of sweet. It wasn’t the scent of flowers or mildew, and I couldn’t quite place it. The hallway was lit with candles and I could just make out a wide set of

stairs, which led up into the darkness. I glanced up to see a beautiful chandelier hanging from the high ceiling. What a shame it wasn't lit-up as I guessed it would have looked beautiful.

"No lights?" I asked as she shut the door behind us.

"Oh no," she sighed. "The house has been undergoing some repairs and the workmen have somehow managed to fuse all the lights. Marshal has contacted an electrician who'll be here in a day or two. They're very busy, apparently."

"Marshal?"

"The gatekeeper come grounds man," she said.

I pictured his twisted back and lip, and shuddered. "So all the electricity is out?" I asked her.

"No, no," she smiled at me, "just the lights."

Leading me to the foot of the staircase, she placed her lantern on a nearby table, plucked up two of the candles and handed one to me.

Throwing my rucksack over my shoulder, I took the candle and followed the old woman up the staircase. With each step, the stairs beneath me groaned and creaked, and the candle flame bobbed to and fro, splashing the orange light into the darkness. The walls were covered in large oil paintings.

Mrs. Payne must have detected my sudden apprehension as she said, “Don’t be scared Ms. Hudson. I know the old place can look a little creepy at night, but by day you’ll see what a wonderful home this is.”

“I’ll take your word for it,” I said, straining to see into the darkness ahead of me. “And call me Kiera. Ms. Hudson makes me sound like a school teacher or something. What about you?”

“I’m sorry, dear?” she asked, nearing the top of the stairs.

“Do you have a first name?”

Smiling at me from behind her candle, her eyes twinkled and she said, “Mrs. Payne, dear. Just call me Mrs. Payne.”

“Okay, whatever you like,” I sighed.

We reached what I thought was the top of the stairs, only to discover that we were on a small landing where the staircase divided left and right. Leading me to the left, I looked back over my shoulder in the direction of the right set of stairs that almost seemed to lead upwards into a black hole.

“What’s back there?” I asked as we started to climb again.

“That’s the right wing of the house, but it’s out of bounds.”

“How come?” I asked, my curiosity getting the better of me.

“Like I said, we’ve got builders working here. They’re refurbishing that side of the house.” Then stopping, she looked at me and that twinkle in

her eye had faded. “Don’t go into that side of the building – it could be very dangerous.”

“Dangerous?” I asked her.

“The floors are unsafe as is the whole structure,” she said fixing me with a cool stare. “The whole lot could come down at any time.”

“So no one goes into that part of the house?” I said just wanting to make sure.

“No one,” she said, turning away. “It is forbidden.”

Now why did she have to go and say that? I mean that was like waving a red flag at a bull – my curiosity dial had just gone crazy. Smiling to myself, I said, “Okay, yeah – sure, it does look kind of creepy back there.” In fact the whole house looked eerie, but perhaps like she said, in daylight it would look more welcoming and friendly.

Reaching the top of the second flight of stairs, Mrs. Payne – as she insisted on being called – led me down a narrow corridor. The walls on each side had doors set into them. I didn’t know what lay behind these doors and guessed that perhaps they were bedrooms. Either way, if anyone were behind them, they were asleep, as I couldn’t see any light seeping from around the door frames. At the end of the passageway, Mrs. Payne stopped outside a white-coloured door. Turning the handle with her frail-looking hand, she pushed it open. Standing outside the open doorway, she peered at

me from the gloom and said, “This will be your room for the duration of your stay, Kiera. Please make yourself comfortable. I hope I’ve thought of everything for you, but if there is something that you should need, just ring the bell.”

“The bell?” I asked feeling bemused.

“You’ll find a bell cord beside your bed,” she said. “Just pull on it should you require anything. The bell will alert me.”

“Don’t worry,” I said stepping into the room, “I won’t disturb you tonight.”

“Oh don’t worry your pretty head about me, dear,” she smiled. “I don’t sleep as well as I used to. You’ll find that I’m awake most of the night.”

“Still,” I said, “I’m a grown-up, I think I can look after myself.”

“Whatever you wish,” Mrs. Payne said, and then seemed to almost curtsy at me before leaving the room.

Closing the door, I held the candle out before me and inspected the room. It was huge. Against the far wall, and seeming to take up most of the space, was the biggest bed that I’d ever seen. It was a four poster, with ornate pillars at each corner that reached up into the dark. What looked like drapes had been fastened with white ribbons to each post. Beside the bed

was a wooden dressing table with a mirror. Placing the candle on it, I sat on the edge of the giant bed. The mattress felt wonderfully soft.

Getting up, I crossed the room, the single candle barely penetrating the darkness that seemed to wrap itself around me like a blanket. On the opposite side of the room to the bed was a set of windows, and as I made my way towards them, my boots sank into a soft white rug that was spread out across the floor. The windows were as big as a doorway, and they opened outwards onto a small balcony. Pushing them open, a chilly breeze circled me and made the curtains whisper. Standing on the balcony, I looked out into the darkness. In the distance, I could hear the sound of lapping water and I guessed it was the sound of the moat rushing around the grounds of Hallowed Manor. Closing my eyes, I tilted my head back and let the wind cool me as I enjoyed the silence. I felt a million miles away from my poky flat with its walls covered in clippings and its piles of newspapers. Then the silence was broken by the sound of gravel being crunched under foot. Leaning over the balcony, I looked down to see a dark figure crossing the grounds below me, a lantern held in the hand to light their way. From my hiding place, I watched, and as my eyes grew accustomed to the darkness and shadows, I could see the curved-shaped spine of the figure below and I knew it was Marshal. Then without any warning, Marshal stopped dead in his tracks, held the lantern above his head and turning he

looked up at me. In the orange glow of the lamp, I could see his one good eye boring into mine.

“Whatcha looking at, copper?” he almost seemed to growl, his top lip rolling back in a snarl.

Without saying anything, and with my heart in my throat, I skulked back into my room. Shutting the windows, I pulled the curtains closed. Crossing back to the dressing table, I snatched up the candle. To be holding the candle made me feel safer somehow. But what was I scared of? And why did I need to feel safe? The poor guy had probably had years of people staring at him, pointing the finger and making fun. This place was probably his sanctuary against all that, and there I was staring at him.

There was a door leading from my room, just to the right of the window. Crossing to it, I pushed it open to reveal a large bathroom. There was a deep bath that stood on four metal legs. It looked big enough to take a swim in. There was a toilet, basin, and shower. Taking my rucksack from where I had left it on the floor, I rummaged around for my wash kit. Stripping to my underwear, I washed my face, cleaned my teeth, and got into bed. Pulling the blankets up under my chin, I suddenly felt tired. Blowing out the candle, I lay in the blackness, and listened to the sound of Marshal’s feet crunching over the gravel as he paced up and down beneath my window.

Chapter Six

The door to my flat was pushed open. The male crept in, closing the door behind him, making himself feel secure, unable to be seen from prying eyes. Creeping across the room, he drew the curtain on the night and switched on his torch. Keeping the beam of light low, he swept it over the piles of newspapers that cluttered the room.

Kicking out with his foot, he knocked a pile over. Bending, he thumbed through them, his hands gloved, so as not to leave any fingerprints. Turning on another pile, he did the same, spreading the newspapers across the floor.

What are you doing? I wanted to ask him, but the words wouldn't leave my throat. In the darkness I couldn't see his face, although there was something about him that was vaguely familiar.

Who are you and what do you want?

From the shadows of my bedroom door, I watched him.

He stood and went to one of the walls. Casting the torchlight over it, he looked at the hundreds of paper clippings. Clawing at them with his

gloved fingers, he tore them from the wall. Wisps of torn black and white paper fluttered to the floor. I wanted to go to him, to stop him, but my feet felt as if someone had snuck up on me while I wasn't looking and nailed them to the floor.

The male turned away from the wall and came towards me. I wanted to move, but I couldn't. With the glare of the light from his torch shining in my eyes, I couldn't see his face. I wanted to reach out and grab the torch from his hands. I wanted to know who it was that was ransacking my flat. He came closer and my heart began to thunder in my chest.

Get out of here! I tried to scream, but my throat felt raw and dry and nothing came out.

He came straight towards me and my stomach somersaulted. As if I wasn't there, he passed me and as he did, I caught the first glimpse of his face and I wanted to recoil in fear. It was a mask of hideous scars. And in that brief moment, I saw that not only was his face scarred, but it looked as if the left part of his face was missing. It was almost as if he had been attacked by some wild animal which had ripped that part of his face away. Running diagonally from above his left eye to the right side of his top lip, his face was twisted out of shape where the skin had grown over the gaping wound.

I wanted to run from him, to get as far away as possible, but I just couldn't move. He went to my bed and pulled back the covers. Taking hold of one of the pillows, he raised it to his face and inhaled. Once he had finished smelling it, he tossed the pillow to one side. Stooping over, he pulled open the drawers of the dresser that was next to my bed. The male rummaged through it, his movements quick yet precise, as if he knew what he was looking for.

But what could that be?

Tossing it aside, he pulled open the second drawer, searched it, then threw it aside, smashing it into the floor where it broke like matchwood. He did the same to the third and the fourth drawers. His breathing began to quicken as he raced about the room, knocking over my CD player and stack of CDs. He trampled over the cases, and I could hear the plastic snapping like broken bones.

What are you looking for? I wanted to scream, but nothing came out.

Once my bedroom resembled something close to a demolition site, he came back towards me, this time the torchlight sweeping over the mess on the floor, almost as if making sure that he hadn't missed anything. And as he came towards me, I got a clearer view of his face. Although it was hideously disfigured, he reminded me of someone. Again, he brushed past

me as if I wasn't even there. He stood in the centre of the room like a dog and sniffed at the air. He froze, as if he had detected a familiar scent. Hunkering down, he crawled on all fours across the middle of my living room and towards one of the armchairs. His nose touched it. He paused, then was off again, the tip of his nose brushing up and over the seat, arms, and back of the chair. Whose scent had he detected – latched onto?

Mine? No not mine. I never sat in that chair; I always sat by the window so I could look out. Who then? Who had been the last person to have sat there?

Lady Hunt! I wanted to shout aloud, but my throat felt as if I were being strangled.

The male stood up as if he had been disturbed in some way. Maybe he had heard something that I hadn't. Some noise that suggested someone was coming or was close by. Then I heard the noise that had obviously disturbed him. It sounded like water dripping from a tap that hadn't been turned off tight enough. The sound was close by. I looked down and in the darkness I could see the black spatters of blood on the newspapers spread about at my feet. I looked up to see the male sniffing at the air again. He looked in my direction, as I felt the warm sensation of red tears leaking from my left eye. I wanted to wipe them away, to stop them dribbling from my chin, but my arms felt as if they had been tied to my sides.

The male came towards me again. He stopped, the tip of his nose almost touching mine. It was then that I knew how he had gotten those scars and who had given them to him. I stared into Sergeant Phillips' twisted and deformed face and remembered how Potter had attacked him and left him for dead in the graveyard at St. Mary's church in The Ragged Cove. He sniffed the air and smiled.

"Oh Kiera," he whispered. "So what they said about you was true after all."

Before I could say anything, he lunged forward and...

...I sat up in bed. I drew in deep lungful's of breath as I tried to figure out where I was. My chest was rising up and down and sounded like a clapped-out steam train, sweat covered me in a fine sheen and my throat felt raw. I looked all around me, and it was only when I saw the four wooden posts protruding from each corner of the bed that I remembered that I was in my room at Hallowed Manor. Daylight glistened around the edges of the curtains. Slowly, it was all coming back to me.

But there was a noise – it sounded as if it were coming from miles away. It was music and it sounded hissy. Tilting my head to one side to listen, I realised I recognised the music that was being played. It was 'Party Rock Anthem' by LMFAO, and I had that particular track on my iPod.

Straining to hear where it was coming from, I realised the music was closer than I originally thought. Wrapping myself in my blanket, I crawled to the end of my bed and peered over the edge. Sitting crossed-legged on the floor was a girl. She was rummaging through my rucksack and was listening to my iPod.

Reaching out, I tapped her on the shoulder and said, “What do you think you’re doing?”

Jumping with a start, the girl removed the earphones, looked at me and said, “Do you know that your eye is bleeding?”

Chapter Seven

Pulling the blanket around me like a shawl, I swung my legs over the side of the bed and went to the bathroom. Taking a piece of tissue paper, I dabbed the corner of my left eye and wiped away the crimson smear that ran down the length of my cheek to my chin.

“So you’re a cop?” the girl said from the other room.

Flushing the bloodied piece of tissue down the toilet, I went back into the room and sat on the edge of the bed. Looking at the girl, who was still rummaging through my belongings, I said, “Do you mind?”

Ignoring me, the girl said, “Where’s your gun?”

“I don’t have a gun,” I told her.

“Taser?”

“I don’t have one of those, either.”

“CS spray?” she asked, looking almost hopeful.

I shook my head.

“Cuffs?”

“Nope,” I said, holding out my hand for my belongings.

Tossing the rucksack to one side and crossing to the window, she said, “What sort of cop doesn’t have a pair of handcuffs?”

Smiling inside, I said, “I’m sorry, but I didn’t realise I would need a full arsenal of weaponry to babysit you – you’re not that bad are you?” It must have come out sounding all wrong because she turned back from the window and scowled at me.

“Listen lady, or whatever your name is, I don’t need no babysitter.”

Taking a T-shirt from the rucksack, I pulled it over my head and said, “My name’s Kiera. I take it you’re Kayla.”

“Yeah, so?” she said taking a piece of gum from her jeans pocket and popping it into her mouth. Like her mother, she had stunning looks, with a mass of auburn hair that curled around her shoulders, an impish-looking face, and icy-blue eyes. Her skin was the colour of cream and she had a spattering of freckles across her cheeks and the bridge of her nose. She was already beautiful, but give it another couple of years, and most men will find her drop-dead gorgeous. I wondered if Kayla knew that, but her confident manner suggested that she already did.

Matching her stare, I said, “So what?” and smiled.

“I don’t need this shit,” she scowled and stormed towards the bedroom door.

“That’s cool,” I said. “I don’t need this shit, either.”

Reaching the bedroom door, she turned and looked at me, and I couldn't help but notice the slight look of surprise on her face. Maybe she was expecting some kind of rebuke for swearing and going through my rucksack without permission. I knew she was testing me. Perhaps Kayla had been expecting some hard-nosed copper who was going to lay down the law, but that wasn't me. I had a week with her and I'd already made up my mind that I wasn't going to spend it fighting. She glanced down at my iPod that lay on the floor where she'd left it. Music hissed from the speakers, sounding faint and far off.

"Can I borrow that?" she asked, her voice still sounding stubborn and cold. "Mine's broken."

Snatching it up off the floor, I tossed it at her. "Knock yourself out," I said.

Catching it out of the air, she turned away, back towards the door. But before she had a chance to disappear, I asked, "What time's breakfast around here? I'm starving."

Without looking back she said, "I'll wait down the hall for you." Then she was gone.

I went to the bathroom, stripped off my T-shirt and underwear, and jumped in the shower. That ever-so-deep bath looked so inviting but I'd just have to try it out later. I didn't want to leave Kayla waiting. Getting on her

good side was going to be difficult enough. The water was warm and I hoped it would help wash away the images that I still had in my mind from the nightmare that I had woken from.

Why had I dreamt of Phillips ransacking my flat? It wasn't the first time that he had made a guest appearance in my nightmares since leaving The Ragged Cove, but they had never seemed so vivid – so real. And why did my eye keep bleeding? Like the visions of the plane crash I'd *seen* yesterday – had the pilot really been screaming that the cockpit had been breached by *them* before it had fallen out of the sky and nose-dived into the sea? I wanted to keep telling myself that it was my imagination working overtime – that perhaps what had happened in The Ragged Cove had disturbed me more than I first had thought, and the nightmares and visions were a consequence of that. Maybe Dr. Keats had been right. No, she thought I was raving mad but I knew I wasn't.

If the nightmare had been some kind of vision, then had Philips really been to my flat and ransacked it? But why? What had he been looking for? If it had been some sort of premonition, that would mean Phillips was still alive and Taylor would be close by. And if they were together, Luke, Potter, and Murphy would be hot on their tail. After all, didn't they say they were going to track them?

Stepping from the shower and towelling myself dry, I wondered if coming to the Hallowed Manor had been such a good idea after all. For months, I'd been looking for – *searching* – each and every newspaper and news report for anything that might suggest their return and as soon as I turn my back....

Kiera, what are you thinking of? I scolded myself. It was just a dream. It had been the first night away from my flat since leaving The Ragged Cove and somewhere deep inside I was probably feeling insecure. That was all I was feeling – I was being paranoid that now I had left Havensfield behind, Luke was going to put in an appearance and I wouldn't be there. I was two hundred and fifty-five-and-a-half miles away staying on some godforsaken moor. How would he ever find me?

"Stop it!" I groaned to myself as I pulled on a pair of jeans, boots and jumper. "Stop torturing yourself."

But I couldn't stop. I needed to know if the nightmare I'd had about Phillips burgling my flat had been some vision or just a dream. How would I know? I still had a whole week down here. So taking my mobile phone from my bag, I went to 'contacts' and scrolled down to 'Sparky'. Hitting 'message' with my fingernail, I wrote the following text:

Had to go away 4 wk can u check on flat?

Thanx. Kiera. x

After hitting the send button, I tucked the phone into my jeans pocket and left my room in search of Kayla.

Chapter Eight

As soon as I stepped into the passageway outside my room, there was that smell again – the sweet-musty odour that I had noticed last night. Even though it was nearly nine a.m., the corridor was very dark as all the doors leading from it were shut, and there wasn't any windows. I could see a grey patch of light ahead of me where the daylight shone up the staircase from below. I could see the silhouette of a figure sitting further down the passageway. To guide myself in the gloom, I trailed my fingertips along the wall. It was then I noticed that they felt sticky, as if someone had covered them in some kind of varnish which hadn't yet dried. I brought the tips of my fingers up to my nose and it was the strange varnish that was making the manor smell so odd. Perhaps it had something to do with the renovation of the manor. Maybe the builders had been tasked to varnish the entire place. But who had ever heard of varnishing wallpaper?

Wiping my hands against my jeans, I walked towards the light and the figure sitting at the end of the passageway. As I drew closer, I could see that Kayla was sitting on the top stair waiting for me.

Looking down at her, I said, “Thanks.”

“For what?” she asked, taking out the earphones and offering me back my iPod.

“For waiting for me,” I smiled, then added. “You can keep hold of my iPod for the time being, I’m in no rush to have it back.”

“Thanks,” Kayla mumbled, as if saying those very words caused her pain.

“So what’s for breakfast?” I asked.

“Dunno,” she replied, and headed down the stairs.

I followed her to the next landing. Just before we headed down to the hallway, I pointed to the staircase that led into the *‘forbidden’* right wing, as Mrs. Payne had liked to call it. Although the light wasn’t great, it was better than the candlelight from the night before. Despite Mrs. Payne’s warning that the right wing was a no-go area, I could see that someone had been up there this morning. I looked at Kayla and could see that it hadn’t been her. Whoever it had been was male, was right-handed, and had carried something heavy in their left hand, probably a breakfast tray, which they’d had difficulty balancing. But why would they have been taking a tray load of breakfast into an area that was *forbidden* and who had it been for?

“What’s up there?” I asked Kayla.

Hearing my question, Kayla almost seemed to falter on the stairs and she gripped the banister as if to steady herself. “Oh, we don’t go up there. No one does,” she said without looking back at me.

Really? I thought to myself. “Why not?” I pressed, as I followed her down to the large circular hallway.

“Mother says it’s too dangerous,” she said. “It’s structurally unsafe or something like that.”

“Have you ever been up there?” I asked her, not wanting to let the subject drop.

“Not since I was a kid,” she said. “It’s been like that for a long time now.”

“Never been tempted to take another look?” I asked, but before Kayla had had a chance to reply, Mrs. Payne had appeared in the hallway.

“Kayla,” she said, her voice sounding frustrated rather than cross. “You know you should be at your chores by now and you still haven’t had any breakfast. What would your mother say?”

“I don’t know and I don’t care,” Kayla shrugged as she passed Mrs. Payne without even looking at her.

“Kayla!” the old woman snapped. “That’s no way to speak -”

“It’s not Kayla’s fault she’s running late,” I cut in.

“Whose is it then?” Mrs. Payne asked, eyeing me up and down. As she did, I noticed white flecks of something in her hair.

“It’s mine I’m afraid,” I smiled. “I’ve been talking to her in my room – just getting to know her.”

Kayla turned back and looked at me with suspicion.

“Well, Kiera, Kayla has rules that she must -” the old woman started.

“I’m sure Lady Hunt wouldn’t have minded just this once. I was keen to get to know Kayla,” I said. “After all, I think it’s what her mother would have wanted.”

Offering me a smile that looked like a crack in a plate, Mrs. Payne said, “Yes, you’re probably right. Lady Hunt did ask you here to keep an eye on Kayla.”

“I am right here, you know!” Kayla snapped. “You don’t have to talk about me as if I wasn’t. And besides, I’m sixteen for Christ’s sake, I don’t need anyone looking out for me!” Then, staring in my direction, she added, “Especially not some stressed-out cop!”

I took her spiteful comment on the chin. After all, I’d been called worse, so I smiled at her.

“Kayla, that’s no way to speak to Ms. Hudson. She’s a guest in this house, so you show her some respect!” Mrs. Payne scolded her.

“She’s getting paid, isn’t she?” Kayla came back.

“Don’t you dare be so ill-mannered!” Mrs. Payne said, her voice sounding cross. “You apologise right this minute young lady!”

Kayla just looked at me, huffed, and then putting in the earphones, she switched my iPod back on.

Cheeky-little-cow, I smiled inwardly.

“I’m so sorry about this, Kiera,” Mrs. Payne said, and she looked genuinely embarrassed.

“No worries,” I said. “I’m sure Kayla and I will become the best of friends.”

“We’ll see,” Mrs. Payne said, and tutted in the direction of Kayla.

Changing the subject, I said, “I was wondering if I could get some breakfast? I’m starving.”

“Of course, my dear,” she smiled. “Come with me.”

The kitchen was, like the rest of the manor, huge. Down the centre of it ran a giant wooden table that would have been big enough to seat an entire football team, coaches and all. Around the far wall stood grey metal sinks and stoves, the kind you would see in the kitchen of a large hotel. There were too many cupboards to count and the three of us looked lost in the vastness of such a great room. How many people could be fed here?

Hundreds I guessed, except there was only Mrs. Payne and as far as I could gather she did the cooking, cleaning and if I hadn't of been around, keeping an eye on Kayla as well.

Pulling back a chair, I sat down at the table and Kayla sat opposite me. The table was so wide that even if we had stretched our arms out as far as possible, our hands still wouldn't have touched. Mrs. Payne placed a large bowl of fruit on the table, some bread, butter, and several different types of cereal.

"Would you like me to cook you something?" she asked us. "Some kippers, perhaps?"

Taking a bowl and filling it with some corn flakes, I waved my hand at her and said, "No this will be just fine."

Without even acknowledging the housekeeper, Kayla took an apple from the fruit bowl and took a bite. She still wore the earphones, and she rocked in her seat as she listened to the music.

"So how do you manage looking after such a big place?" I asked Mrs. Payne as I splashed ice cold milk onto the cereal.

"Oh, it's not so bad," she said, pouring me a mug of coffee and setting it before me. "There is only Lady Hunt, Kayla, Mr. Marshal, and James to worry about."

"James?" I asked her.

“The chauffeur,” she said, placing a glass of orange juice down in front of Kayla. Again she was ignored, there was no ‘thank- you.’

“Oh, is that his name?” I said. “He wasn’t very talkative last night. I did ask him, but he wouldn’t tell me.”

“James is a little deaf, perhaps he didn’t hear you,” she tried to explain.

He heard me alright, I thought. Mrs. Payne must have sensed that I wasn’t convinced, because she added, “We don’t really know him that well.”

“How come?” I asked around a mouthful of cornflakes.

“After the disappearance of Lord Hunt, Lady Hunt let the last chauffeur go and hired James,” she explained. Then looking at me, she added, “In fact, she let all of the staff go except me.”

“Why did she keep you on?” I half-smiled.

“No one knows this house or The Hunts like I do,” she said with some pride.

“So why the new driver?” I asked her.

Mrs. Payne stared at me and said, “Why so many questions? Are you on duty?”

“Nope,” I said, matching her stare.

“I thought police officers were always on duty,” she said with a wry smile.

“Not this one,” I said back.

“Lady Hunt wanted a change I guess. The last driver could be very cantankerous at times and Lady Hunt never got on very well with him. Besides, Lady Hunt is very much into her charity work.”

“Charity work? What’s that got to do with hiring herself a new chauffeur?” I asked feeling bemused.

“James can’t walk,” she said, as if I should have already known this. “Lady Hunt has done a lot of great work for the disabled and believes that everyone should have an equal chance of employment.”

“Apparently he had an accident or something years ago and hasn’t walked since,” Kayla cut in.

I looked across the table at her to see that she had removed the earphones and turned off the iPod.

“Really?” I said, somewhat bewildered. “But he drove me all the way here,” and I pushed my empty bowl to one side and took a banana from the pile of fruit.

“Lady Hunt had the Rolls Royce converted so it could be driven by a disabled driver,” Mrs. Payne cut in.

It was hearing this that I understood why the chauffeur hadn't got out of the car last night for Lady Hunt and me. He'd stayed in the vehicle when she'd gotten out at the railway station and again on our arrival at the manor. All off a sudden, I felt incredibly guilty and wondered perhaps if I had judged him unfairly. I regretted calling him a jerk.

"So what about Marshal?" I asked them.

"What about him?" Mrs. Payne said.

"Is he new here too?"

"Yes, he was hired by Lady Hunt after Lord Hunt disappeared," she explained.

Then raising my hand to my face, I said, "So what about...you know...the bandages?"

"The bandages?" Mrs. Payne said, and I couldn't help but notice her glance at Kayla. There was a pause – it lasted only a fraction of a second – but long enough to be noticeable. "Oh, them," she eventually said. "Marshal was born with a facial deformity and a twisted spine."

"Yeah, his face scares the shit outta me," Kayla cut in.

"That's quite enough of that, thank you very much," Mrs. Payne glared at the girl.

"Another one of Lady Hunt's charitable works?" I asked.

“Lady Hunt came across him by chance on a visit to a homeless shelter. Marshal had been living on the streets since he was not much older than Kayla is now. He had fallen foul of the law and because of his deformities, he had never been given the same opportunities in life like the rest of us. Lady Hunt therefore took it upon herself to give him sanctuary here, and in return, Marshal tends to the grounds and he has become quite an accomplished handyman. Lady Hunt has even provided the funds for him to have reconstructive surgery. The bandages are covering the scars while they heal,” she said.

Looking at Kayla, I said, “Gee, your mother sounds like a real saint.”

“She can be okay, I guess,” Kayla said thoughtfully.

“Only okay?” Mrs. Payne cut in. “After everything that your mother has done for you?”

Pushing her chair back from the table, Kayla jumped up. “What would you know about anything!” Kayla shouted at Mrs. Payne. “You’re just the housekeeper, so keep your nose out of my business!”

“Don’t you dare speak to me like that!” Mrs. Payne snapped back, her face flushing scarlet.

“Or what?” Kayla spat back.

“You wait until your mother gets home,” the housekeeper warned her.

“And then what?” Kayla snapped. “What’s she gonna do, pack me off to another boarding school? Well if you didn’t already know, there isn’t a school in the country that will take me. So it looks as if you and mother are stuck with me.”

“Right, young lady,” Mrs. Payne said, “get to your room and don’t come out until you’ve learnt to keep a civil tongue in your head!”

“You can’t tell me what to do, so why don’t you just do us all a favour and piss off!” Kayla yelled, snatching up the iPod. She stormed out of the back kitchen door and onto the grounds of the manor.

“Well, that couldn’t of gone any better,” I sighed.

“You don’t know what she’s like,” Mrs. Payne complained.

“So what *is* she like?” I asked, raising an eyebrow and getting up from my seat.

“There’s something wrong with her,” she said, her voice sounding angry.

“She’s not the only one,” I whispered to myself as I went after Kayla.

It was cold outside, so I was glad I’d put on a jumper. A strong wind blew about the eaves of the old manor as I passed down the side of it and

towards the front of the building. I went around the front and down the gravel path. Ahead of me, there was a wide open grassy area and in the distance, I could see Kayla propped against a tree, her knees drawn up under her chin. I walked towards her and as I did, I looked back at the house and up towards the '*forbidden*' right wing. I hadn't noticed it the night before, but the right side of the building was hidden by scaffolding and thick sheets of tarpaulin, which kept most of it hidden from view. On the ground, just beneath the scaffolding, were four large yellow skips and each of these had been filled with rubble and masonry. Perhaps that part of the manor was being renovated after all, but I couldn't see any workmen or builders.

Turning front again, I headed towards Kayla. "Want to show me around?" I asked her.

She just shrugged her shoulders.

"You might as well," I said. "You've got my company for a whole week, so we should try and be friends."

Taking the iPod and placing it in her pocket, (I guess it was hers now, at least until I left) Kayla said, "Why did you cover for me back there?"

"I don't know what you mean?" I said, helping her to her feet.

“You told that old bag that it was your fault I’d been late for breakfast.”

“Oh, that. Aren’t friends allowed to cover for each other from time to time?” I smiled and looped my arm through hers.

“You’re not what I expected,” she said, leading me through the trees and away from the manor.

“What were you expecting then?” I asked her.

“I dunno,” she said. “Somebody a bit older to start with. And not so...easy going, I guess. I thought coppers were meant to be serious all the time.”

“Why don’t you just forget I’m a cop for a while – I’m a person too, you know,” I smiled.

“Okay,” she smiled back.

“I know you’re pissed off that your mother asked me -” I started.

“To come down here and spy on me,” she said.

“Is there a reason to spy on you?” I asked her, ducking down to avoid a low-hanging branch.

“You tell me,” she said. “My mother’s told me you have a bit of a reputation for being a smart-arse – like you have this knack of working out things real quick.”

“Did she?” I said. “What else did she tell you about me?” I asked.

“That you had been suspended from the police, but she didn’t tell me why,” Kayla said. Then looking at me with a twinkle in her eyes, she added, “Are you like one of those rebel cops who’s always breaking the rules and getting into trouble with their superiors?”

“No,” I told her. “I don’t think I am.”

“So why were you suspended then?”

“I haven’t been suspended...I’ve been...”

“What?”

“Given some extended leave,” I told her.

“What you’re telling me is that your boss thinks you’re a pain in the arse, but he doesn’t know what to do with you,” she said, leading me out into a wide open area with the most wonderful flowerbeds I’d ever seen. *Mrs. Lovelace would love it here*, I thought to myself.

“How did you figure that out?” I asked Kayla.

“It’s exactly what happened to me at school,” she explained. “If you’re different or you speak out, people think you’re a pain and it’s easier for them to either pretend you’re not there or better still, just get rid of you altogether. People like me and you, Kiera, don’t fit in.”

“Why didn’t you fit in at school?” I asked her, the smell of the flowers a break from the musty stench that permeated the manor. “Your mother told me that you can be disruptive.”

“She would say that,” Kayla said, sounding angry again. “I was just sticking up for myself, that’s all.”

“Why would you feel the need to stick up for yourself?” I asked.

“Mother didn’t tell you did, she?” Kayla said her eyes wide.

“Tell me what?” I asked her.

Letting go of my arm, she quickly looked back over her shoulder in the direction from which we had come, as if to make sure that we hadn’t been followed. Then quickly, she pulled her top from over her head and let it flutter to the floor. She stood before me, the pale morning sun reflecting off her round shoulders and glinting off her auburn hair. Then slowly, she turned around. Raising a hand to my mouth, I gasped, as poking around the white straps of her bra were two small, black wings.

Chapter Nine

As quickly as she had taken it off, Kayla pulled her top back over her head and covered her wings. They weren't like the giant sized wings I had seen grow from Luke's back; Kayla's were smaller and trailed halfway down her back. They didn't have that leathery look either; they seemed finer, like those of a butterfly's. Although they were black, the wings had looked like they had been splashed with liquid silver. They had almost seemed to shimmer in the light of the hazy sun.

"Do they fold away?" I asked her as she stood looking at me, her arms now folded across her chest. "What I mean is, can you make them disappear into your back?"

"No," she said, shaking her head. "But they are so soft, they lie flat against my back, just like an extra layer of skin."

I couldn't think of anything to say, so I said, "Okay." I was still reeling inside from what she had shown me. It wasn't like I hadn't seen this sort of thing before, but finding out that Kayla was a Vampyrus was like being hit with a sledgehammer. It was the last thing I had been expecting.

“So you can see now why my mother asked you to come here,” she said turning away and heading back towards the shelter of the trees.

“What do you mean by that?” I asked, catching up with her.

“Your mother said that someone was stalking you. That someone was coming to the manor and watching you. She wanted me to find out who it was.”

“That’s only half of it,” Kayla said, weaving her way through the trees. “She wants you here because of what happened to you in that other place.”

“The Ragged Cove?” I asked.

“Yeah, that’s the place,” she said glancing at me. “Don’t you get it? You’ve seen people like me before – and survived. Now that my father has vanished, my mother doesn’t know what to do.”

“But if you’re a Vampyrus, your mother must be one, too,” I said.

“That’s the problem, Kiera,” Kayla said, leading me towards the iron gate that I’d been driven through the night before. “I’m not a true Vampyrus. My father *is* one – but my mother is human. So I don’t really know what that makes me – and my mother doesn’t know either.”

I looked at Kayla and all I could hear was Dr. Keats voice in my head. “*How do we know that living right amongst us aren’t the children*

born out of relationships between humans and these ‘Vampyrus’ as you call them.” And here I was looking at the result of one of those unions.

“Did your mother know that your father was a Vampyrus?” I asked her.

“No, not at first,” she said, as we reached the ancient stone wall that circled the grounds of the manor. On the other side of it, I could hear the sound of the water from the moat lapping against the wall.

“For years, it seems that my father lead a double life,” she started to explain. “On one hand, he was this successful businessman, the head of a multinational company developing renewable genetics. He was married with a daughter, but secretly he was a creature from below ground who could grow wings, fly at incredible speeds, and had almost invincible strength.”

Before I’d the chance to say anything, Kayla disappeared up a stone spiral staircase set into the wall. I followed her. At the top, the stairs levelled out onto a narrow ledge that ran around the top of the wall. I peered over the top, and for miles all I could see were the barren and featureless moors, stretching out into the distance. The ground seemed almost black, with a spattering of green where some vegetation had sprung up between the huge, jagged rocks. The sight had a prehistoric feel to it, like we were the very first humans to encroach upon this land.

Kayla hoisted herself up onto the lip of the wall and I joined her. The wind raced all around us, forcing bruised-looking clouds over the sun, turning the day overcast and bleak.

“How my father kept it from my mother for so many years, I don’t know,” Kayla continued. “I understand now that like vampires, he would often crave blood - human blood – but to quench his thirst he would have to go beneath ground, to where he came from, his home.”

“The Hollows,” I said, looking at Kayla, her thick auburn hair billowing out in the wind like a mane.

“Yeah, that’s what he called it,” she said, looking ahead over the moors. “He would tell my mother and me that he had to go away on business for a week or two, but really he was going back home, to his real home. He’d go on one of his *business trips* three or four times a year.”

“Were you or your mother never suspicious?” I asked her, now understanding the complications of being in love and sharing your life with one of these creatures. My mind couldn’t help but turn to thoughts of Luke.

“I wasn’t, but I don’t know about my mother,” she said. “It was just the way it was for as long as I can remember. But things started to change – *I* started to change.”

“In what way?” I asked.

“When I was about fourteen, I had these lumps appear on my back, just between my shoulder-blades. They were small at first, like pimples. But they never burst or went away, they just gradually got bigger. My mother was concerned, but my father just kept brushing it off as something to do with puberty and that they would go away. But they didn’t. Then, one day at one of those boarding schools, I was in the showers and one of the other girls started screaming and pointing at my back. All the other girls looked at me then started screaming too.”

“What had they seen?” I asked her.

Reaching up and rubbing her left shoulder, Kayla said, “Just about here, a little black lump had started to poke through my skin. It was hard and felt like a piece of bone. I didn’t know what it was and to be honest, I was so scared at the sight of it that I started to scream, too. Anyway, I was taken to the nurse’s room and she covered it with a bandage, not because it was bleeding or anything, just so she didn’t have to look at it, I guess. The headmaster called my parents and they brought me back here. My mother was almost hysterical when she saw that little piece of black bone sticking out of my back. I remember her screaming, ‘Michael what is it? What’s wrong with our baby?’

“Without being able to take his eyes off my back, my father whispered, ‘Leave it to me, I’ll get a friend of mine to look at it.’

‘What friend!’ my mother hollered at him, as she wrung her hands together.

‘He’s a doctor I know,’ my father tried to comfort her. ‘He’ll know what to do.’

‘But why can’t Kayla go to see our doctor?’ my mother begged him.

‘Just leave it to me,’ he said, taking her in her arms.

“I remember my mother sobbing against his chest. But I caught her peering at me, Kiera, and it was fear that I saw in her eyes. It was like my own mother was scared of me,” Kayla said.

Sitting listening to her, I could see a kind of sadness in her eyes so I took one of her hands in mine. She didn’t flinch or pull away, but just let it rest there on her lap.

“So what did this doctor friend of your father’s say?” I asked her.

“We didn’t go to him, he came to us,” she told me. “He was a thick-set man, with a pale complexion and glasses perched on the end of his nose which drooped down like a beak. I remember lying there on my bed, looking up at him thinking how much he looked like an owl. After rolling me over onto my front and gently prodding the piece of black bone, I heard him whispering to my father from the corner of the room. But I could hear some of what he said.

‘The Terminal Phalanx is coming through,’ the doctor whispered.

‘What can you do about it?’ my father asked him, and like my mother’s eyes, I could hear the fear in his voice.

‘This is uncharted ground, Michael – you know that, don’t you?’ the doctor said to my father, in an uneasy-sounding voice.

‘But we can’t risk them growing,’ my father almost seemed to plead with him.

‘All I can do is cut it off, stitch up the hole, and pray that it doesn’t grow back,’ the doctor said.

“Then looking back over my shoulder, I saw the doctor coming towards me with a needle.

‘This might sting a bit,’ he smiled

“The next thing I knew I was waking up in my room,” Kayla said.

“My father was sitting on the edge of my bed and stroking the hair from my brow.

‘My precious Kayla,’ he whispered, and for the first time in my life I thought I could see tears in his eyes. ‘I’m so sorry.’

‘I love you daddy,’ I smiled and drifted back into unconsciousness.

“What had the doctor done?” I asked her, alarmed by her story.

“He had removed that piece of bone and sewn up the hole that it had left behind,” she said, rubbing her shoulder with her free hand, almost as if it still hurt in some way.

“But it came back, right?” I asked.

“Not straight away. About six months later, I guess,” she explained, again staring out across the cracked and boggy wasteland before us. “When I returned to school, my once good friends had started to keep their distance. They called me ‘Stickleback’ and other stupid names. Although I pretended it didn’t bother me, it did. I was miles away from home and I was scared.”

“What of?” I asked her, my heart aching.

“Those words that I’d heard the doctor whisper into my father’s ear – Terminal Phalanx – I couldn’t get them out of my head. So one afternoon after class, I went to the school library and Googled those two words. And do you know what they meant?” she asked me.

I shook my head and shrugged.

“They are the bones located at the tips of the fingers and toes,” she said and grimaced. “I couldn’t believe what I was reading. I mean, how could I have fingers or toes growing out of my back? What sort of a monster was I turning into? I was so scared, Kiera.”

I thought of the three bony fingers that I had seen at the tip of Luke’s wings and knew exactly what they were. I only had to come to terms with a sprinkling of acne as a teenager – and I thought that had been horrific

enough. How I would have coped with fingers growing from between my shoulder blades I did not know.

Knocking her fringe from her eyes, Kayla said, “One morning, I woke up and it felt as if something was sticking out of my mattress into my back. After inspecting the bed, I could see that none of the springs had come through, so with my stomach feeling as if it had been tied into knots, I went to the communal bathroom at the end of the dormitory and took off my nightdress. Peering over my shoulder, I looked at the reflection of my back in the mirror. To my horror, not only had that piece of black bone returned, but there were now six of them poking out of my back, three above each shoulder blade. But that wasn’t the worst of it, Kiera. Those pieces of black bone didn’t look like bone, they looked like fingers and they wiggled back and forth as if clutching at the air.

“I dropped to my knees in front of the toilet and puked my guts up and didn’t stop until my stomach felt bruised and raw and my throat felt as if I’d swallowed a pint of battery acid,” she said.

“Did you tell anyone?” I asked her.

“Are you kidding me?” she scoffed. “And put up with more pissing from my class mates? No way. I packed up a few of my belongings and fled. I ran away as far as possible.”

“Didn’t you come back here?”

“What? And have that quack operating on me again? No way! I never wanted to see this place again or my mother and father for that matter,” she said, sounding spiteful and angry.

“Why not?”

“Because I knew that they understood more than they were letting on. And I feared that they would just send me back to school again to face my tormentors,” she said.

“So how did you come to be back here?” I asked.

“My father hired these two guys,” she said. “They were some kinda cops or something. One of them was young, in his early twenties, I guess. He was a real arrogant jerk and loved himself. The other one was older- but he was okay.”

I knew straightaway who she was talking about, and the fact the Kayla’s father had known Potter and Murphy made me feel kind of strange. I didn’t know how I should feel – but it gave me a connection to Kayla, her father, and this place. Perhaps I’d done the right thing in coming to Hallowed Manor after all. Maybe they would come here too?

“Can you remember these guy’s names?” I asked her.

“The jerk’s name was Potter – I don’t think he ever told me his Christian name – not that I wanted to know it. The other guy – the older one – his name was Jim Murphy I think.”

“The jerk’s name was Sean,” I said.

“You know them?” she said, sounding surprised. “How?”

“They were on my shift in The Ragged Cove,” I told her.

“Where are they now?”

“I wish I knew,” I said, looking out across the moor.

“They were real cops then?” she asked.

“I guess. Did you ever meet a guy called Luke Bishop?” I asked, wondering what had happened to him and why he wasn’t with his friends.

“You couldn’t forget him – he’s a real hottie.”

“Yeah, I’ve met him,” Kayla said and my heart raced.

“Where? When?” I blurted out.

“The last time I ran away. He came in search of me.”

“How long ago was that?” I asked her, keen to know what information she had about Luke.

“Two months ago – just before my father went missing,” she said.

Only two months ago! I thought to myself. Then that means Luke is out there somewhere and connected to the manor. Maybe he will come here after all?

“He was a really nice guy and very kind to me, but he didn’t look cute like you say he does,” Kayla said.

“What do you mean?” I asked confused.

“He looked as if he had been in some kinda accident or something, because the left side of his face was all scarred,” and she looked sad as she thought of him.

I remembered how Luke had looked the last time that I had seen him, his face blistered and charred from the fire at St. Mary’s Church. I felt sick inside at the thought that by rescuing me, he had been left disfigured.

“Are you okay?” Kayla asked me. “You’ve gone really pale.”

“Hmm?” I muttered. “No I’m okay. I was just remembering something.”

“What?”

“It doesn’t matter now,” I said just above a whisper.

Then from nowhere Kayla said, “You’ve got a text on your phone.”

“Sorry?” I said, still feeling dazed by what Kayla had told me about Luke.

“You’ve got a text on your phone – or you’re gonna get a text any moment now,” she said, her head tilted towards me as if listening to something.

“I haven’t got a text,” I told her, rummaging for my phone in my pocket. Pulling it out, I looked at the screen and it was blank. Holding it up to her, I said, “See, I haven’t got a text come through.” And just as those

words left my lips, the phone vibrated in my hand. I looked at the words ‘*New Message*’ flashing on the front of the screen.

Tapping the screen with my fingernail, the message opened and it was from ‘Sparky’. It read:

Bad news Kiera – your flat has been burgled.

It’s a real mess here. Where are you?

Sparky. x

Looking back at Kayla, I said, “How did you know I was going to receive -” But before I’d the chance to finish what I was about to say, I felt myself falling off the wall and everything went black.

Chapter Ten

The tube train doors closed. It was hot and stuffy – way too many people were in the carriage. It smelt of bodies and sweat. The train rattled out of Euston Road Station and into the tunnel. The lights flickered above me, sending the carriage into a moment's darkness. The lights came back on and with it, a scream. It was ear-splitting and I covered my ears with my hands. The train lurched over a set of points, and with my hands covering my ears; I stumbled into the male standing next to me. My face came to rest against his sweaty armpit. He didn't notice, he was too busy, like all the other passengers wedged in beside me, the guy was straining to see who had screamed. Gripping the handrail above me, I regained my balance and looked through the mass of bodies to see what was happening further down the carriage.

There was another scream – this time it was different. It sounded more like a roar.

“What's happening?” a plump, middle-aged woman asked, fear and confusion brimming in her eyes.

Another scream. This time nearer. Then those passengers lucky enough to have grabbed themselves a seat started to stand, so they too could see what was going on.

Another scream but this time it sounded like whoever had made it was gurgling on something in the back of their throat. Then there was chaos. Those at the opposite end of the carriage started towards those of us at the far end. Bodies began to enclose tighter around me as people tried desperately to get away from whatever was at the other end of the carriage.

“Let me out!” Someone screamed, their voice bordering on hysteria.

“It ripped her fucking throat out!” Some cried. “Did you see that?”

Passengers rushed towards me in a blur of panic, their eyes bulging from their sockets with terror.

Another scream!

Standing on tiptoe, I frantically tried to get a glimpse of what was happening at the other end of the carriage. Then a jet of crimson liquid sprayed across the walls.

“Jesus!” the man with the sweaty armpits screamed and his voice was shrill like that of a little girl. He turned to look at me and I could see that his face was speckled with little red drops of blood.

More screams and blood, as I was pushed back into the side of the carriage and crushed against the door. Then I saw a familiar face in the

crowd – how would I ever forget his piercing blue eyes? Those sunken cheeks and the way he wore that black wide brimmed hat.

“What’s happening?” the plump woman squealed, clutching her handbag to her chest as if was going to offer her some kind of protection.

“A priest just ripped some woman’s throat out with his teeth!” a spotty-looking youth gasped as he started to hoist himself on to the shoulders of those near him in an attempt to get away. I watched as he fought his way over the heads of other passengers, knocking some of them to the ground who then became trampled underfoot by those that stampeded through the carriage. As he came closer, I could see that his face wasn’t covered in spots but in lumps of bloodied flesh.

Taking hold of the handrail, I tried to pull myself up, desperate not to be pulled under with the tide of people that now trampled over the seats and each other. I strained to see back down the carriage at the face that I had recognised. His eyes met mine, and his lips turned up in a smile. No, not a smile, a snarl.

“Taylor,” I whispered.

“Open the door! Open the fucking door!” someone squealed.

“I’m being crushed!” yelled another.

“I can’t breathe!” someone gasped.

Turning, I looked at the knot of bodies pressed against the interconnecting carriage door. But the door opened inwards and with so many bodies pressed against it, it was impossible to open.

“Move back! Move Back!” A guy with glasses was screaming. But then he was gone, drowning beneath the sea of frantic passengers. I tried to reach down for his hand to pull him free, but his fingers slipped from my grasp, and I was suddenly grateful for the deafening screams all around me, as his fingers were snapped beneath somebody’s boot. I didn’t want to hear the sound of those fingers being crushed.

More screams from the opposite end of the carriage – where Taylor stood, blood running from his chin like crimson gravy. A fair-haired woman seemed to suddenly pounce from the floor of the carriage as if being launched from a springboard. Her eyes rolled in their sockets and they burnt orange as if on fire. Her face was as white as soap but her neck was...was open. I could see her windpipe opening and closing like a fist as she gasped for air. Her torn open throat made a sucking and burping noise. Then she opened her mouth and revealed a drooling set of fangs.

Those passengers still unfortunate enough not to have been able to press themselves into the opposite end of the carriage looked at her, their mouths open in shock and terror. Then she was on them, her arms pin wheeling at the speed of motorboat blades as her claws sliced through those

around her. Lifting them from where they'd fallen as if they were rag dolls, she buried her face into their necks.

“Please! Please!” I heard somebody sob from close by. I looked down to see a young woman, not much older than myself kneeling on one of the cushioned seats. She had removed one of her stilettos and was smashing the heel against one of the carriage windows.

“Please let me out! Please!” she cried, as she slammed the heel of her shoe into the glass. But the reinforced glass didn't even chip and the heel of her shoe snapped loose, bouncing back and striking her across the forehead. A gash appeared, seeping blood down into her eyes. The victims of the fair-haired woman must have smelt the blood running from the girl's forehead, because they sprung-up from the carriage floor, newly awakened, their own throats open and sucking in air.

The girl dropped her broken shoe and frantically rubbed the blood from her eyes, but in her moment of blindness, the vampires took their chance and dragged her to the floor kicking and screaming.

I could feel the tube train begin to slow and I looked up to see that we were pulling into Kings Cross underground station. Before the train had even come to a stop, the passengers that crushed against me were trying to pry the doors open with their fingers. The people on the platform were unaware of what was awaiting them. I opened my mouth to scream at them

to run – to get off the platform. But I was unable to form the words – it felt as if something had got lodged in the back of my throat and I was gagging on whatever it was. The train stopped. The doors were forced open and the frantic passengers spilled on top of each other onto the platform. Some of those passengers waiting looked stunned and bewildered as they were trampled underfoot.

Those that had been bitten on the train sprang with lightning speed from the carriage and launched themselves at the unsuspecting commuters. Within seconds the platform had become a scene of complete panic and confusion. People fell, collapsed and collided with one another in sheer terror. Their screams echoed through the tunnels and maze of passageways beneath ground.

The carriage had emptied and I found myself alone, unable to move, my arm stuck in the air, gripping the safety rail. I looked right and I could see that I wasn't alone after all. Taylor stood at the opposite end of the carriage. He was now stripped to the waist. His body was white, almost opaque, and his ribs seemed to poke through his skin like rungs on a ladder. His mottled black wings hung from his back like a tattered cape. His eyes were fixed on mine, but he didn't come forward. He just stood there. I couldn't bear the sight of his eyes; it was as if they were boring into me – looking inside of me.

Turning away, I looked through the open carriage door and out onto the platform and watched the girl with the bleeding forehead, hobble up the platform in her one remaining stiletto as she sought out her first victim. Looking back at Taylor, he smiled at me and whispered, “Wake...”

Chapter Eleven

“...up!” someone was saying. “Wake-up!”

“She’s bleeding,” I heard a gruff male voice say above me.

“Get her up and into the house,” a female said.

I felt myself being lifted into the air and held by a strong set of arms. My face was resting against some kind of rough material. Opening my eyes, I looked up to see a single eye looking down at me. Why couldn’t I see the other eye? I blinked and looked again. The other was covered with a dirty bandage. My eyes closed again, and I felt sick and disorientated.

“She fell from the wall,” someone said. “She fell like a stone.”

The voice sounded familiar and it took me a moment to realise that it was Kayla who was talking.

“Is she going to be okay?” someone else asked, and it was Mrs. Payne.

I opened my eyes again, and this time they focused to reveal the covered face of Marshal looking down at me.

“Will she be alright?” I heard Mrs. Payne ask again, but I couldn’t see her.

“How should I know?” Marshal grunted from above, his top lip curling upwards. Twisting my head slightly, a bolt of pain sliced through my skull and down into my neck.

“Where am I?” I murmured.

I felt someone touch my hand, the fingers were soft and gentle. “You’re going to be okay,” Kayla said, and I looked around to see her beside me. I couldn’t help but notice the concern in her eyes.

Rolling my head back, I could feel that rough material against my cheek again. I looked and could see that my face was pressed against Marshal’s chest as he carried me in his arms back towards the manor. That sweet-musty smell lingered on his clothes and it made me feel sick. Screwing up my nose, I looked up into his face again, those filthy-looking bandages concealing most of him. Tufts of unkempt beard poked through the gaps around his chin and neck. His hat covered his hair, but I could see straggly black lengths sticking out from underneath. He saw me study him and he looked away. I couldn’t help notice that although his arms felt muscular beneath and his chest as hard as rock against my face, he seemed to tilt forward and it was then that I remembered his misshapen back.

“I think I will be okay to walk,” I told him, but without looking down at me, he grunted and continued to carry me back towards the manor.

Despite his back, Marshal carried me up the two flights of stairs and down the corridor to my room, where he gently laid me on my bed. Without looking back at me, he turned and left my room. As he did I looked at his long black coat, the sleeves and his boots. Kayla bounded onto the bed, and crossing her legs she came and sat next to me.

Mrs. Payne appeared in the bedroom doorway with a tray which had a glass, bowl, and jug of water balancing on it.

“Kayla, don’t just sit there gawking at Kiera, go to the bathroom and get me a flannel!” Mrs. Payne snapped.

Without argument, Kayla scuttled from the bed and returned moments later. She handed the housekeeper the flannel, who then poured some of the water from the jug into the bowl. Moistening the flannel with some of the water, Mrs. Payne began to gently dab at the corner of my left eye.

“Your eye has been bleeding, Kiera,’ she explained. “But I don’t seem to be able to find a cut or where the blood is coming from.”

Taking the flannel from her, I said, “It’s okay, it happens sometimes.”

“Does it?” She asked, sounding alarmed.

“There’s nothing to worry about,” I tried to assure her, and I noticed Kayla staring at me from the foot of the bed.

“You should see a doctor, dear,” Mrs. Payne said, plumping up the pillows beneath my head.

“I have, but they tell me there’s nothing wrong with me,” I said.

“Well, whatever, but you need to get some rest. You’ve had a nasty fall,” she told me. It was then that I remembered getting the text message on my phone from Sparky, and then...everything had just gone black.

“How many times have you been told not to climb up on that wall, Kayla?” Mrs. Payne snapped.

“I’m not six-years-old anymore,” Kayla muttered.

“I don’t want to see you up there again,” the housekeeper said, staring at Kayla. “Do you understand me?”

“Whatever,” Kayla sighed, flopping down on the bed.

“And what do you think you’re doing?” Mrs. Payne snapped at her again.

Poor Kid, I thought to myself. Wings or no wings – I’d want to run away from this place and never come back.

“I’m going to sit with Kiera and make sure she’s okay,” Kayla said.

“You’ll do no such thing,” the housekeeper sighed. “Kiera needs to get some rest. She doesn’t want you -”

“It’s okay,” I said. “I feel fine – honestly.”

“Don’t talk such nonsense.”

“No, I’d like Kayla to stay -” I started.

Ignoring me, Mrs. Payne, glared at Kayla and said, “Come on, you have some chores to do.”

Swinging her legs over the side of the bed, Kayla shrugged at me and headed towards the door, following the housekeeper.

Just as she was about to disappear into the corridor, I called after her, “Have you got my phone?”

“Huh?” Kayla said looking back over her shoulder at me.

“My mobile phone?”

Staring at me, Kayla said, “I don’t know where it is. Maybe you dropped it into the moat as you fell from the wall.” Then she was gone, swinging the door shut behind her.

“Not my phone,” I groaned, punching the mattress with a clenched fist. I closed my eyes and tried to recall the text message Sparky had sent me. I remembered looking at my phone, and behind my eyes those flash-bulbs popped on and off again and in those flashes of light, the words from the message that Sparky had sent swam about in front of my closed eyes. Like I was solving some word puzzle I put the words in order so that they

made sense. Then, as clear as if I were holding the phone in my hand, I read the words that seemed to have appeared on the inside of my eyelids.

Bad news Kiera – your flat has been burgled.

It's a real mess here. Where are you?

Sparky. X

Opening my eyes, the words shot away, like the pieces of a scrabble game being tossed around the inside of my skull. So my nightmare about Phillips ransacking my flat had been true. He'd really been there, going through my stuff. But why? And what had he been looking for? But more than that, the message from Sparky proved that my dream had been more than just a nightmare, it had been a vision – premonition – of some kind. Realising this, my body turned cold and gooseflesh crawled up my arms and legs. If the nightmare that I'd had about Phillips had somehow been a window to what was happening outside the grounds of Hallowed Manor, then perhaps the nightmare I'd experienced while unconscious might also be....

Could that have really happened? I asked myself as I sat bolt upright on my bed. Could vampires have really gone berserk on the London Underground and killed all those people? And if it were true – if that had

really taken place – what about the plane crash? And the voice of the pilot screamed inside my head: “*Mayday! Mayday! They’ve breached the cockpit!*” The pilot’s voice seemed almost deafening inside my head. Covering my ears with my hands, I lay back down on the bed and rolled onto my side. Pulling my knees up under my chin, I cradled myself like a baby.

What is happening to me? And what is happening out there beyond the walls of Hallowed Manor? If the world was coming under attack by vampires, why was I seeing it? I didn’t want to see it! I needed to make contact with the outside world – I needed to speak with Sparky, but without my phone how would I? This place would surely have a phone. Perhaps Kayla would have a mobile that I could borrow – all teenagers had a mobile phone these days, right? But what was his number? I had it stored in my phone, sure, but I couldn’t remember it. That was the whole point of storing it in my phone – so I wouldn’t have to remember it. Perhaps I could get his home number by ringing directory enquires – yes that’s what I would do. Sparky would be able to tell me if any vampires had been found on that plane, if there had been a massacre on the Underground. Something like that would be all over the news and in the papers. God how I wish I had access to some newspapers right now. I wouldn’t be able to stop myself from cutting and pasting. I pictured my flat in Havensfield covered with the

news cuttings of vampires at forty thousand feet above ground and two hundred feet below ground.

My head started to pound and it felt as if someone or something was chipping away at my brain with a pickaxe. I didn't know if the pain was due to my fall or the realisation that I was somehow *seeing* what had happened, what was happening, or had yet to happen. Closing my eyes, I thought about the show-and-tell session Kayla and me had shared that morning. There were still questions that I wanted to ask Kayla – there was stuff I needed answers to. Some I could provide myself, like I now knew that it had been Marshal who had been up to the '*forbidden*' wing. Why had he taken a tray up there and for whom? That I didn't know. But there was someone else living at the manor other than Kayla, Mrs. Payne, Marshal, and the chauffeur. I also knew that Lady Hunt hadn't gone to New York like she claimed she was going to. She was definitely going somewhere – but it was closer to home than that or she would have taken suitcases with her. She didn't even have a handbag when she got out of the car at the railway station.

I now understood the true reason why she had asked me to come and watch her daughter – but where was she, and what was she doing? And what of Murphy, Potter, and Luke? Where were they when I needed them? What about Luke? Kayla had said that the last time she had seen him, he

had looked disfigured – burnt. But there was one thing that I just couldn't work out. Sitting on that wall with Kayla, she had known that I was going to receive a text message on my phone – some seconds before it had arrived. How had she known that? I would have to ask her, I thought as my eyes drooped shut and I drifted into sleep.

Chapter Twelve

I didn't dream – I just slept – and when I woke my room was in semi-darkness. Someone had lit candles and placed them around my room. The curtains were open, and through the window, I could see that it was night and a crescent-shaped moon hung in the sky like a piece of cheese rind. Glancing at my wristwatch, the little luminous hands told me it was just before 9 p.m. Rolling onto my back, I propped myself up onto my elbows. My head still ached from my fall, but the pain had eased. Then in the gloom, I spotted Kayla sitting in the chair in the corner of the room. Noticing that I was awake, she removed the iPod's earphones, picked something up from the dresser, and brought it towards me.

"I made you a sandwich," she said, handing me a plate. "I thought you might be hungry." Taking the plate of neatly-cut sandwiches from her, I looked at them and she added, "They're ham. You do like ham, don't you? I wasn't sure."

"I love cheese," I said, taking a bite. "Mmm. These are good."

“I fetched you a glass of milk, too,” Kayla smiled and took a glass from the dressing table.

“You’re too kind,” I smiled and took a gulp.

“Are you okay?” she asked, and I could see the concern in her eyes that twinkled in the candlelight.

“I’ll be fine,” I said, putting the glass to one side.

“You had me worried for a bit,” she said.

“Don’t worry about me. I’m as tough as an old pair of boots,” I told her, and she laughed. There was an awkward silence that fell between us, so I broke it by saying, “So what have you been doing while I’ve been out of it?”

“Not much,” she sighed. “The old bag has had me mopping the kitchen floor and then I had to go and wash the Rolls Royce for James.” Then holding out her hands, she said, “See, look my hands have gone all wrinkly. Then I made you a sandwich and have just been sitting up here in the corner listening to music.”

“Anything good?” I asked her.

“ ‘Rocket Man’ by Elton John. I love that song,” she said.

As we were on the subject of listening to things, I said, “So tell me, how did you know I was going to get that text earlier? I mean, you knew it was coming even before it showed up on my phone.”

Making herself comfortable on the edge of my bed, Kayla looked at me and said, “I hear things.”

Swallowing a mouthful of ham and bread, I said, “How do you mean?”

“I don’t know – it’s hard to explain,” she sighed. “Remember how I told you I heard that doctor whisper in my father’s ear? Well they were right on the other side of my room but I could still hear them.”

“It could just have been good acoustics,” I said, but didn’t really believe that. And to hear myself doubt her like that reminded me of how Doctor Keats disbelieved me. The girl had wings for crying out loud – I should be able to believe anything.

“Come with me,” Kayla said, climbing from the edge and taking one of the candles. Pushing the plate aside, I took a candle for myself and followed her.

“Where you taking me?” I asked her.

“C’mon,” she said over her shoulder. “I want to show you my room.”

Following Kayla down the passageway, that smell hit my nostrils again. I tried not to get too close to the walls in an attempt to avoid getting that sticky stuff on my clothes. Just before the stairs, Kayla stopped outside a door and pushed it open. Looking back at me, she stepped inside. With my

candle held out before me, I followed her. The room that I'd entered was lit with so many candles that it could have easily been mistaken for some kind of chapel. There were tall ones, short ones, fat and thin ones. The smell of melting wax was almost overwhelming. Apart from the candles, Kayla's room could have been mistaken for any other teenage girl's room up and down the country – apart from the four-poster bed, Ensuite bathroom, sheer size, and the balcony outside. Her room was covered with pictures of Enrique Iglesias, Robert Pattinson, and Katy Perry. Clothes spilled from the half-open wardrobe and across the floor, a Kindle lay on her bed.

“Reading anything good?” I asked.

Looking back over her shoulder, she said, “‘*Atlas*’ by Sienna Rose.”

“Any good?” I asked, turning to look at her dressing table.

“Awesome,” she said. “You should read it sometime.”

“Perhaps I will someday,” I smiled, noticing how her dressing table was littered with lipsticks, half-empty bottles of perfume, face wipes, hairgrips, and nail polish.

Kicking some of her clothes under the bed, Kayla smiled and said, “Sorry about the mess.”

“Hey, this looks like paradise compared to the state of my flat,” I said. Then I thought of how Phillips had left it and dreaded going back there to face it.

“Right. You lay down there,” she said. “I want to prove something to you.”

Playing along with her, I lay on her bed. Looking up I could see the bell pull hanging from the ceiling. It was frayed all down one side and at its end. Glancing away, I watched Kayla cross to the far side of the room.

“Right now, close your eyes so you can’t lip read. Go on, close your eyes,” she urged me.

Smiling to myself, I closed my eyes and lay back. All I could hear was the sound of my own breathing.

“Ok, so what did I say?” she asked.

Opening my eyes, I looked at her standing across the room from me. “I couldn’t hear what you said,” I told her.

“See!” she exclaimed coming back towards me. “I was standing exactly where my father and that quack were that night, but I still heard them. That would be impossible, right?”

“I guess,” I said sitting back up. “So you have extra-sensitive hearing?” I asked her.

“It was like that at first,” she started to explain. “But now it’s different.”

“How?” I asked, crossing to the window to look out onto the balcony.

“I don’t know how to explain it – but it’s not like I hear voices, words, or sounds – it’s more like vibrations,” she said. “And it’s those vibrations that create noises inside my head. Like today, when we were sitting on the wall. I couldn’t have heard your text arriving because I heard it before it arrived on your phone. So how could I have heard it, if it hadn’t made a sound?”

“I don’t know,” I said, stepping away from the window. I’d seen enough so I went to her bathroom and glanced inside.

“I heard the vibrations of that text message travelling towards your phone through the air – does that makes sense?” she said.

Sitting on the edge of her bed, I looked at Kayla and said, “I think so.”

“That’s why I like to listen to music,” she said, coming to sit next to me.

“How come?”

“There is always noise going on inside my head – it can kinda drive me nuts at times,” she said. “It’s like just sitting here next to you, I can hear your heart beating, I can hear the blood surging through your veins, I can hear your hair and nails growing. It’s like there is this constant background noise.”

“How do you cope with it?” I asked her.

“Sometimes I don’t,” she explained. “That’s one of the reasons I was distracted at school. It was so hard to concentrate when I could hear the lunch that the girl sitting next me had eaten being broken down by her stomach acid inside her. It wasn’t very nice and very distracting!”

“I know how you feel,” I told her. “I can see things.”

“See things?” she asked, then with an excited glint in her eyes, she added, “What, like ghosts and stuff?”

“No,” I laughed. “I’m not psychic.” But then I thought of how I’d seen Phillips burgle my flat in a dream and wondered if I was. God, Doctor Keats would have enough material to keep her busy for the rest of her life!

“How do you mean then?” Kayla asked.

“Okay,” I said. “How many people live in this house?”

“Well, including you and my mother when she’s here -” she started.

“Apart from us,” I cut in. “How many staff are there?”

“Why, just three,” she said, looking confused. “Mrs. Payne, Marshal, and James.”

“Wrong, there’s another,” I said looking her straight in the eye.

“But that’s impossible!” she gasped. “Who are they, and where are they? I haven’t seen anyone!”

“But I have,” I said. “I don’t know who they are, but I know that they are probably living in the other wing.”

“How can you be so sure?” She asked, sounding breathless.

“Marshal took them breakfast this morning,” I assured her.

“Marshal? How do you know that?”

“The stairs leading up to the ‘forbidden’ wing, as the good housekeeper likes to call it, are covered in dust. Thick dust which I guess has been created by the renovations that have been taking place there. It looks reddish in colour which probably makes it brick dust,” I said.

“So?”

“There aren’t any builders here – not that I’ve seen,” I said.

“No, they stopped work last week,” Kayla said. “They can’t continue until some more supplies have been ordered. Well, that’s what Mrs. Payne told me anyhow. Apparently, they’ll be back next week.”

“Okay, so if there haven’t been any builders in the manor since last week, why are there fresh boot prints in the dust on those stairs? The prints looked to me to be about a size twelve – far too big to be Mrs. Payne’s or yours. The chauffeur can’t walk, so that only leaves one other person...”

“Marshal!” Kayla breathed, her eyes growing wide. “But how do you know that he was taking someone their breakfast?”

“Halfway up the banisters, there is a handprint where someone gripped hold of it. It wasn’t because they slipped or fell, having to suddenly take hold of the banister, the footprints didn’t show any sign of this. The

fact that there isn't a matching handprint on the opposite banister tells me that they were carrying something else in their hand. Something that they were trying to balance and something that they couldn't drop for fear of bringing unwanted attention to themselves," I explained. Then holding my arm up with my hand out flat, I pretended that I was holding a tray. "See, a tray would contain plates, cutlery, or a teapot and a cup at the very least. Imagine the noise that would have made if it had gone clattering down the stairs."

"But what makes you think it was breakfast?" Kayla asked, looking intrigued.

"What else could someone possibly be carrying on a tray at such an early hour in the morning?" I said.

"How do you know it was in the morning?" she asked.

"I passed those stairs at gone midnight last night and even though I only had the aid of a candle to guide me, it was adequate enough for me to have noticed any great big boot marks if they'd been there."

Looking at me, Kayla blew out her cheeks and said, "That was pretty neat. But how can you definitely be sure it was Marshal? I know what you said about him being the only -"

"When he placed me on the bed after my fall today, I couldn't help but notice a trail of the same coloured brick dust along the right sleeve of

his coat. And as he walked away, I could see it on the soles of his boots,” I explained.

“You really do see things, don’t you?” Kayla said. “But if you are right - and I don’t doubt you – who was Marshal taking breakfast to and what are they doing up there?”

“I don’t know,” I said. “But it would be nice to find out.”

“If you go up there, will you take me with you?” she asked.

“I don’t know,” I said shaking my head.

“I used to go up there as a kid,” she told me. “I could show you the way.”

“I’ll think about it,” I said getting up from the bed and heading for the door.

“You know what?” Kayla said, as I reached for the door handle.

“What?”

“My mother was wrong about you.”

“In what way?” I asked, looking back.

“She said you were going to be tough – that you wouldn’t put up with any nonsense and that you would keep me line,” Kayla said.

“But your mother was right about one thing,” I said lingering by the door.

“Oh, what was that?”

“You do have someone watching you,” I said, but I didn’t tell her that I knew she knew who he was. I didn’t tell her that despite the moat, the walls, the drawbridge and gate, he somehow gained access to the grounds. That she sends him messages to let him know the coast is clear. That he waits for her below until it is safe for him to come up to her balcony, but he is not her boyfriend. But nevertheless, he is someone she trusts and feels comfortable with. I didn’t tell Kayla that I had seen all of this since entering her bedroom.

“Do you know who it is?” Kayla said, springing from the edge of her bed and I could detect fear in her voice.

“Not yet,” I told her, closing the bedroom door behind me.

Chapter Thirteen

Instead of going back to my room, I crept down the stairs to the next landing. With the candle flickering in my hand, I looked at the stairs leading up into the '*forbidden*' wing. Crouching forward, I looked only to see that the stairs and banisters had now been cleaned. Any trace of Marshal's footsteps had been wiped away.

"Have you lost something?" a voice said from behind me.

With a gasp of fright, I leapt up and spun round. Peering through the flame of the candle that she held in her hand, Mrs. Payne gave me a distrusting look.

"Erm, no...well yes," I said, sounding flustered.

"Oh, yes?" Mrs. Payne said without taking her beady eyes off me.

"What have you lost?"

"My earrings," I blurted out.

"Really?" Mrs. Payne said. "Well, you couldn't have lost them here."

“How come?” I said, looking down, pretending to be searching for them.

“You weren’t wearing any earrings today as Marshal carried you back into the house after your fall,” she smiled through the candlelight at me.

“That would be it then,” I said sounding relieved. “They must have come off when I fell.”

“Perhaps,” the housekeeper said, moving around me so as to block the stairs leading up into the blackness. “I’ll get Marshal to have a look for you tomorrow.”

“No, its okay,” I said. “They weren’t very expensive – just forget about it.”

“Whatever you wish,” Mrs. Payne smiled, but it was false. For a moment we just stood and looked at each other in the gloom.

“Any idea on when the lights are going to come back on?” I asked her.

“Very soon,” she said her fake smile fading.

“When would that be exactly?” I pushed.

“In a day or so – when the builders return. Why? Is there a problem, Kiera?” she asked.

“No, no problem,” I said, turning away and heading back up the stairs to my room.

“Goodnight then,” Mrs. Payne’s voice echoed up from the darkness.

“Goodnight,” I said, and climbed the stairs.

Back in my room, I closed the door and went to the bathroom. The bath looked inviting; so, taking off my jeans and jumper, I put my hair up and ran myself a bath. While the water was tumbling from the taps, I lit a few more candles and went to the windows, opening them just enough to let the cool night air into my room.

Turning, I went back to the bathroom, took off my underwear, and climbed into the bath. I sunk right to the bottom of it and the warm water almost came up to my chin. Leaning my head back I closed my eyes. I wished that I had my iPod with me; to be able to listen to Adele while I relaxed in the bath surrounded by candlelight would have been perfection. But Kayla still had it and I guessed her need was greater than mine. I liked Kayla and she was nothing like her mother had portrayed her. Sure she could be a little cocky, but she had a lot to deal with. Not only had one of her parents recently disappeared (and I knew how that felt), she had been left knowing that she was different from everyone else. Although she knew that her father had been a Vampyrus, had he ever really talked to her about

that? Had she ever seen his wings? Surely he would have tried to have comforted her, made her feel as normal as possible. No wonder she was bitter and angry at times. And where was her mother now? Why had she really gone away? Was it in search of her husband?

I could understand Lady Hunt believing I might be able to protect her daughter; after all she told me herself that she knew I'd managed to survive in The Ragged Cove. But who was I protecting Kayla from, and did she really need protecting? I knew that Kayla was in contact with someone on the outside of the manor, I could see that when I looked out of her bedroom window onto the balcony. There was a torch hidden in the corner. If she had a torch available to her, why wasn't she using it to light her way through the house at night instead of a candle? No, she was using the torch to send a signal to someone at night on the moors. She flicked the torch light on and off to send messages to him. A candle would be no good; the wind would blow out the flame. There was also a sprinkling of earth on the stone floor of the balcony and some had dirtied the windows. Directly below her balcony was a flowerbed, and this is where the man stood and threw earth up at her window to get Kayla's attention. How did he get up onto the balcony? Kayla would unfasten the bell pull. She would tie a knot in one end to secure it between the balcony railings and the male would hoist himself up. He wasn't a Vampyrus or he would have flown onto her

balcony and there would have been no need for the mud-slinging or frayed looking-bell pull.

Whoever it was, he was just a friend to Kayla. There was no romantic interest as she wasn't trying to impress him. Any young girl wanting to grab the attentions of a young man wouldn't dare let him into such an untidy room, where used face wipes were discarded on the dresser, and dirty clothes and underwear sprawled across the floor. But this did show that whoever it was, she felt comfortable with him – comfortable enough not to put on a show.

My head spun with so much information. So splashing some water onto my face to waken myself, I climbed out of the bath. Wrapping a towel around me, I peered into the mirror fastened to the wall above the basin. With the forefinger of my right hand, I touched the tear duct of my left eye. I couldn't see any blood and my eye didn't even look bloodshot. I still didn't understand why my eye bled when I had those – visions – when I *saw* things.

What, with me *seeing* things and Kayla *hearing* things, nothing would ever get past us. What a team we would make! Then as if being punched in the face, I staggered backwards – nearly stumbling back into the bath. How had I not *seen* it? Kayla had been going through changes since the age of fourteen. And since that age she had been *hearing* things. I tried

to remember at what age I had started to *see* things – probably about the same age I guessed. But just like her hearing, which over the years had started to develop – *change* – so had my sight. No longer was I just able to *see* things that anybody else would if only they looked for them, but now I was *seeing* stuff that either had yet to happen or had happened. But Kayla had gone through other changes too – she had started to grow wings. Although small at the moment, they were sure to develop into full-sized wings as she grew older.

With my heart pounding in my chest, and my mouth turning dry, I lowered the towel that I had wrapped around me. Glancing back over my shoulder, I looked at my back in the mirror.

“What am I doing?” I shouted aloud. “Kiera Hudson, you need to get a grip!”

Then I started to laugh, there was no way I could be some kind of half-breed human-slash-Vampyrus. One of Kayla’s parents had been a Vampyrus; mine had just been plain old –

...then I screamed in horror and pulled the towel tight about me. Reflected in the mirror was my bedroom window, and in its reflection was the bandaged face of Marshal staring back at me.

Chapter Fourteen

Tying the towel around me, I turned around and raced towards the windows on the far side of my room. Throwing them open, I went out onto the balcony.

“What’s the big idea?” I shouted, expecting to see Marshal standing there, but the balcony was empty. There was no one there. Suspecting that he might have seen me coming and climbed off the balcony, I peered over the edge, but couldn’t see him. How had he disappeared so quickly? It only took me moments to get from the bathroom to here. My mind then started to tell me that perhaps he hadn’t been there at all. Maybe I hadn’t seen him spying on me through the windows. But I knew he’d been there watching me. But for how long had he been standing on my balcony, and why?

There was a squeaking noise from below and I wondered if it were Marshal trying to make good his escape. Peering down into the darkness, I could hear the squeaking noise but couldn’t see anything. Running back into my room, I blew out the candles. Returning to my balcony, I crouched down and peered through the concrete railings, hiding myself in the

darkness, hoping that whoever was below might reveal themselves if they thought that I had gone back to my room, and gone to bed.

The squeaking came again and I couldn't work out where it was coming from or what was making the sound. Then, peering to my right, I saw James come from around the side of the manor house in his wheelchair. With every turn of the wheels, they let out a high-pitched squeaking sound. Staying hidden in the darkness, I watched him make his way down the gravel path towards the gatehouse. I sat there until the squeaking faded into the distance and he disappeared from view. I stayed hidden in the darkness and wondered why he would be out at such a late hour and heading for the gate house. Was he going to see Marshal? Deciding that there wasn't anything that odd about this, and suspecting I was just being jittery because I thought I saw Marshal watching me, I decided to go back inside and lock the windows behind me.

But just as I was about to crawl out from the shadows I saw a light blinking on and off out across the moors. The light flashed once, then again but this time longer. Then again, and again. Staying hidden, I peered along the side of the building and could just make out Kayla's balcony in the distance. Lying as flat as I could, I watched her balcony windows swing slowly open. Within seconds, I watched as Kayla came crawling out on her hands and knees. Just like I knew she had been, she took the torch that she

had been hiding, switched it on then quickly off again. The torchlight on the moors flashed again in recognition of her signal. Kayla switched her torch on and off in rapid succession and whoever she was signalling to on the moors signalled back with a quick flash of torchlight.

Scrambling back into my bedroom, I rummaged around for a pen and a scrap of paper in my bag. Searching in the darkness with the tips of my fingers, I pulled out a pen and an old mini-bank statement. Hurrying back onto the balcony, I waited for the flashes of torchlight to come from the darkness of the moors. At first there was nothing and I hoped that I hadn't missed the last of it. Then, out of the night came two long flashes followed by two short bursts of light, followed by one long flash, and then a pause which was quickly followed by a further two long flashes and one short burst. I frantically made a note of this on the scrap of paper and waited. Nothing more followed and I looked to my right and watched Kayla disappear back into her room, quietly closing the windows behind her.

Hurrying back into my room, not knowing if I had any time to lose, I struck a match from the box on the dressing table and lit a candle. In the dim light I tried to make sense of what I'd written. This is what I'd scrawled on the back of the bank statement:

-- --/-/--

-- --/-

How I wished I'd learnt the Morse code, as I sat looking at the lines and dashes I'd drawn. Trying to work as fast as I could, I knew that the top line made a four letter word and the second line consisted of a two-letter word. But what were they? I tried to think of as many two letter words that I could, but there were too many. Then I remembered reading once that the most commonly used letter in the English alphabet was the letter 'E'. So I hoped that maybe either word started with the letter 'E' or at least had the letter somewhere within them.

Then I noticed that the first word had two short dashes in the middle. So under them I wrote:

-- --/-/-/--

e/e

The two-letter word also had one of these short bursts as its second letter, so I wrote:

-- --/-/-/--

e/e

--/-

/e

I couldn't think of too many two-letter words that ended with 'E' and the first that came to mind was the word 'ME'. I looked at my scribbles and could see that the first letter of the first word was identical to that of the first word in the second word, so I wrote:

-- --/-/--

M/e/e/--

-- --/-

M/e

Looking down at the piece of scrap paper there was only one four letter word that I could think of which started with the letters M.E.E and that was the word *meet*. So placing the letter 'T' at the end of the cipher, I read the message that the person on the moors had sent Kayla. It read:

Meet me!

Fearing that Kayla was going to go and meet this stranger, I pulled on my clothes, and blowing out the candle I'd lit, I crept to my bedroom door. Opening it just an inch, I peered out and could just make out Kayla heading away from me down the corridor. Sneaking out, I suddenly stopped. Kayla could hear things? If she could hear my heartbeat just sitting next to her, wouldn't she be able to hear me following her? Closing the door behind me as quietly as I could, I knew it was a risk I'd have to take if I were to ever find out who it was she had been meeting. After all, that's what Lady Hunt was supposedly paying me to find out.

I waited until the top of Kayla's head had disappeared over the brow of the stairs, then as quickly and as quietly as I could, I set off down the passageway after her. At the top of the stairs, I looked around the banister to see her cross the hall beneath the giant chandelier. Hunkering down and peering through the gaps in the banisters, I watched as she reached the front door. Sliding back the bolts, she stole one quick glance back over her shoulder then disappeared out into the night.

Running down the stairs on tiptoe, I raced across the great hall and slowly opened the front door just a fraction. Pressing my eye against the gap that I'd created, I watched Kayla run across the open grassy area in front of the manor, heading towards the shelter and utter darkness beneath the trees. Not wanting to lose sight of her, I pulled the front door closed

behind me, and headed across the lawns. Ahead of me, Kayla disappeared into the darkness and I lost her from view. With my heart racing in my chest, I prayed that she couldn't hear it and I headed towards the tree line.

Shielding myself behind the trunk of an ancient oak tree, I spied into the darkness that filled the gaps between the tree trunks like black ink. Then to my left and a short distance away, I saw a light weaving back and forward across the ground. Believing that she was a safe distance from the manor and hidden by the trees, she must have turned her torch on. Following the torch light, I crept after her. Gradually my eyes grew accustomed to the darkness, and everything around me looked grey and dull as if the colour had been sucked out of it. In the distance I could see the torchlight bobbing up and down. Then I heard a sound in the silence which made me quicken my step and close the gap between Kayla and me. It was the hissing sound of my iPod that I could hear, and if she was listening to that, then maybe she wouldn't be able to hear me following her.

Weaving between the tree trunks, I continued after her, until some way ahead, the torchlight went out. Stopping where I was, I listened, but there was only silence now, even the hissy sound of my iPod had stopped. Placing one foot carefully in front of the other, I made my way towards the area where I'd seen the torchlight go out. As I drew near, the trees thinned out into an open circular area. In its centre was a small summerhouse. It

was white in colour and the roof was pointed, giving it the appearance of a medieval chapel. At the front of it there was a small covered porch and a swinging couch. The porch was raised off the ground, and to get to it there were several wooden steps. Surrounding the summerhouse was a white picket fence. From my hiding place and lit by the light of the moon, the tiny little house looked like something from a fairy-tale.

Kayla stood to one side of the summerhouse. I watched her wind the earphones around my iPod then place it on the ground next to her jacket which she had taken off. She was dressed in jeans and a black gym top, which was tight-fitting, stopped an inch above her navel, and was low-cut at the back. Arching her shoulders and hanging her arms loosely by her side, Kayla's small looking wings unfolded from her back. The tips of them peeked just above her shoulders and I could see the three bony fingers at each end of the wing wiggling open and closed in the moonlight.

Then I heard the sweetest sound that I think I'd ever heard. Kayla started giggling to herself and it sounded like the happiest sound in the world. As she giggled, she fluttered her wings and ever so slowly her feet began to lift off the ground. Watching from the darkness beneath the trees, I felt kind of weird as if I were intruding on a very private moment. But, however much I guessed that I should walk away, I couldn't; I was mesmerised by her beauty. She looked like an angel.

Kayla's feet rose about a foot off the ground, before she dropped again. Raising herself on the tips of her toes, she held her arms out on either side of her slender frame and with a gentle flap of her wings, she rose off the ground again. At first I wasn't sure what she was trying to achieve by doing this, but then she hovered a few feet off the ground, twisted her body to the right and fluttered in that direction. Seeing this, I knew that she was getting used to having wings – she was practising flying. I could tell that her wings were too underdeveloped to reach the heights and speeds that I'd seen Luke, Potter, and Murphy achieve, but one day – one day she would and what a sight she would make, soaring, racing, and diving through the sky with her flame-coloured hair billowing out behind her. As I thought of this, there was a very small part of me that was envious of her.

My thoughts were broken by the sound of gentle applause. Looking towards the sound I could see that someone had appeared on the porch of the summerhouse. I'd been so caught-up in the spectacle of Kayla that I hadn't noticed him arrive and neither had Kayla. Hearing the sound, she fluttered the few feet back to the ground and went racing towards him, her wings glinting in the moonlight behind her. Racing up the steps, she threw her arms around this man and they held each other. Even though it wasn't a lover's embrace, I could tell that Kayla felt deeply for him. From my hiding place, I watched the man plant a soft kiss on her forehead and she ran her

hand gently down the length of one side of his face. The overhang of the porch cast such deep shadows that it was impossible for me to see the identity of this man. Letting go of each other, the male led Kayla by the hand into the summerhouse and closed the door behind them.

I waited several minutes, and when I was sure that they weren't coming out again, I tiptoed from beneath the shelter of the trees and made my way across the open area towards the summerhouse. Passing the porch, I crept around the side of the tiny structure. Set in the side of it, there was a window. Drooping low so I was almost crawling, I positioned myself below the window. Holding my breath and trying to calm my racing heart – I didn't want Kayla to hear it – I slowly pulled myself up and peered through the window.

Chapter Fifteen

The inside of the summerhouse was in semi-darkness. There was an oil lamp on the table and it cast an orange glow. There was a small wooden table in the centre of the room and Kayla and the male sat at it on two white-washed chairs. Kayla was sitting to one side, and I had to strain my neck to see her. That was good though, because if I couldn't see her without making some effort, then she wouldn't be able to see me. But the male was who I really wanted to get a good look at, but he had his back to me. What little I could see of him was cast in shadow. I could hear them talking, but their voices were low and muffled as if they were speaking in whisper, not wanting anyone else to hear what it was they were saying to one another.

Lowering my head, I pressed my ear against the thin wooden wall of the summerhouse and listened.

"I think I'm close," the male said, but that was all I got as his voice faded.

"How long now?" I heard Kayla ask, and from what I could tell, her voice had an urgency to it.

The male replied but the first part of what he said was incomprehensible. All I heard him say was, "...if all goes well."

"That soon?" Kayla gasped, her voice rising as if excited in some way.

"Shhh," I heard the male gesture. "You need to be ready, Kayla," he said, his voice just a little clearer.

"I'm practicing – but it's difficult now that..." and her voice faded again.

"Do you think she knows?" I heard the male say.

"...don't know," was all I got of Kayla's reply.

"She didn't miss a trick in The Ragged Cove," he said, and my stomach somersaulted as I suspected the male was referring to me.

The first part of Kayla's response was missing but I caught the last few words, "...don't like Marshal."

You're not the only one, I thought to myself.

"...not long now," the male said and I sensed he was trying to be reassuring. "Be ready."

"I'll try and..." her voice trailed away again.

"...got to be ready for what's coming," the male said. "We've all got to be ready."

Then I heard the sound of chairs scrapping against the wooden floor boards of the summerhouse as they stood up from the table, their secret meeting over. With my heart in my mouth, I crawled away, back towards the trees. I didn't look back until I was hidden once again out of the moonlight, and in the shadows. Tucking myself behind the trunk of a tree, I watched as Kayla and the man left the summerhouse. Leaning over her, he kissed Kayla softly on the cheek and silently walked towards the trees on the opposite side of the open area to where I was hiding. I watched Kayla pick her jacket up off the ground and put it on, concealing her wings beneath it. Unwinding the headphones, she placed them in her ears and switched on the iPod. With the sound of '*Rocket Man*' by Elton John hissing away in the darkness, I turned and raced back towards the manor house. Several times I stumbled in the darkness, tripping and falling over bracken and broken branches. I came to realise that lending Kayla my iPod was one of my better moves. With the noise I'd been making, I was surprised that I hadn't woken the whole manor. Reaching the tree line, I raced towards the front door, hoping that I could get inside and out of view before Kayla reached the clearing and saw me. With my feet crunching on the gravel path, I reached the door. Just as I was about to sneak inside someone said from behind me, "Did you enjoy your evening walk?"

Spinning round on my heels, I looked back to see the chauffeur sitting in his wheelchair just feet behind me.

Where in the hell did you spring from? I wanted to ask him, but I bit my tongue instead. How had I not heard him? I mean his wheelchair wailed like a set of fingernails being dragged across ice.

“I didn’t mean to scare you,” he said, looking at me from beneath the rim of his peaked cap. His unkempt sideburns glistened silver in the darkness and covered both sides of his face like wire wool.

“No worries,” I said, just wanting to be back inside the house. I knew that if Kayla saw James and me she wouldn’t come out from beneath the trees, but I didn’t want her to see me at all. If she asked me tomorrow where I’d been, I really didn’t want to have to lie to her or tell her the truth.

“What did you say?” the chauffeur said, raising a hand to his ear. “I’m a bit deaf.”

“I said it doesn’t matter,” I told him. “You didn’t scare me.”

“What was that?” he asked again.

“It’s ok – you didn’t scare me!” I said, raising my voice but not wanting to shout.

“Where you been?” he asked.

Trying to be as casual as I could, I ignored his question and asked one of my own. “What happened to the squeak?”

“The what?” he asked, holding his hand to his ear again.

“Your wheelchair was making an awful squeaking noise earlier,” I said in a raised voice which sounded more like a stage whisper.

“Oh, that,” he said. “Went down to see Marshal at the gatehouse, I did. He put a bit of oil on it for me. As good as new now!” then he rolled the chair backwards a few inches as if to prove the point. The squeaking had gone.

“Oh, well that’s good,” I smiled. “If you don’t mind, I should really be getting to bed now.”

“What was that you said?” he asked, leaning forward in his chair.

“Goodnight,” I said, stepping inside the manor.

“So long,” he said, and I looked back to see him trundling away down the gravel path.

Then, just before I closed the door, I said just above a whisper, “vampires.” If I’d blinked, I would have missed it, but as that word left my lips, the chauffeur seemed to falter as if suddenly stung. But then he was off again, wheeling himself down the path.

Shutting the door behind me, I wondered if the chauffeur was really as deaf as he claimed to be. After all, I could see that he didn’t need the wheelchair. He could walk.

Taking two of the stairs at a time, I raced up them, wanting to be in my room before Kayla returned. As I passed the landing and the stairs leading to the '*forbidden*' wing, I couldn't help but wonder if Marshal was up there in the darkness. Leaping up the next flight of stairs, I ran down the corridor, through that musty-sweet smell and back to my room. Closing my door, and in the darkness, I went to the windows. Peeling back the curtain I peered out to see Kayla suddenly appear from beneath the trees. Jerking her head left and right to make sure the coast was clear, she snuck back across the lawns and to the house.

Closing the curtain, I flopped onto my bed. I didn't even bother to light a candle; all I wanted to do was sleep. And as I closed my eyes, I couldn't help but wonder what was going on at Hallowed Manor. Why was Marshal creeping around at night, staring at me through my window? Why was the chauffeur pretending to be deaf and wheelchair bound? Who was the man Kayla was secretly meeting? But what troubled me most of all was what I'd overheard him telling Kayla.

"...got to be ready for what's coming," the male had said. "We've all got to be ready."

Ready for what? I wondered, as I drifted off to sleep.

Chapter Sixteen

My heart was racing and the smell of smoke was suffocating. Everywhere I looked there was chaos. People ran screaming in fear, but I didn't know from what. My heart raced inside me and every one of my senses was telling me that I should run – but run where and why?

The smoke cleared and I could see that I was standing in a deserted street. Where had everyone else gone? It was dusk, and for as far as I could see, the streets were lined with burning buildings and cars. Had there been some kind of riot while I'd been sleeping? What had happened to the world?

There was a noise above me, a high-pitched squawking. Looking up I could see great black shadows soaring across the sky. There were hundreds of them – no thousands. There were so many that they almost turned the sky black, blocking out the last rays of a dying sun. Shielding my eyes with my hands, I tried to make out what they were; in my heart, I already knew, but my head was telling me that it couldn't be possible. Their black wings rumbled like thunder as the thousands of Vampyrus swooped

above me. From street level, it looked as if I'd woken back in time and the world had been overrun with pterodactyl dinosaurs. Although they looked terrifying as they raced above me, the sound of their screaming and squawking hurting my ears, I couldn't help but also notice their beauty. Beneath each set of prehistoric-looking wings, was the body of a god. Their bodies, male and female, toned, muscled, and as white as alabaster. They looked like perfect sculptures. Their eyes burned like stars and their sharpened teeth gleamed. Some looked old, others young and some were children, but all of them were stunning.

Humans could only dream of such perfection, I thought to myself, as I stared up at them.

They almost seemed to flock together, banking right, swooping up, down, and then banking again. Then there was a sound behind me, like a drum beating. Spinning round, I saw two of the Vampyrus land, their wings rustling in the wind like sails. They came towards me, and as they approached through the burning smoke and flames, I could just make out that it was Taylor and Phillips. Even though their faces were a blur, distorted by the ripples of heat that wafted up from the burning tarmac, I knew it was them.

They came towards me, their strides purposeful and quick. I knew that I was in danger. So turning, I ran between the burnt-out cars and

busses that littered the street. My boots crunched over broken glass and my eyes stung from the smoke that billowed all around me like fog. Finding an open doorway, I ran inside. The windows of the building were frosted with cracks and splinters. I pulled at the door but it was stuck fast.

“Please!” I groaned as I banged against it with my fists.

Glancing back over my shoulder, I could see Taylor and Phillips coming closer. Running out from the doorway, I headed down an alley. Bins had been overturned, their contents rotting in the gutter, maggot-infested and being gnawed at by rats. Water ran down the walls of the buildings that loomed above me on either side and they felt as if they were closing in on me. The other end of the alley seemed as if it was miles away, just a pinprick of grey light in the distance. And however hard and fast I ran towards it, the light never got any closer.

Peering back over my shoulder, I could see that Taylor and Phillips were gaining on me. Desperate, I spun around and around looking for any place to hide. Then I saw a rusty-looking fire escape zigzagging up the side of the building. Kicking out at some scrawny looking rats that had their heads buried in a nearby bin, they scurried away. Turning the bin over, I climbed on top, reached out for the bottom of the fire escape and hoisted myself up.

Placing one hand over the other, I climbed up. I swung my legs out so they came to rest on the first step of the ladder. Then with the little energy that I had left, I raced up the fire escape to the roof of the building. Halfway up, I realised what a stupid thing I'd done. Why was I climbing up, when the sky was full of the very creatures that I was trying to run from? But I had committed myself and had nowhere else to go. Reaching the roof of the building, I looked out across the horizon and screamed.

I was in London. In the distance I could see Big Ben; its four clock faces were broken and leaking red flames into the fast-approaching night. It looked like a giant candle lighting up the horizon. Around it swooped the black-winged Vampyrus. Looking to my right, I could see the giant dome of St. Paul's Cathedral, which looked as if half of it had crumbled away onto the streets below. Clouds of black smoke pumped from the huge hole. To my left, on the opposite side of the Thames, the London Eye looked broken and bent out of shape, like a bicycle wheel that had been run over by a truck. For as far as the eye could see, tendrils of smoke poured up into the night from the buildings which had been reduced to mountains of rubble. Vampyrus swooped and soared over the devastation, their squawks drowning out the sounds of collapsing buildings and raging fires.

"Kiera," a voice said from behind me. Whirling around, I gasped at the sight of my mother. She stood by the fire escape that I had climbed only

moments before. “Kiera,” my mother said again, and this time she held out her hands towards me.

“Mum,” I stammered. “What are you doing here?”

I looked at her and she smiled. Her black hair curled around her neck and shoulders like velvet, and her blue eyes shone.

“Kiera, I’ll explain later,” she said, her voice soft and soothing, just as I remembered it to be. “We don’t have time. You have to come with me now,” and I noticed that her hands were smeared with blood.

“Mum – your hands,” I breathed. But when I looked again, I could see that she was clutching a length of blonde hair between her fingers, just like Henry Blake had been clutching a length of hers under that tree in The Ragged Cove.

“She’s one of us,” somebody answered for her. Turning, I saw Taylor and Phillips standing behind me. I looked at them and covered my mouth with my hands to stifle the scream that was racing up my throat. I couldn’t bear the sight of Phillips’ mutilated face. It looked raw and infected. Why didn’t he cover it with bandages or something?

“Mum,” I whispered, moving towards her.

Taylor came towards me, his limp worse than I had previously remembered. He was having difficulty walking. “Don’t trust her Kiera. Don’t listen to what she says.”

“But she’s my mother,” I said, feeling confused.

“Don’t listen to him,” my mother cried from over my shoulder.

Then, before I’d the chance to tell my mother how much I loved and missed her, the building began to shake like it was made out of children’s building blocks. It tilted left, then right and I swayed towards the edge. I heard a tearing noise as the fire escape came away from the side of the building. Dust and brick flew into the air and the world seemed to spin all around me.

“Help me!” I cried, clutching at the air as I teetered backwards.

My mother reached for me, panic in her eyes, but then I was falling backwards, cartwheeling through the air until I...

...sat up in bed. Shards of grey daylight cut through the gaps in the curtain, dust moats caught within them. My face felt wet and warm. Touching my cheek with the tips of my fingers, I pulled them away to see the now familiar sight of blood. I felt woozy and sick as if I’d spent the night partying and now I was paying for it with a thumping hangover.

Climbing from my bed and heading to the bathroom, I couldn’t help but notice the sense of urgency and panic my nightmare had left me feeling. Was the dream another premonition of what was going on in the world on the far side of the walls that surround the manor and its moat? Without a

phone and no access to newspapers or television, I had no way of knowing. I thought of how similar a situation I'd found myself in while working in The Ragged Cove.

How does the same shit happen to the same girl twice? I wondered to myself.

Flushing the toilet, I took a flannel and washed away the blood that had leaked from my eye. But things didn't have to be like they had been for me in The Ragged Cove. The manor must have a T.V. and I wondered if Kayla had a mobile phone that I could borrow. I was no longer going to be a passive observer. The words of the man that had met up with Kayla kept going around and around in my mind and I wanted to know what it was that Kayla had to prepare herself for. But more than that, before the day was over, I was going to investigate the '*forbidden*' wing.

So after a quick shower, I changed into some fresh clothes and I made my way from my room. And that was another thing – *I am going to find out what that awful smell is!* I thought to myself as I passed down the stinky passageway.

In the great hall, I looked at the door which led to the kitchen, but where did the other doors lead to? What lay behind them? There must be a T.V. set or telephone in one of them. Heading in the opposite direction to the kitchen, I came to a double set of doors. Heaving them open, I went

inside. Like most of the other rooms at the manor, it was huge, with a high ceiling that towered above me in a series of criss-crossing wooden beams. The floor was tiled, but huge rugs covered much of it. Along one of the walls was the centrepiece of the room. I'd never seen such a big fireplace – it looked as if you could've almost walked into it. Thick stone pillars stood on either side of it and along the top ran a marble shelf. I weaved my way between the luxurious-looking sofas and armchairs that were scattered about the room and headed towards the fireplace. All along the marble shelf were pictures and photographs, ornaments and candlesticks. I looked at the photographs in their silver frames and picked up one of the Hunt family. It couldn't have been taken that long ago because Kayla sat in the foreground in front of her parents and she looked pretty much identical to the way she looked now. Behind her and to her right was Lady Hunt and even in the picture, her beauty was startling. Then I studied the picture of her father. He was handsome, with thick jet-black hair swept back off his brow. It was longish and touching the collar of the white shirt he was wearing in the picture. He had the clearest green eyes I'd ever seen, full lips, and a square jaw line. But as I stared at the picture, there seemed something vaguely familiar about him. I was sure I'd never met him before but there was something; I just wasn't sure what.

“Can I help you?” Mrs. Payne's voice came from behind me.

Surprised at her sudden appearance, I nearly dropped the picture, sending it crashing to the floor. Placing it back onto the marble shelf, I turned to face her.

“What are you doing in here?” she asked, her beady eyes fixed on mine.

“Why? This isn’t another area of the house that is *forbidden* is it?” I smiled.

“This is the family’s private sitting room,” she said. “Now if you would kindly -”

“I was looking for a T.V. set,” I told her glancing about the room. Then, spying one of those big flat-screen T.V.’s sitting in the far corner, I crossed the room towards it.

“What do you want the T.V. for?” she asked, and I could hear her coming after me, her plain black shoes clacking against the tiled floor.

“To watch, of course,” I said over my shoulder.

“It doesn’t work!” she almost shouted at me.

“How come?” I asked, leaning forward and switching it on.

“The builders took the satellite dish down while they were repairing the house,” she explained. “You won’t be able to get a picture, I’ve tried.”

Ignoring her, I pressed the ‘ON’ button. The screen flickered momentarily, then hissed with white snow.

“See, I told you so,” the housekeeper said, snatching the T.V. controls from my hand and turning it off.

“What about a newspaper?” I snapped, placing my hands on my hips and staring at her. “Surely you must have a newspaper?”

“Never read them,” she smiled. “Full of doom and gloom and a pack of lies, usually.”

“A telephone?” I asked, doing everything in my power to control my ever increasing frustration. “This place must have a telephone?”

“We have several in fact,” Mrs. Payne said.

“There’s a *‘but’* coming though, isn’t there?” I said.

“It’s the builders you see,” she started. “They cut through the telephone cables -”

“And the electric cables and removed the satellite dish,” I cut over her. “How convenient!” I shouted, storming from the room.

Mrs. Payne followed me, and quickly closed the living room door behind us.

Kayla appeared at the foot of the stairs and although she was dressed, she still looked half asleep. I wasn’t surprised after her flying practice and secret meetings during the middle of the night. Crossing the hall towards her, I said, “Kayla, you must have a mobile phone that I can borrow?”

“Sure,” she blinked at me and rubbed sleep from her eyes. “What’s all the shouting about?”

“Ah, it’s not important,” I said, holding out my hand.

Kayla reached into the back pocket of her jeans and pulled out a mobile. “There you go,” she smiled.

Snatching hold of the phone, I glanced at the housekeeper who had that knowing smile on her face. I looked at the screen and to my relief there was a full signal bar across the top of it.

Now that I had the phone in my hands, I couldn’t think of one person to call. I couldn’t remember Sparky’s number and I didn’t know his home number. He was my only contact with the outside world.

Come on Kiera – think of something! I screamed at myself inside. *You have your hands on a telephone now – make good use of it.* Then coming to my senses, I telephoned directory enquiries. I gave the operator Sparky’s address.

Please don’t be ex-directory! I prayed.

To my relief, the operator came back with Sparky’s number. With my hands trembling, I entered his number into the phone and pressed the dial button. Holding it against my ear, I looked at Mrs. Payne as she hadn’t been able to take her eyes off me. Kayla was now sitting on the bottom stair, yawning.

“Hello?” Sparky said from the other end of the line. To hear his voice made me want to jump in the air and start cheering.

“Sparky, it’s me, Kiera,” I said.

“Kiera!” he almost shouted down the phone. “Where in the hell are you?” I’ve been receiving your texts -”

“Sparky, I don’t know how long I’ve got, I’m in a really remote place here so I don’t know how long the signal will last,” I gabbled down the phone at him. “What happened to my flat?”

“It’s been badly trashed,” he said. “Whoever did it has made a right mess, Kiera. I got scenes of crime to come round and -”

“Don’t worry about that,” I cut over him. “What I want to know is, have there been any problems on the London Underground?”

“What, with delays you mean?” he said, sounding confused. “I don’t know, I mean London is like six hundred miles from Havensfield. Why would I know if there has been any disruption to the service -”

“I’m not talking about the bloody timetable!” I snapped, remembering why he was called Sparky. “Has there been, like, any major incidents? You know, like loads of unexplained deaths, rioting...”

“No, nothing like that,” he said and his voice began to crackle on the other end of the line.

What I really wanted to ask him was had there been any sightings of vampires, but I didn't want to ask such a thing in front of Kayla and Mrs. Payne. So instead I said, "So there hasn't been anything out of the ordinary happening? You know, anything weird that can't be explained?"

"Well, there has been something," he said, his voice fading in and out.

With my heart starting to race, I said, "What is it, Sparky? What's happened?"

"Well, apart from the burglary at your flat – which really wasn't a burglary because I don't think anything was –"

"Just tell me, Sparky!" I shouted at him.

"Well, remember that old lady you helped?" he asked. "You know, the one who had her ring stolen?"

"Mrs. Lovelace?" I said, my heart getting quicker. "What about her?"

"Well her house got ransacked, too," he told me. "But worse than that, she's gone missing – like just disappeared off the face of the earth."

"But how...?" I mumbled, my confused mind trying to conjure up the right words.

"But it gets weirder, Kiera," Sparky continued. "Remember the guy who stole her ring – Evans?"

“Yes,” I whispered.

“Well, he’s gone missing too,” he explained. “Not only that, remember the guy who owned the pawnbrokers? Well, he’s gone missing and that doctor you used to see...”

“Keats,” I said, filling in the blanks for him.

“Yeah, well she’s gone – just vanished,” he said, sounding bemused. “It’s like anyone that you’ve come into contact with since returning from that creepy place you told me about has disappeared. Now you’ve gone missing and the police are wondering if you’re not in some way involved. Kiera, they’re looking for you – they’ve seen your flat and all the cuttings and newspapers. They found traces of blood in your bathroom and they think you’ve gone mad – they think you’ve...I don’t know how to tell you this...but they think you’ve murdered them all. CID is even re-opening your mother’s case, because she went missing too, didn’t she?”

My brain felt as if it had been scrambled and I couldn’t make sense of what he had told me. Then as if I’d been struck, I shouted down the phone at him, “Sparky, you’re not safe – you’ve got to -”

“What do you mean I’m not safe?” he half-laughed down the phone at me.

“Don’t you see, Sparky?” I said, my voice brimming with fear for him. “They’re taking everyone that I’ve been in contact with since coming

back from the Ragged -”

“Hang on a moment,” he said, sounding far away. “There’s someone at my door.”

“*No Sparky!*” I screamed so loud down the phone that Kayla jumped up off the bottom stair and Mrs. Payne flinched. “*Don’t open the door!*”

But the sound of the receiver clunking down onto the table in his hallway back in Havensfield told me that I was too late. Pressing the phone to the side of my head, I listened, but the line was so fussy and broken I couldn’t hear what was happening. Then I had an idea. Turning on the speakerphone function, I held the phone towards Kayla.

“What can you hear?” I asked her, my voice and hand trembling.

“What?” she asked looking startled.

“Just Listen!” I hissed at her. “Tell me what you can hear!”

Kayla came towards me and lent her head towards the phone. She closed her eyes, and her face seemed to take on a calm and tranquil expression.

“Your friend is opening the door,” she said. “There is a bolt and a lock with a key. He is turning it. His breathing is calm, but there are another two on the other side of the door. They are excited. I can hear their hearts – they’re racing.”

“Kayla, stop this at once!” Mrs. Payne shouted coming towards us.

Looking at her, I whispered, “Don’t even think about it, lady!”

Seeing the grim expression on my face, the housekeeper skulked away.

“Your friend is opening the door, and he’s saying ‘Hello’,” Kayla continued. “ ‘Are you John Miles?’ one of them is asking. ‘Yes’ he says.” Then Kayla stopped. Her eyes flickered open and she stared at me. I didn’t need her to tell me that Sparky was screaming – I could hear it for myself. Then the phone line went dead.

Chapter Seventeen

I handed Kayla her phone, and slumped onto the bottom stair. What was I to do? For the first time that I could remember, I had no plan – I couldn't see a way forward. I couldn't see what to do. Pushing the mobile back into her pocket, Kayla came to sit next to me, wrapping her arm around my shoulder.

"I'm sorry, Kiera," she whispered.

"You don't have anything to be sorry for," I told her.

"I'm sorry for your friend."

"Me too."

"How about a nice cup of tea?" Mrs. Payne chipped in.

Glancing up at her, I could see that she felt as dumbfounded as we all did. I don't think any of us knew what to do or say after hearing Sparky scream like that. I guess we all felt helpless.

"A cuppa would be great," I smiled weakly at her.

"I'll be in the kitchen when you're ready," she said walking away, leaving Kayla and me on the stair alone.

“What’s going on?” I said aloud, I don’t know if I really meant for Kayla to have all the answers.

“What do you mean?” she asked.

I looked at Kayla and wanted to tell her I’d been watching her last night with that man. I wanted her to know what I’d heard them discussing together. But I couldn’t, because it might cause her to distrust me, to become more secretive than she already was. But worse than that, she might warn her secret friend – tell him not to come back and then I might never know his identity. But there was other stuff, too. I wanted to know if Kayla was as suspicious of Marshal and James as I was. She had told her friend last night that she didn’t like Marshal and I couldn’t disagree with her about that. The guy was a creep – perhaps he spied on her too?

The whole set-up at the manor was wrong. But was Kayla a part of it? Did she know more than she was letting on? I didn’t know who to trust or believe anymore. I’d made that mistake before – I’d put my trust in my friend Sergeant Phillips and it had nearly got me killed. For now, I would have to keep my suspicions to myself and unravel what was really going on at the manor in my own way.

“Do you know what?” I said, looking at Kayla.

“What?”

“Tell Mrs. Payne to put a hold on the tea, I’m going for a walk,” I told her.

“Can I come?” she asked.

“I’m sorry Kayla, I just need some time on my own,” I said heading for the door.

“Okay see you later alligator,” she smiled at me.

Hearing those words, I froze. “What did you say?”

“I said, see you later, alligator,” she said. “Is there a problem?”

“No. No problem,” I half-smiled. “It’s just that’s the last thing I ever said to my mother before she disappeared.” Then closing the door, I left the manor house.

It was cold, I tucked my hands into the pockets of my jeans and headed towards the tree line in the distance. I thought I would take the opportunity to go and have a look at the summerhouse in the daylight. It might give me a chance to clear my head and see what I could see there.

I followed the route that Kayla had taken the night before. Again, it was dark beneath the trees, and the air felt clammy and damp. It was so quiet and still that not even the branches or leaves stirred in the trees that towered above me. What was I to do about Sparky? What had happened to him and to the others that I’d had contact with. Had they gone missing or

had...? I couldn't bring myself to think of the other possibility, but Sparky's screams sounded like his last. Shuddering at the thought, my skin turned cold. Should I contact the Police and give them what little information I had? But what information did I have?

I suspected that it was Phillips and Taylor who were behind what had happened to my friend and the others. But I was solely basing that on a series of nightmares that I'd had. Nightmares that I thought might perhaps be premonitions, but Sparky said that none of that other stuff had happened. Vampires hadn't gone berserk on the London Underground, feeding on everyone they came across. London didn't look like an apocalyptic wasteland with thousands of Vampyrus soaring through the sky and blocking out the sun. None of that had happened. But my flat had been turned over. I dreamt about that and Phillips had been responsible. But what did that prove? My superiors already thought I was nuts – they'd cart me straight off to the loony bin if I bowled straight into the nearest police station and started telling them about my nightmares. And besides, Sparky said that my colleagues suspected me of being involved with the disappearances of those people and possibly murder. If I showed my face at any police station I was bound to be arrested. What good would that do? No – I had more chance of finding out the truth of what was going on from the manor, not from a prison cell.

I knew that Luke, Potter, and Murphy had connections to the manor. Kayla had told me that her father had sent them in search of her when she'd gone missing in the past. Her father had known them. Perhaps that was what Lady Hunt was really doing – looking for the three of them? After all, she said that she already had enlisted help in search of her missing husband. Perhaps it was they who were helping her, and if so she might well return with them. The thought of seeing Luke again after all this time made my stomach flutter with anticipation and nerves. Would he feel the same way about me? Would my feelings be the same for him? There had definitely been a connection between us – but had those feelings been real? Had we not just been thrown together by circumstance? I knew deep down that I still had feelings for him – but what, I wasn't sure. I guessed I wouldn't really know until I saw him again and fell under his spell.

Reaching the clearing, I stepped out onto the grass and headed towards the summerhouse. In the light of the silver sun that hung above, it still looked magical. The small structure was white in colour and looked like somewhere a princess would live in a Disney film. Climbing the steps, I crossed the tiny porch to the door. Taking hold of the brass door handle and twisting it, I wasn't surprised to find it locked. Cupping my hands against the window, I peered inside. Just like it had been the night before, the room was in semi-darkness. The small wooden table sat in the centre of

the room with two chairs placed on either side. The lamp was on the table. But then I noticed something I hadn't seen as I'd peered through the window the previous night. I wouldn't have because it was directly above the window I'd been peeking through. On the wall, just above the window, was the faded outline of where a crucifix had once been. It had left a mark against the wall similar to that when taking a painting down from where it had previously hung for many years. A clean patch had been left on the wall in the shape of a cross. But why had it been removed and by who?

I could see that it had only been taken down recently by the light colour of the wood left behind. Stepping away from the window, I made my way back down the steps and headed around the rear of the summerhouse. Leaning against the wall were three large cans and a pair of stepladders. Lifting one of the cans off the grass, I pulled open the lid with my fingernails. Looking inside I could see the traces of white paint in the bottom. Tucked behind the empty cans of paint, I found a large brush, its bristles stiff with dried paint.

Guessing that Marshal had probably recently given the summerhouse a new coat of paint, I placed the cans back where I'd found them and made my way back around the front of the summerhouse.

Standing with my back to it, I looked left, then right. Heading right, I made

my way from the summerhouse and headed in the direction that I'd seen Kayla's friend take the night before.

I made my way through the trees, leaving the summerhouse behind me. I'd been careful to enter the woods at the exact same point that I'd seen the male disappear the night before. Hunkering down, I scanned the ground for any tracks that he might have left behind. To my surprise I found several, and all of them different. I identified Kayla's friend's prints straightaway. It was easy to do so as it was only his that had ever ventured out from beneath the shadows of the trees, the other tracks stopped before leaving the clearing. Whoever these people were, on one occasion they had tiptoed away from the edge of the clearing and back into the dark. Then after inspecting the footprints left in the soil again, I slapped my forehead.

"How could you be so dumb, Kiera?" I whispered to myself. Whoever they'd been, they had run away – not tiptoed. The gap between each mark was too far apart for them to have been tiptoeing away. No, they had been running and fast, leaving only toe prints behind. But why? Who had they been running from?

Standing, I followed their tracks through the maze of trees. Ahead I could hear the rippling sound of the moat and realised I was heading towards the wall that surrounded the manor. I continued to follow the footprints left behind by Kayla's secret friend and whoever the other

happened to be until they came to an abrupt end in front of a large bushy area that scaled the wall before me. Pulling the branches aside, I lurched backwards at finding a black iron door set into the ground. The last time I'd seen anything like it had been the grate in the floor at the police station in The Ragged Cove.

"A hatch to the hollows," I whispered, bending down to inspect it. There was a black metal ring pull and taking hold of it, I yanked as hard as I could. But like the summerhouse door, it was locked fast. Beneath the ring pull there was a lock.

"But where is the key?" I said, standing and brushing soil from the knees of my jeans. "And why are the Vampyrus coming in numbers from The Hollows, going only as far as the tree line surrounding the summerhouse then running away again?"

Covering the door with the brambles and bushes, I wondered where I might find the keys to the summerhouse and the door leading below ground.

"The gatehouse!" I said aloud, and palm-slapped my forehead again.

But that creep Marshal might be there. I could ask him what he was doing on my balcony last night. What did I have to lose, I thought to myself, heading for the gatehouse.

I walked for about ten minutes or so, when I came across a circle of weeping willows. Their branches hung so low that they made a curtain of leaves. Pulling them apart, I stepped into the circle and gasped. Hidden behind the branches was a small circular graveyard. There must have been sixty or so gravestones. Closing the gap on the branches behind me, I stepped slowly between the graves, looking down at the inscriptions written upon them.

In loving memory of Joshua Edwards

1704 – 1716

There was another, and the inscription upon this headstone read:

Karen Turner - Sadly missed

1833 – 1848

And another:

Richard Baker

Gone too soon

1927 – 1935

The dates on the graves spanned the centuries and the most recent I could find was dated from 2009. This one read:

Our precious Lucy

May your wings give you flight now

1996 – 2009

Standing in the centre of the tiny graveyard, gooseflesh ran up my back and the hairs at the nape of my neck stood on end. Although each of the gravestones and graves had been immaculately kept, and the whole setting hidden behind the branches of the weeping willows was tranquil and serene, I couldn't help but feel spooked. It was the dates carved into the blocks of grey stone that upset me so much. All of the people buried here hadn't lived passed the age of sixteen – they had all died as children.

Being careful not to stand on any of the graves that had been so tightly laid next to one another, I made my way out of the tiny surreal graveyard and back into the woods. Closing the branches over just how I'd found them, and my heart aching for all those poor children, I couldn't help

but wonder why they had all died so young. And of what? Why be buried here, hidden away in the grounds of Hallowed Manor?

With my heart feeling like a lump of stone in my chest, I made my way towards the gatehouse.

Chapter Eighteen

Passing the front gate to the manor, I could see that the drawbridge was up. Glancing through the iron bars of the gate, I could just make out the moat. The water looked dark and choppy. I wondered how deep it was, and whether my phone lay at the bottom of it. In the distance I could just see the sun setting low over the moors and it looked like a thin strip of silver ribbon on the horizon.

Turning away, I crossed the wide, gravelled drive and approached the door to the gatehouse. It was a single story building constructed out of black slate, with a thatched roof that looked as if it could do with some urgent repairs before winter arrived. There was a stone chimney and a column of black smoke spiralled up into the sky. The door was made of wood, which had faded almost to grey and was warped at the bottom. Clenching my fist, I rapped on the door with my knuckles. There was no answer or sound from inside.

“Marshal?” I called out, knocking on the door again.

Nothing.

Looking over my shoulder at the manor way off in the distance, I gently pushed the door with my shoulder and to my surprise, it swung open. Making sure that I wasn't being watched, I slipped inside, closing the door behind me. There was one main room, and two smaller ones that led off it. One of these was a kitchen and the other, a poky-looking bathroom. Making sure that the gatehouse was deserted I said, "Marshal, are you here?"

The only sound was a fire snapping and crackling in the fireplace that was set into the wall. Crossing the room, I held my hands out and warmed them over the flames. Peering around the room, I could see that it was sparsely furnished with a worn-out sofa that had the stuffing sticking out of it like a string of spongy guts. There was a small cabinet and on this there was a lamp which hadn't yet been lit, even though the day had been grey and overcast. There was a table which was cluttered with what looked like nothing more than junk. Turning my back on the fireplace, I began to rummage around the stuff that had been strewn across the table. Snatching my hand away almost at once, I grimaced at the dirty bandages that had been left there. Picking up a pair of scissors which lay amongst the mess, I used them to turn the bandages over. Apart from being grey and dirty looking, I could see no signs of blood on them. But there was something. Holding the bandage towards the light from the fire, I used the scissors like a pair of tweezers to remove several hairs that seemed to be stuck to it. The

hairs, if that's what they were, appeared to be made of some man-made fibre, similar to acrylic.

Placing these fibres on the table, I inspected the bandage again and noticed that parts of it were covered in a yellow gum that had crystallised. Turning-up my nose, I sniffed the filthy-looking bandage. The yellow crystals smelt of solvent – like some kind of glue. Putting the bandage to one side, I rummaged through the other clutter on the table and found a small bottle of liquid latex. Turing it over in my hands I read the label on the front.

Great for Halloween make-ups

Scare all your friends!

Beneath the writing there was a picture of some kid whose face had been covered in a load of fake scares and cuts.

“What the hell is going on here?” I whispered to myself. Placing the bottle back on the table, I found a false beard and a small bottle of Spirit gum to attach it with and a case containing blue-coloured contact lenses. Looking around the room in disbelief, I noticed what appeared to be a dead snake hanging from the back of the front door. Snatching it from the hook it had been hung from, I inspected it. The snake was nothing more than a

woman's stocking that had been stuffed with torn-up pieces of cloth and knotted at both ends. Realising what it had been used for, I slung it over my shoulder and tied both ends of the stocking beneath my arm. Looking back over my shoulder, it appeared that I now had a hump. If I covered it with a jacket and lent forward, anyone would believe that I had a twisted spine – just like Marshal was supposed to have.

Taking off the fake hump, I looked at the make-up, fake beard, and contact lenses and knew that Marshal – if that really was his name – was trying to hide his true identity. But why? Who was really hiding beneath that disguise? And what did they have to hide?

Then I remembered what Kayla had told me yesterday as we sat on the wall together. Kayla said she had once met Luke and that his face was disfigured. It had looked scarred as if he had been in some kind of accident.

“Marshal is Luke!” I said aloud as if I'd just struck gold.

Realising who Marshal really was, I didn't know if I should feel angry or relieved. But everything seemed to be fitting into place. He had tricked me into coming to the manor so he could protect me – that's why he was on my balcony – he had come to make sure that I was safe. Then wanting to kick myself for not seeing it before, I said aloud, “That's how he disappeared so quickly – he flew from my balcony!”

But why the disguise? I wondered. Then I thought again about his disfigurement. Perhaps he wasn't ready for me to see him like that. Did he really believe that I would be so shallow as to run from him? Be scared by him? There was only one way to find out his true reasons and that was to ask him.

"What are you doing in here," a gruff-sounding voice said from behind me.

Spinning around, I gasped as I saw Marshal standing in the open doorway. He stood, stooped slightly forward, one blue eye staring back at me from behind the grubby bandages.

With my heart racing in my chest, I said, "You don't have to hide from me any longer."

"I don't know what you're talking about, copper" he said back in that gruff voice.

Moving slowly towards him, I trembled and said, "I don't care what you look like under those bandages. You're still the same person that I met in The Ragged Cove."

Holding his hand out as if to stop me from coming any closer, he turned his head away and said, "Don't come near me."

Taking his hands in mine, I could feel that they weren't the hands of a workman – they were strong – but soft. He almost seemed to flinch at my

touch. So wrapping my arm about his shoulder, I pulled him close to me and said, “I’ve missed you.” Then gently turning his head to face me, I leant forward and kissed him gently on the mouth. My heart was racing so hard and fast, I wondered whether Kayla could hear it in her room back at the manor.

He didn’t respond to my first kiss, so I kissed him again, this time allowing my lips to linger over his. Then without warning, he was kissing me back, his strong arms wrapping themselves around me and pulling me against him. He smothered my lips with his and just like the kiss we had shared outside the Crescent Moon Inn all those months ago, they were frenzied – almost hungry. I matched his keenness, entwining my fingers in his hair as he ran his hands down my back. Without our mouths parting, he eased me down onto the crumpled sofa and ran his hands up my legs where they came to rest on my hips.

Being with him like this released all those feelings that I’d bottled up since leaving The Ragged Cove. It was like we had never been apart. And like they had been in the Cove, my feelings and senses seemed to be ablaze when with him. He kissed my face and neck, his hands running over me and pulling at my clothes. In an attempt to match his passion, I wanted to kiss his face, I wanted to show him however scarred or disfigured he may

be under those bandages, I didn't care – my feelings wouldn't change for him.

So working the tips of my fingers through the hair at the nape of his neck, I found the knot that held his mask together, and pulled it free. The bandage fell away, revealing his face beneath it.

Staring wide eyed up at him, I screamed, “Oh my god! You disgusting pig!”

Chapter Nineteen

“Easy, tiger!” Potter smiled down at me.

Swiping at him with my hand, I tried to slap his face. I couldn’t believe who I’d been kissing. But he was too quick for me, and had taken hold of my wrist in his hand. “Don’t get so excited!”

“*Excited!*” I screamed, pushing him off me with my knees. “I’m not excited! You disgust me!”

“Could’ve fooled me,” he said, standing by the table and tugging fake bits of beard from his cheeks. “You couldn’t keep your hands off me a minute ago.”

“That’s because I thought you were someone else!” I roared at him, straightening my hair and clothes. “I should arrest you for indecent assault!”

“Indecent assault? Me?” he said with mock surprise on his face. “It was *you* who assaulted *me*! You threw yourself at me! You couldn’t tear your lips off me!”

“You took advantage of the situation,” I hissed. “You knew that I must have thought you to be somebody else. But oh no, you just had to be a jerk – you just couldn’t resist -”

“Don’t flatter yourself, sweet-cheeks!” he scowled.

“Don’t call me that!” I hollered. “My name’s Kiera!”

“Oh, I’m sorry *Kiera*,” he said.

“Why do you have to make things so difficult for me?” I said, trying to get a grip of my anger.

“Difficult for you?” he said, sounding genuinely surprised. “Do you have the faintest idea how difficult it’s been for me, skulking around this place night and day with bandages wrapped around my face and a pair of stockings stuffed up my jacket?”

“Don’t you go blaming me for that,” I snapped at him. “And why have you been disguised as the hunchback of Notre Dame ever since I got here?” Before he had a chance to answer, I added, “And that’s another thing – why were you spying on me through my bedroom window the other night?”

“Making sure that you were safe – that’s what this whole goddamn thing has been about!” he said, pulling out the stocking from beneath his long dark coat and throwing it down onto the table with the rest of his

disguise. “And what thanks do I get, huh? I thought you were kissing me out of gratitude for saving your bacon.”

“Saving me from what?” I asked.

“That’s another thing,” he said ignoring my question and removing something from his eye. “These contact lenses hurt like a bitch and then there’s the cigarettes. I haven’t been able to smoke since you got here.”

“I haven’t stopped you from smo -” I started.

“Oh no?” he sneered, pulling a packet of cigarettes from his pocket and lighting one up. “Knowing what you’re like, the slightest sign of a discarded cigarette butt and you would’ve been crawling around on your hands and knees trying to figure out how tall the smoker was, how old he was, what zodiac sign he was, whether he’d taken a crap that morning, and Christ knows what else.”

“So why put yourself through all of this for me if it’s been such a nightmare for you?” I said.

“Why don’t you ask *him*?” Potter said, pointing over my shoulder and blowing smoke through his nostrils. “He’s the brains of the operation, sweet-cheeks.”

Spinning round I saw James sitting in his wheelchair by the open door to the gatehouse. He looked at me from behind his tinted glasses, then at Potter. “I don’t believe you Potter,” he growled.

“Don’t start having a moan at me, Sarge,” he said. “She already had it figured out.”

Looking at the chauffeur sitting in the wheelchair, I said, “Sergeant Murphy – I might have known. I guess you couldn’t have walked around as I would have noticed your limp? But I’d already figured out you could walk.”

Taking off his cap, glasses and pulling away his fake bushy sideburns, he sprang out of the wheelchair and said, “You mean I’ve been trundling around here for the last few weeks like that guy out of the X-Men and you knew it was me all the time?”

“I didn’t know it was you, Sarge, but I figured out last night that you could walk,” I told him.

“How?” he said, staring at me.

“Don’t wear shoes that are clearly scuffed on the soles and covered in gravel dust and earth,” I smiled at him.

“Oh great,” Potter sighed in disbelief. “All this sneaking around and you go and blow it because -”

“I needed to take a leak, okay?” Murphy snapped. “You try wheeling yourself around this place – it ain’t easy you know! I was only out of my chair for a couple of minutes – long enough to sneak into some bushes and take a whiz. Anyway, you can’t talk. What was with all the bandages? ‘I

said a beard, and a few scars and stuff,’ and you end up looking like the invisible bleeding-man!”

“You try putting this crap on everyday – it ain’t easy you know!” Potter snapped, waving the bottle of liquid latex under Murphy’s nose. “I didn’t think you would be back so soon the other night. There I was sticking on the beard and you arrive at the drawbridge with sweet-cheeks. What was I meant to do? I wasn’t in character – so I grabbed the nearest thing that came to hand and covered my face with it. Got a problem with that?”

“Yeah, I got a problem with it,” Murphy barked, pulling the last of the fake white whiskers from his chin.

“At least I came up with a fake name,” Potter snapped back. “I mean Marshal’s a cool name. What did you come up with? James! That’s your real name for Christ’s sake!”

“My name’s Jim!”

“Whatever!” Potter said. “I’m glad she’s found out. I was getting bored of all this sneaking around.”

I looked at the pair of them and said, “You couple of amateurs. Call yourselves cops.”

“Listen here, tiger,” Potter hissed, “we had everything under control until you came in here and threw yourself at me.”

“Threw herself at you?” Murphy said, looking and sounding confused.

“I thought he was Luke,” I told Murphy. “Not for a second did I think it was Lon Chaney standing over there.”

“Lon Chaney?” Potter said, confused. “Who in the bloody hell is Lon Chaney?”

Ignoring him, I turned to Murphy and said, “Where’s Luke?”

Looking in my eyes, Murphy said, “He’s not in a good way.”

“Where is he?” I said.

“The burns didn’t heal as well as we might have wanted them to,” Murphy sighed.

“Where is he?” I said again. “I want to see him.”

“He doesn’t want to see you,” Murphy said, coming close with that awkward limp that he had.

“Why not?”

“He’s very badly burnt,” Murphy explained. “He doesn’t want you to see him like that.”

“I thought the girls all loved a guy with a scar,” Potter laughed.

“Put a sock in it, Potter,” Murphy growled without looking at him.

“*Please* tell me where he is?” I said, my voice softening. “I just want to see him. I don’t care what Luke looks like. It doesn’t matter to me.”

“Isn’t that sweet,” Potter smiled.

“I won’t tell you again, Potter,” Murphy said over his shoulder. “I promised him, I wouldn’t say -”

“He’s in the forbidden wing, isn’t he?” I asked.

“Where?” Potter scoffed.

“The wing of the house that Mrs. Payne has forbidden me to enter,” I said, staring at Murphy and then at Potter. “That’s who you’ve been taking food to, isn’t it?”

Before Potter could confirm or deny my accusation, Murphy turned on him, and chucking his tinted glasses across the room, he shouted, “I can’t trust you to do anything without screwing up!”

“Don’t you go blaming me for this!” Potter moaned. “It wasn’t me who wanted to bring her here. I told you she would only go poking her nose around -”

“Look, I’m not interested in whose fault this is,” I cut in. “I just want to see Luke.”

Then from the doorway someone said, “I don’t believe what I’m seeing!”

Turning, the three of us looked towards the open doorway of the gatehouse to find Kayla standing there.

“What you doing here?” I asked her, not knowing how long she’d been listening to our conversation.

“I thought you were my friend, Kiera,” she said, sounding angry.

“I am,” I told her, feeling confused.

“So why have you been keeping secrets from me?” she seethed.

“Why have you been spying on me with them?”

“I don’t understand,” I said, going towards her.

“Those are the two guys who came looking for me when I ran away. The ones I told you about,” she said. “And all the time they’ve been disguised as my mother’s chauffeur and handyman, when really, she’s had them down here watching me – *spying* on me - and you’ve known about it all along!”

“No Kayla,” I said, reaching for her. “You don’t understand.”

Pushing my hand away she looked at me and I could see the hurt in her eyes. I could *see* that she thought I had in some way betrayed her. “I understand, Kiera. Everything I’ve shared with you – everything I’ve shown you – told you – you’ve been secretly telling them.”

“I haven’t,” I insisted. “I promise you, Kayla. It’s not what it looks like.”

“They work for my mother and so do you,” she said, her voice flat, just simmering with anger and hurt. “Why have they been in disguise if

they haven't been here spying on me? I trusted you, Kiera, I really trusted you."

Before I had the chance to explain, she was gone, running back across the grounds to the manor. I went to go after her, but Murphy gripped my arm and pulled me back.

"Leave her be for now," he said. "She's confused and angry at the moment and not in the right frame of mind to listen or understand what you have to tell her."

"What is it I have to tell her?" I said, eyeing him.

"I'll let Luke explain," he said. "It will sound better coming from him."

"What will?" I asked.

"He's in the 'forbidden wing' as you like to call it," Murphy said. "First room on the right." I turned to go and as I did, he pulled me back again and said just above a whisper, "Nothing will be the same for you, Kiera, after you see what's in the forbidden wing."

Turning away, I started back towards the manor and as I did, Potter called after me and said, "Don't worry, sweet-cheeks, I won't tell Luke how happy you were to see me again. It will be our secret."

Jerk! I thought as I headed into the darkness.

Chapter Twenty

Taking a candle from the table in the enormous hall, I made my way to the foot of the stairs and began to climb. Knowing that Luke hid above in the darkness made me want to run up them, but another part of me wanted to hold back. Murphy's warning that nothing would ever be the same for me made me nervous. Why would everything be different for me after my visit to the 'forbidden' wing? What secrets could it possibly be hiding? And if those secrets were so bad, what was Luke doing hiding amongst them? Biting my lower lip, I continued to climb.

Reaching the landing where the staircase split left and right, I turned and shone the light from my candle up into the darkness at the top of the right-hand staircase. Even with the candle flame flickering before me, it did nothing to penetrate the blackness that lurked at the top of the stairs like a monstrous fog. Taking a deep breath, I started to climb. The stairs seemed to go on forever, each step taking me further away from the world below. With my heart racing in my chest like a trip hammer, and my stomach

somersaulting, I stepped onto the landing. With my arm outstretched, I stared into the wall of blackness ahead of me.

Then there was a brilliant flash of white light and I closed my eyes. Those flashbulbs popped on and off inside my head like a thousand cameras and in those sparks of light, I could see the twisted shapes of people cowering in the darkness ahead of me, their bodies bent out of shape as if not properly formed. But these visions didn't scare me or make me want to run. The sight of these hideous creatures overwhelmed me with sadness. I wanted to seek them out in the darkness and tell them that everything would be alright – that I would save them. But who and what were they – they looked half human and half...

As soon as they had come they had gone again – those flashbulbs blinking out and leaving me to the blackness that clung to the walls on either side of me. Brushing the tips of my fingers against the wall to feel my way, I was aware of that tacky substance that coated the walls. Then my hand brushed against something cold, and at first I just wanted to snatch my hand away. But after shining my candle in that direction, I could see that I had come across a big brass door handle. The door that it was attached to was white – nondescript – and if what Murphy had told me was true, then Luke was hiding behind it. Against the wall next to the door was a chair and on it was a silver tray. Casting my candle over it, I could see the remains of

a half-eaten fried egg sandwich. Remembering back to The Ragged Cove and how I had first spotted egg on Luke's tie, I smiled to myself. In my mind's eye, I could see him standing in the front office at the police station, his thick black hair dripping rainwater all over his coat, his boyish grin and those green eyes staring at me. As I remembered him, he looked almost kind of vulnerable. But then I thought of him racing through the night sky, his sturdy arms gripping me, his naked chest cold like iron against me, and he didn't seem vulnerable at all – he was like a god. Twisting the door handle, I pushed the door open.

If I thought the passageway was dark, then the room was a vast open hole of blackness that seemed to reach out and grab for me. With the candle shaking in my hand, I stepped into the room.

“Luke?” I whispered, a slight tremor in my voice.

Then there was movement in the darkness, the light from my candle just catching a fleeting glimpse of something that darted across the room in front of me.

“Luke, is that you?” How I hated that wavering sound in the back of my throat.

The sound of movement came again, but this time from behind. Spinning around so fast that my candle almost flickered out, I could see that the door to the room had now been closed.

“Luke?” I whispered again.

“Why have you come here?” a voice said from within the darkness. Even though I couldn’t see him, I knew that the voice belonged to Luke.

“From what Murphy and that clown Potter told me, you guys brought *me* here,” I said into the darkness. “You didn’t really think that you could all keep this pretence up, did you? It was only going to be a matter of time before I figured out what -”

“I mean, why have you come to this room?” his voice came again from the blackness, and it sounded almost angry.

“They told me you were hiding here,” I told him. “And I wanted to see you, Luke.”

“I don’t want to see you,” he said, his voice almost a growl which made me want to cringe away from it.

“What are you scared of?” I said, trying to keep my voice even.

“I’m scared of nothing!” he snapped.

“You’re scared of me seeing you,” I told him, taking a step closer to his voice.

Sensing my movement, Luke shouted, “Keep away from me, Kiera!”

“I can’t,” I said, moving closer still. “I haven’t been able to stop thinking about you since leaving The Ragged Cove. My life isn’t too good

either at the moment if I'm to be honest. I became obsessed with finding you – that's all I thought about. Night and day I watched the news for any reports that might suggest you had come up from The Hollows. My flat looks like a frigging newspaper, it's covered with so many -"

"Go away, Kiera," his voice broke over mine. "Forget about me and don't come back."

"Then why bring me here?" And it was my turn to sound angry.

"To protect you – to keep you safe while we deal with -" he started.

"Deal with what?" I demanded. "I'm part of this, Luke; don't you think I know that? I've changed since the Cove. I have nightmares almost every night, I wake up crying blood and I see things. You're not the only one who's suffering. But I figure you're too wrapped up in your own self-pity to see that!" Then with my candle held out before me I raced back towards the door. Just as my fingers curled around its cold handle, I felt a hand reach out of the darkness and grip my shoulder.

"What do you see?" he whispered, his breath hot against my ear.

"Terrible things," I whispered back, not turning to face him. "I've seen the world overrun with..."

"*What?*" he hissed.

"Vampire bats," I said. "*Vampyrus.*"

Then, slowly, I turned to face him, and however much I tried, I couldn't hide the gasp of air that slipped from my lips as I looked at his face in the candlelight. The left half of his face was waxy and taut-looking, like Clingfilm that had been stretched too tight. His skin was pale, but the side of his face that had been burnt looked blue and purple – the colour of a ripe bruise. His left eyebrow had been burnt permanently away, and his left ear looked twisted and melted out of shape. My heart ached to see Luke like this.

“Scare you, do I?” he said, and his voice sounded almost resentful – bitter.

“No,” I said, pulling him close, hoping this would show that I didn't fear him. “This is all my fault. If you hadn't put your own life at risk to save mine -”

Then, placing one finger over my lips, he told me to hush. “You're not to blame for this,” he said, his voice now softening, and I guessed that he must have felt some relief that I hadn't run screaming into the darkness to be away from him.

“Why have you been hiding away up here from me?” I asked, pulling him so close that my cheek rested against his bare chest. “Were you afraid that I would be scared of you – not want to be with you?”

“Some of that is true,” he said, holding me tight against him. “But there are other reasons that I’ve been hiding – why we’ve all been hiding out at the Hallowed Manor.”

“Why?” I asked.

Then, leading me into the darkest corner of the room and sitting me down on a narrow bed that was concealed there, he said, “We’re all being hunted and they won’t stop until we’re all dead.”

Chapter Twenty-One

Luke took a lantern from a small table beside the bed and lit it. A milky-yellow light glowed, throwing long, deep shadows up the walls of the bare room. The floor was wooden and the boards looked rough and unvarnished. The walls were cracked and in some places, the plaster had fallen away, revealing the brickwork beneath it. Cobwebs hung from the corners of the room like dusty-looking chandeliers and I wondered how Luke had managed to hide away in such a place for so long. The room creeped me out and I shifted closer to him on the edge of the bed.

In the light from the lantern, I had a clearer view of Luke and his injuries. Apart from the burns on his face, his left shoulder was also marred by a long scar that ran from just under his chin, down his neck and across his chest. Like the burn on his face, the skin looked stretched and pulled out of shape as if someone had poured boiling wax over him. With a trembling hand, I gently reached out and stroked his chest with the tips of my fingers. He flinched and I snapped my hand away.

“Sorry,” I whispered. “Does it hurt?”

“No,” he said. “I just worry that you will be repulsed by me.”

Without saying anything, I placed my hand against his scars.

Looking into his sea-green eyes, I could feel his heart thumping away inside of him. “How could I ever be repulsed...scared of you?” I asked. “You got these scars saving me and I can never forget that...or repay you.”

Taking my hand, he removed it from his chest, brought it up to his mouth and kissed it. “You don’t have to repay me anything,” he said, staring into my eyes. He then added, “I haven’t saved you yet.”

“You said we were all being hunted?” I asked him. “I guess you’re talking about Phillips and Taylor.”

“Not just them,” he whispered as if someone might be eavesdropping. “There is another.”

“Who?”

Then placing his head in his hands, he looked ahead and into the darkness. I couldn’t ever recall Luke looking so demoralised. I remembered him to be strong and confident but now he just looked beaten and I guessed it wasn’t just his disfigurements that troubled him.

Running my hand down the curve of his spine, I said, “What is it, Luke? Tell me what’s happened.”

In a low, soft voice he said, “As you know, after leaving The Ragged Cove, Sergeant Murphy and Potter took me below ground – back to The Hollows. We stayed amongst our own while I rested and tried to heal. But

word spread amongst the Vampyrus about what had happened above ground. It became common knowledge that we had killed Rom and Roland.”

“But they were killers,” I whispered, tracing small circles with my fingernails across his naked back.

“An emergency meeting was called by the elders of our race in the Great Caverns,” he explained. “Vampyrus came from every part of The Hollows. For as far as the eye could see, the caverns were packed tight with Vampyrus, never before in our history had there been such a huge gathering.”

“But why now?” I asked him.

“It has been feared for some time that some of the Vampyrus had been unhappy living beneath humans and some of them wanted more. No longer was it enough that they could come above ground and make a life for themselves amongst humans as long as they returned when the hunger was upon them. It wasn’t that the elders particularly cared for the human race; they just didn’t want attention drawn to our existence. The elders feared that if humans ever discovered us, they would come in search of us – that they would invade The Hollows, and just like they have done above ground, deplete our world of all its natural resources which would eventually result in the Vampyrus’ extinction. So a compromise had been made – Vampyrus

could live above ground only if they didn't draw attention to themselves and the rest of our race. The elders hoped that this would placate those Vampyrus who wanted more," he explained.

Then turning to look at me, he continued, "But as you know, Kiera, Rom and his kind wanted more. They wanted to live above ground, as true Vampyrus. They believed they were better than humans. So that's why the Sarge, Potter, and me were sent to hunt them. But our mission was to locate them, to gather evidence and report back. It was the elders who were to make the final decision as to their fate – but as you know, it didn't work out that way. As far as the elders are concerned, we took the Vampyrus law into our own hands and in doing so, we risked drawing attention to ourselves and the rest of our race."

"But they were killing people!" I said. "Rom and his merry men were creating vampires – *monsters!* If that isn't drawing attention to your race, I don't know what is!"

"It wasn't just that," Luke said, looking back into the darkness as if somewhere lurking within it were the answers. "Rom, Roland, Taylor, and Phillips are just the front men. Behind them in the shadows is another. He pulls the strings of those that want more."

"Who is this Vampyrus?" I asked.

“Nobody knows his identity.” Luke whispered, again as if almost fearing that he might be overheard. “He hides behind his puppets – those who do his dirty work. They go before him, clearing a path. They brainwash and recruit other Vampyrus, telling them that their lives could be so much more above ground if we didn’t keep our identities a secret – if we revealed our true selves to the human race. But whoever he is, he is responsible for everything that is turning bad within The Hollows. Every crime that is committed, from murder to robbery, if you look deeply enough, he will be lurking in the background.”

“Can’t he be stopped?” I asked.

“How can we stop him if we don’t know who he is?” Luke said with a tinge of bitterness in his voice. “Assassins have been sent before to infiltrate his organisation but they have each been rooted out and killed. No one has ever got close to him – not close enough to discover his identity. But word got back to the elders via spies that Rom, Roland, Taylor, and Phillips were his four most trusted disciples and we had killed two of them and left the others close to death. Discovering this, he had marked us... issued a death warrant against the Sarge, Potter, and me. Word spread like fire that anyone who shielded us, anyone who offered us shelter, would be dead, too. So fearing that we had brought war and unrest to The Hollows, the elders offered a deal of peace to this faceless and nameless monster.”

“So what was this peace offering?” I asked.

“We were,” Luke said, and his shoulders shuddered in the gloom.

“They banished us from The Hollows – the elders and our race washed their hands of us in an attempt to pacify this monster.”

“So you can never go back?” I said, shocked by what he had just told me.

“Never,” Luke said, his voice sounding broken. “We had to leave then and there. We had no choice. We weren’t even allowed to say goodbye to our friends. It wasn’t so bad for Potter – he didn’t really have anyone. If you hadn’t already noticed, he doesn’t seem to make friends that easily.”

“What about you?” I asked, placing my arm about his shoulder. Cocking his head, he looked into my eyes and said, “I was the lucky one. The person I love lives above ground, Kiera.”

To hear this and see the intensity of his stare made butterflies swoop about in my stomach. But before I’d the chance to respond to what he’d said, he continued.

“I came above ground too soon, my wounds hadn’t healed properly. I can’t stand the daylight at all, and to be uncovered in it for a moment makes my skin smoke and blister until it feels raw. My wings are still in tatters and flying is difficult.”

“Will it always be this way?” I asked him, my heart aching.

“As long as I keep out of the sun and in near darkness, the scars will eventually heal. That’s why this part of the manor is covered in tarpaulin,” he explained. “For the first few days, we hid above ground by travelling at night and sleeping the days away in cheap hotel rooms. But the Sarge, Potter, and me soon realised we were being pursued by the agents of the man that had issued our death warrants.”

“How did you know?” I asked him.

“In the towns that we left behind, we heard that there had been reports of people being mauled by animals. The Sarge and Potter went to investigate one day, while I rested in the darkness of some hotel room. The authorities believed that the victims had been killed by animals but Murphy and Potter knew better, they could see the signs.”

“Signs?”

“Most people killed by animals don’t usually spring from their graves a few days later,” he said with a grim smile on his face. “There were Vampyrus behind us and they were feeding and creating vampires in their wake. So one night, when the moon was out and the air was cool, we went in search of these Vampyrus. You could say that the hunters became the hunted that night. Potter was really pumped up. I’d never seen him so agitated. I think he was craving for blood and not being able to go below ground, the flesh of his own kind was going to have to be good enough.

There were two of them and we tracked them to a car parked at the rear of a bar. They waited in the shadows for the bar to close for the night and the last of the staff to leave. We waited in the treetops of a nearby park and waited for the hunters to strike. And we didn't have to wait long. I was glad that the wait was short because Potter had begun to twitch and shake with hunger.

“ ‘C'mon, show yourselves!’ ” he kept saying over and over. “ ‘Let's just get this over with.’ ”

“Then we saw her, this petite barmaid locking the door to the bar behind her and stepping out across the desolate car park. Before she even had a chance to reach her car, the hunters had raced in a blur of shadows and were upon her. But just as quick, Potter had raced across the sky and before I'd the chance to blink he had pulled the girl free of her attackers. The Sarge was close behind her, snatching her away and laying her on the ground. With my wings still tattered and torn, I leapt from the tree and see-sawed towards the unconscious barmaid. Making sure that she was okay, I carried her to her car. Finding the keys in her bag, I laid her on the backseat of the car, out of harm's way.

“Turning away from the car, I watched as Potter tore apart one of the assassins sent to kill us. He showed no mercy. I'd never seen Potter like that before. His arms seemed to be pumping up and down in a blur as he pulled

away chunks of the hunter beneath him. Then he set about his face with his teeth and in seconds it would have been hard to believe that the creature had ever had a head, let alone a face. With thick lumps of flesh and sinew swinging from his chin, he turned, looking for the other assassin.

“Murphy had hold of him. The assassin was knelt forward, his head cast low like someone about to be beheaded. Potter strode towards him, his thirst for blood still not quenched.

“ ‘What do you want from us?’ Potter roared into the face of the hunter. ‘Is it not enough that we have been banished from The Hollows?’

“The kneeling man made no reply, but Potter wouldn’t let up.

“ ‘Tell me what you want?’ he screamed, his face only inches from that of the assassin. Again he kept his head bowed and said nothing.

“Then completely freaking out, I watched Potter grab the assassin by the hair and drag him across the car park to the remains of his partner. Leaning in close, so as only the assassin could hear, Potter said something. I don’t know what it was, but the assassin began to scream and beg for his life. And as he sobbed like a baby, I heard him say a name that sent a chill down my spine,” Luke said.

“Whose name was it?” I asked Luke.

Looking at me, his eyes gleaming like cat’s eyes in the gloom, he said, ‘Kiera Hudson.’ It was your name that he said.”

“But why me?” I asked, gooseflesh scampering up my spine. “What did they want with me?”

Ignoring my question, Luke said, “Murphy and me watched as Potter tortured a confession out of the assassin. It wasn’t nice to see and I was shocked at Potter’s sheer brutality, but he got the assassin to tell him that Taylor and Phillips were coming for you.”

“But why?” I asked, and again Luke ignored my question.

Staring into the darkness in the corner of the room, Luke said, “Once Potter had all the information that he was going to get, he ripped the assassin to pieces. Murphy and me were stunned by the sheer ferocity and speed of his attack. Within seconds he had beheaded the Vampyrus sent to kill us, and had his head buried in his chest cavity like a wild dog and eating as if he were ravenous.

“ ‘We’ve got to get him some help,’ Murphy said to me just above a whisper. ‘If we don’t, it won’t be long before he’s attacking humans to satisfy his hunger. Vampyrus blood won’t keep him going for long.’

“I argued with Murphy, Kiera,” Luke said. “I wanted to come straight to Havensfield and get you. But the Sarge said that we should stay together, not split up. I was still weak and with Potter being driven insane by his hunger, Murphy said we should go into hiding – we wouldn’t be able to help you if we weren’t keeping it together ourselves,” Luke explained.

“So what did you do?” I asked him.

“We came here,” he said. “Murphy had some connection to Lord Hunt. They had grown up together in the same part of The Hollows. But Lord and Lady Hunt were reluctant to help us. The news about our banishment from The Hollows had seeped above ground. And knowing that a threat of death had been made to anyone that helped us, they really just wanted to get rid of us. But Murphy spoke to Michael Hunt in private and whatever it was they discussed, he agreed to let us stay, but on the understanding that we helped him.”

“How?” I said, wondering what agreement had been made between them.

“His daughter Kayla had gone missing, so in return for sanctuary, Murphy and Potter agreed to track her and bring her home. I was too weak to go and would only have slowed them down. So it was decided that I would hide out in this wing of the house,” Luke explained, and he said it as if he’d let his friends down in some way.

“But what about Potter and his thirst?” I asked. “Come to think of it, how are you all coping?”

“Did Lady Hunt tell you what her husband did as a job?” Luke asked me.

“She said he owned a company that was developing renewable genetics,” I told him. “But I’m guessing now that that was a lie?”

“Kind of,” Luke half-smiled, as if being caught out.

“What then?”

“He was a chemist – a bit like a doctor really. He was working on renewable genetics of a sort. He was developing a synthetic blood that would ease the cravings for human blood.” Luke explained. “But it would only have been a temporary substitute if for any reason a Vampyrus couldn’t get below ground. The plan was for each of the Vampyrus to carry around a small bottle of the stuff they could use in case of an emergency. Like if you were on a flight that got delayed and you were forty-thousand feet above ground when the cravings started. Instead of feeding on the flight crew and other passengers, the synthetic blood was to hold back the thirst. A bit like giving a heroin addict methadone. It’s not the real thing, but it’s meant to help for a while. Hunt called it Lot 13.”

“And does it?” I asked, wondering how his cravings were doing.

“Does it what?” he asked.

“Help?”

“Yes,” he smiled. “You’re safe with me. It doesn’t totally get rid of the thirst but it helps – it becomes manageable.”

“So what about me?” I asked him.

“Sorry?” he said.

“You never answered my question.”

“What question was that?” he said, looking away from me again.

“Why were Taylor and Phillips coming after me?”

Luke didn’t say anything, he just looked ahead.

Grabbing him by the shoulder and forcing him to look at me, I said,
“They’ve taken, or worse...*killed* anyone that I’ve had contact with since returning from The Ragged Cove. Some of these people were my friends and they’ve suffered because of me. I think I have a right to know why I’m being hunted!”

Standing, Luke took me by the hands and said, “Kiera, come with me and I’ll show you.”

Chapter Twenty-Two

Picking up the lantern, Luke led me from the room where he had been hiding for so long. In the passageway, he turned right, leading me away from the landing and further into the darkness. Even with the lamp held before him, the passageway was dark and suffocating. Being with Luke did nothing to ease the creepiness that I felt.

“Watch your step,” Luke whispered over his shoulder as he led me up a narrow staircase. Reaching out with my hand, I brushed the wall for balance. Again, I could feel that sticky, tacky substance on the walls and its smell became almost overpowering as we climbed.

“What is that sticky stuff on the walls?” I asked him. “It stinks.”

“Oh, that,” he said over his shoulder. “I’ve gotten used to it. I don’t even notice it now.”

“Lucky you,” I muttered. “But what is it?”

“It’s a mixture of garlic and queets, which is a herb only found in The Hollows. Lord Hunt discovered that when the two are mixed together it

forms a powerful paste that sends vampires completely nuts. They hate the stuff – won't come anywhere near it."

"But why is it all over the walls?"

"Hunt had every wall, door, and window frame coated with the stuff," he explained. "Should vampires ever get past the moat and into the grounds, then it's a final layer of protection from them."

"What's so special about the moat?" I asked. "It doesn't even look that deep."

"The water's blessed – holy water if you like," he said, and his voiced echoed back down the staircase. "It acts like a ring of steel around the entire manor. The vampires would never be able to cross it."

"Why did Lord Hunt fear an attack from vampires" I asked. "What was he trying to protect?"

Reaching the top of the stairs, Luke stopped outside a door and looking at me from the darkness, he said, "This is what he was trying to protect." Pushing open the door, Luke stepped inside.

I followed him into a vast room, which I guessed was somewhere hidden inside the roof of the giant manor. There were no windows that I could see and the room was lit by many tall candles that had been fixed into silver-coloured candlesticks. There were so many that the light filled the room with a dim orange glow. As I peered around the room, my stomach

began to tighten as I saw what looked like several hospital beds running down each side of the room. Beside the beds stood machines that blinked on and off in the gloom. They buzzed and beeped and luminous green monitor screens cast eerie shadows up the walls.

““What’s -?” I started.

“Shhh,” Luke whispered placing a finger against his lips.

Leading me down the aisle between the two rows of beds, I counted ten in all, and in each one, to my continuing dismay, I could see a child. Each of them was connected in some way to the machines that stood beside them. Tubes and wires coiled from their nostrils, arms, and fingertips which all fed back into the monitors and strange looking apparatus. Peering through the candlelight at them, I could see that there was a mixture of boys and girls and I guessed they were aged between thirteen years and sixteen years old.

I couldn’t remain silent any longer; I had to know what these children were doing, hidden in this makeshift hospital, in the attic of the manor. “What’s going on here?” I asked Luke. “Who are these children?”

Luke just looked back at me, and I could see sadness in his eyes. Then from the shadows in the far corner of the room, a voice said, “They are half-breeds, Kiera.”

Peering into the gloom, I saw a figure walk from out of the darkness and towards us. As he stepped into the candlelight, I knew at once that he was the doctor who tried to remove the black bony fingers from Kayla. He looked just how she'd described him. He did look like an owl. He wore blue scrubs and latex surgical gloves. His forearms were muscular and covered in so much white hair, that he would have made a polar bear envious.

"My name is Doctor Ravenwood," he smiled and pushed his glasses back onto the bridge of his nose. His voice was deep, but somehow gentle – *caring*. His tone of voice was like all doctors, who had bad news to break to you.

"Half-breeds?" I said, feeling a little startled at his sudden appearance.

"Yes, I'm afraid," he replied, looking at the children lying in their beds. "It's a problem that arises when Vampyrus and humans produce children together."

"Like Kayla?" I asked, reminding myself of how her father had been a Vampyrus and her mother human.

"Yes," he said, looking at Luke, then back at me. "Kayla has told you then?"

"She showed me her wings," I told him. "Kayla told me how you tried to remove them – to stop them growing."

“That’s right,” Doctor Ravenwood said.

“And these others,” I said looking at the children stretched out in their beds, “they are like Kayla?”

“Yes,” he smiled weakly, “but with a difference.”

“And what’s that?” I asked, glancing at Luke, who was standing with his head bowed and looking at the floor.

“She is only one of the few who has managed to live past the age of sixteen,” Ravenwood started to explain. “You see, for years – hundreds of years, the Vampyrus have been coming above ground and living in secrecy amongst -”

“She knows all this,” Luke cut in, without looking up from the floor.

Ignoring him, the doctor continued. “Anyway, some of the Vampyrus fell into relationships with humans – most of these humans were totally unaware of their lover’s true identity. They were naive to the fact that they were in love with and sharing their lives with a breed of vampire bat. Some even married and they had lives that to the world seemed normal. But these relationships were far from normal. They were marriages between two entirely different species. Fortunately, at first, it seemed that those Vampyrus and humans couldn’t have produced children. But over the centuries, some females of the two species gave birth and children were

born out of these unions. It was a terrible tragedy as these children were born hideously mutated and they lived very short, and tragic lives.

Relationships between Vampyrus and humans was therefore forbidden by the elders of our race, but like any forbidden fruit, some find its taste too hard to resist. So over the years these relationships have continued in secrecy and more children...*half-breeds*, have been born.”

“The graveyard,” I whispered aloud over the doctor.

“I’m sorry?” he said, looking put out that I’d interrupted him.

“What did you say?”

“I found a graveyard in the grounds of the manor,” I told him. “They were all graves of children – they were the children born out of these relationships that you speak about.”

“That’s correct,” Ravenwood said, very matter-of-factly.

“But some of them lived to the age of sixteen years,” I gasped. “You said that they died at a very early age.”

Then looking at the rows of beds in the makeshift hospital, Ravenwood said, “As you can see, Kiera, some live longer lives – but there have ever only been three that have grown past the age of sixteen. We do our best to make those who live longer comfortable.”

“Comfortable?” I sighed, looking at the figures sleeping all around me. I went to the foot of one of the beds and stared down at the girl who lay

on it. She was about fourteen years old and curled on her side. The girl had long blond hair that curled down the length of her back. But between her golden locks I could see a series of black bones sticky out like a rack of ribs. Turning away, I looked at the boy in the bed next to her. He was about sixteen and with his eyes closed, he looked so peaceful. Tubes ran from each of his nostrils and into some type of breathing apparatus beside the bed. The machine made a wheezing sound as it helped him to breathe. The boy's skin was as pale as chalk and had a translucent appearance, and as I stared harder through the candlelight at him, I could see his heart beating beneath his chest. I could see his veins and arteries, his bones and muscles. It was as if I were looking at a human-shaped jellyfish. The sight of him didn't scare or repulse me, it just made me feel incredibly sad for him – for all them.

“Wouldn't they be better off in The Hollows?” I asked Doctor Ravenwood.

“Oh no,” he said, coming to stand beside me at the foot of the boy's bed. “We can't take them home. Remember the relationships that these children were born out of are forbidden. Oh no, that wouldn't do at all.”

“So what?” I snapped, “You just sit and wait for them to die?”

Looking at me over the rims of his glasses, Ravenwood said, “We are not ruthless, uncaring creatures, Kiera. Even though these children

aren't truly Vampyrus – we still want to look after them – to cure them.”

“Cure?” I said. “What, make them human again?”

Shaking his head at me, the doctor said, “They will never be truly human or Vampyrus – they are what they are – half-breeds. But that doesn't mean they have to die young, to not live out their lives and realise their true potential – whatever that maybe.”

“You said, *we*, who's *we*?” I asked him. “You and who else are trying to cure these children?”

“Lord Hunt, of course,” he said.

“And how are you planning on achieving this cure?”

Pulling the latex gloves from his hands and rolling them into a ball, he looked across the room at Luke, then back at me. “We discovered it by chance. It was after I removed the piece of bone from Kayla's back. We had been wondering why it was that Kayla had grown past the age of sixteen with very few physical problems. It wasn't until she reached that age that she started to show any physical changes at all. To the outside world, she looks just like any other sixteen-year-old human female.”

I thought of how Kayla had been called '*stickleback*' by the other girls at her school and wondered if Ravenwood was just deluding himself. Apart from the children lying in the hospital beds, I'd never seen another sixteen-year-old with wings. But then again wasn't that the point that

Ravenwood was trying to make – no other half-breed had lived past the age of sixteen.

“We wondered whether the cure lie in Kayla’s DNA.” The doctor continued. “So after carefully abstracting the marrow from the piece of bone from Kayla’s back, Lord Hunt injected it into Alice over there,” and he pointed to a girl lying in a bed at the furthest end of the ward. Ravenwood made his way to the foot of her bed and I followed him, all the while, Luke remained silent.

“See her wings?” Ravenwood asked me, pointing at the girl on the bed. It was difficult to see exactly how old she was, as she was lying on her front, her face turned against the pillow. Out of her back hung two long black wings and just like Kayla’s, they were jet-black and covered in a fine, sparkly substance which looked very much like glitter.

“They look okay to me,” I told him.

Then, taking hold of the tip of Alice’s wing, it crumbled into a black ash between his fingers. Rubbing the dust from his hands, I watched as the wing reformed where it had only moments ago broken away beneath Ravenwood’s touch. “Six months ago, every bone in her body reacted in the same way,” he explained. “You only had to brush up against her and her arm would break, her leg would snap, or her ribcage splinter. But after Lord Hunt injected the DNA taken from the bone in Kayla’s back into Alice, her

bones began to harden – to solidify. They no longer break now when touched, but it's her wings. As you can see, they are still brittle. If she were conscious, Alice would have been in unbearable pain as her wings had crumbled."

"So why doesn't it work?" I asked him.

Looking at me, his eyes almost seeming to shimmer behind his glasses, Ravenwood said, "Remember I said that only a few of these half-breeds had managed to live past the age of sixteen years?"

"Yes," I said, nodding.

"Well, Lord Hunt was of the belief that the extracts of DNA from those three survivors would hold the key to a cure," the doctor said.

"Do you know who these three are?"

"Kayla is one, of course," he said. "Another is an eighteen-year-old boy named Isidor Smith."

"And where is he?" I asked.

"He has been very hard to find – but we have managed to locate him. We don't know if this Isidor Smith knows what he is," Ravenwood said.

"A half-breed, you mean?"

"Exactly," he continued. "But we should know soon enough – Lady Hunt has gone to...how can I put this? *Persuade* him to come home with

her.”

“Like she did to me?” I said, trying to hide the resentment that I felt about being tricked by Lady Hunt. “So who is the third of these surviving half-breed?”

Taking his glasses from the tip of his nose and cleaning the lenses on the hem of his scrubs, he looked at me and said, “For someone who has the ability to *see*, Kiera, you don’t *see* very much at all.”

“See what?” I asked, the muscle in my stomach beginning to tighten.

“Can’t you see the real reason that Lady Hunt got you to come and stay here?” he asked, pushing the glasses back onto his nose.

Feeling numb, I shook my head at him. “She brought me here so Luke and my friends could protect me from Taylor and Phillips.”

“And why do you think you would need their protection?” Ravenwood asked.

“Because...because...” I started, but my mind seemed frazzled – confused. Then I remembered what Taylor had said to me in St. Mary’s graveyard back in The Ragged Cove. Taylor had told me that I was *unique*! “No!” I whispered backing away from Doctor Ravenwood.

“Yes, Kiera,” he said coming towards me. “You are one of the three who can save these children. You are a *half-breed*.”

Chapter Twenty-Three

“It’s not true!” I snapped, turning on my heels to look at Luke. I was hoping that he would tell me that it wasn’t and that there had been some mistake. But he just stared back at me, and again I could see that sadness in his eyes. Running across the ward, I gripped him by the shoulders and said, “Please Luke, tell me that it isn’t true!”

Casting his eyes down as if he were unable to look at me, he whispered, “I’m so sorry Kiera.”

Letting go of him, I turned, and facing the doctor, I said, “It’s not true. I refuse to believe it. My parents were human.”

“One of them was,” Ravenwood said and his voice had that tone again – the one that told bad news. “Your mother was one of us. She was a Vampyrus.”

“Liar!” I roared at him.

“It’s true,” Luke said from behind me. “Your mother was a vampire bat.”

“And how long have you known this?” I hissed, turning on him with tears in my eyes. “You didn’t think of telling me this before?”

“I didn’t know,” he said, coming towards me. “Honestly – I didn’t know, Kiera.”

“So, how long *have* you known?” I asked, tears now spilling onto my cheeks.

“When I returned back to The Hollows,” he said. “The elders told me.”

“So where is she now?” I demanded.

“I don’t know,” he said. “All I know is that Phillips took her like he took Lord Hunt.”

“But why?” I snivelled.

“Why do you think, Kiera?” Ravenwood said, coming to stand by my side. “Your mother, Lord Hunt, and Isidor Smith’s father are the only Vampyrus who have produced children with humans that have lived past adolescence. Whoever it is that Taylor and Phillips work for, he is the one who believes the parents hold the answer. But he is wrong – we tested Lord Hunt’s DNA on the half-breeds and it had no positive results whatsoever. He has realised his mistake now and is therefore in search of their offspring.”

“But why?” I said, wiping the tears from my cheeks with the back of my hands. “What possible use could we have? From what Luke has told me about this Vampyrus – he doesn’t sound like he would be interested in curing anyone – or any *thing*.”

“Cure is not what he seeks,” Luke said, placing a hand on my shoulder. “He is interested in your power.”

“Power?” I asked. “What power?”

“Kiera, you have the gift of *seeing*, Kayla the gift of hearing, and we’ve heard that Isidor has the power of smell,” Ravenwood said.

“I don’t understand,” I told him, every fibre of my being feeling alive and on fire.

“Kiera – you’ve been having nightmares right? But they’re more than nightmares – they’ve become visions. Tell me what you see,” he said, fixing his eyes on mine.

Pulling my arms tight around me, I said, “Vampyrus taking over London. Killing passengers on the underground, creating vampires that then feed on humans that, in turn, become vampires until...”

“Until what?” Ravenwood asked me, his voice sounding stern.

“Until there are no humans left,” I breathed. “But I saw hundreds... thousands of Vampyrus sweeping over London. There were so many that their wings blocked out the sun.”

“What you see, Kiera, is the future...what might happen,” Ravenwood explained. “Those Vampyrus you see could very well be an army sent by the elders to protect the human race – to fight alongside them – but that we don’t know. The future is not yet set, we have a chance of changing it.”

“Kiera, we don’t have time to waste – the future of the human race and the Vampyrus balances on a knife’s edge,” Luke said. “A few days ago, a Vampyrus went crazy on an inbound flight into the UK. At forty-thousand feet, he tore through the plane, gorging himself on the crew and passengers – each one of them becoming a vampire. We can’t be sure, but we believe that this Vampyrus’ aim was to land a plane at Heathrow, full of bloodletting vampires which would then overrun the airport, sending vampires swarming through London. But the pilot fought back by ditching the plane into the sea, killing all on board before they reached London.”

“I saw that on the news,” I told him, “the day that Lady Hunt came to visit. So do the government...the authorities know what is going on?”

“The plane has yet to be recovered,” Luke said, “So no – they are not aware. But we fear it may only be a matter of time before our existence is known to the wider world. We have people in place – Vampyrus that have worked their way over the years into positions of power within governments around the world, but they will only be able to bury so much

of the truth. And if your nightmares are visions of what is yet to come, then it won't be long before those corrupted Vampyrus like Taylor and Phillips start attacking major cities across the globe."

"But I still don't understand how I will be of use to *this* Vampyrus?" I asked, still feeling numbed and confused by everything that I was hearing. "How will I be able to help him?"

Folding his white hair-covered arms across his chest, Ravenwood looked at me and said, "Imagine having an ally that could see into the future – predict what your enemy was going to do next. Someone who can see through darkness – see what others fail to *see*."

I thought back to how I'd seen into the darkness in the crypt beneath St. Mary's church in The Ragged Cove. But that had only happened once. "But it's not a precise thing that I can do," I told Ravenwood. "It's very hit-and-miss."

"Your gift is still developing," he told me. "But you must realise that your abilities are getting stronger each day. You have more and more of these visions – you *see* more. It will only be a matter of time before you have complete control over your gift."

"But my eye, it bleeds – I pass out," I told him.

"That's just a symptom of your developing powers," Ravenwood said. "That will soon pass as you become accustomed to your power."

“But what about Kayla and this other one...Isidor Smith? What do they bring to the party?” I asked him.

“Just like you, Kiera, can you imagine what an asset Kayla would be to our enemy? You could send her forward to spy. From behind closed doors, outside buildings, from miles away she would be able to hear them plotting. To listen in as they planned their next strike – their next move. From great distances she would be able to know from which direction the enemy approaches, their numbers, and the fear in their hearts. Isidor, with his sense of smell, would be able to track the enemy – never lose their scent – hunt them down until they could run no more. Imagine, Kiera, having an army with such gifts – they would be invincible.”

“An army?” I asked, raising my eyebrows. “There are only the three of us.”

“You don’t really think that once our enemy understood what it was that was so special about your DNA, what made you so unique, that he wouldn’t use that on the other half-breeds who had been born?” Ravenwood asked me. “Even if they were born sick and feeble like the ones you see in this room, he would be able to heal them like we plan to do and who knows what powers they might have.”

“But why do the half-breeds have the potential to be so much greater than a Vampyrus?” I asked the doctor.

“We don’t know, is the honest answer,” he said scratching his white wiry hair. “It must be something to do with when the two sets of DNA come together. We know that other species of bat have undeveloped eyesight and there are many myths that bats are, in fact, blind. This is untrue – some bats can even see ultraviolet light. So perhaps when human DNA and Vampyrus DNA is thrown into the mix together, it creates an enhanced ability of sight. We know that some bats hear in sonar, and others have an incredible sense of smell – perhaps these abilities are greatly magnified when the two species mix.”

“Like some potent cocktail?” I said.

“Perhaps,” he said, flashing a thin smile at me.

Then looking at both Luke and Ravenwood, I said, “But even if this were all true and I was some freaky half-breed, Phillips, Taylor, and whoever it is they work for seem to be forgetting that there is no way on Earth that I will betray my own race and fight alongside them.”

Then staring at me, Ravenwood said, “You seem to be forgetting two things, Kiera.”

“And what are they?” I asked, cocking my head at him.

“You don’t actually have a race that you belong to. Secondly, they have the best bargaining tool that your enemy could ever want.”

“Which is?”

“They have your mother,” he replied with a grim smile. “And the fathers of Kayla and Isidor. I think they’ll be able to make the three of you do anything that they want you to do.”

With my heart sinking in my chest and wanting to throw-up, I said, “And *you* seem to be forgetting, I don’t actually believe any of this shit.” Then pointing to the children lying asleep in their beds, I added, “I’m nothing like them, or Kayla. I mean look at me, I don’t have wings!”

Taking me by the hand, Luke whispered, “Let us show you.”

Following behind Doctor Ravenwood, Luke led me into the shadows in the far corner of the room. Hidden in the darkness was a doorway. Pushing it open, Ravenwood ushered us into a small room at the far end of the ward. The room consisted of a desk that was littered with pieces of paper which were covered with equations and handwritten notes. There were files and medical instruments that I had never seen the likes of before. In the corner, there was an examination couch, and attached to the walls were several x-ray negatives of limbs and I guessed they were pictures of the insides of the kids sleeping in the ward.

Taking a clunky-looking camera from the desk, Ravenwood looked at me and said, “Kiera, take off your top and go lay face-down on the couch over there.”

“I’m sorry?” I said, pulling my top tightly about me.

Seeing that I looked uncomfortable at his sudden request, he said, “It’s okay, Kiera, I’m a doctor. I just want to examine your back.”

“Why?” I said, looking across the room at Luke as he might also have the answer.

“I want to prove to you one way or another that you are a half-breed,” Ravenwood said.

“How?”

“With this,” he said, holding the huge camera. It looked like something that they would have used in the early nineteen-hundreds. The front of it appeared to have a long protruding lens which stuck out like an accordion, and it had handles on either side. As I looked closer at it, I could see that it wasn’t made of plastic or metal, but wood.

“What’s that?” I asked him.

“A camera of sorts,” he smiled. “You have nothing to fear, Kiera. I’m sure your friend Luke will be watching out for you.”

Looking towards Luke again, he nodded and said, “It’ll be okay, I wouldn’t let anyone hurt you. I promise.”

Believing in him, I went to the couch and began to unbutton my shirt. Glancing up at Luke, I asked, “Do you mind?”

Smiling to himself, he turned his back. Once my shirt was off, I climbed onto the couch and laid on my front. Ravenwood came towards me, with the camera-type contraption in his hands.

“This might feel a bit cold,” he warned, placing the end of the machine between my shoulder blades. He then very gently moved it down the length of my back to the base of my spine, then up again around both sides of my ribcage. The end of the device did feel ice-cold and I felt the skin on my back tighten with goose bumps.

“Put your shirt back on. I’m all done,” he said.

Climbing off the couch, I threw my shirt back on. “You can turn around now,” I told Luke. He looked at me and he still had that boyish grin tugging at his lips. “You’re so juvenile,” I tutted.

Ravenwood placed the camera-thing on his desk and flipped a switch on the side of it. The machine made a purring noise as a cone of brilliant white light shone from the lens. The light shone against the wall and I looked at it. It was like watching an old black and white movie. At first, the moving picture seemed blurred and out of focus. Ravenwood adjusted a few dials on the side of the device and the image on the wall sharpened. And as it did, I could see that it was some sort of x-ray of my spine and ribcage. The camera, or whatever it was, had recorded my insides and was now playing the images back onto the wall. But as I studied the

images, I could see that my spine and ribcage looked different – different from pictures that I had seen in human anatomy books. I had way too many bones and there was shading over my lungs.

“That can’t be me,” I gasped.

Ignoring me, Ravenwood went to the wall and taking a pen from the pocket of his scrubs, he pointed at the images being played out. “This is amazing,” he said, and I could sense the excitement in his voice. “I’ve never seen such a developed set of wings that have yet to break through the skin.” Then, jabbing at the wall with the tip of his pen, he said, “Look Luke, can you see the humerus? And look! There’s the radius and ulna. The bones are perfectly formed.”

“I don’t believe it,” I trembled, those tears standing in my eyes again. “I would know if I had all those extra bones in me. They would be heavy. I would know that they were there.”

“Not necessarily,” the doctor said, not being able to take his eyes from the weird-looking x-ray. “You’ve always had these bones inside you, Kiera. Why would you feel any different? It’s all you’ve ever known. And besides, these bones aren’t heavy – they’re mostly hollow – you know, to be able to help you fly better.”

Pointing at the wall I said, “What are those dark patches over my lungs?”

“Oh that’s just the patagium,” he beamed.

“In English,” I said, tears now running down my cheeks again.

“Your wings, Kiera – that’s what they are! My god –this is amazing!” he shouted.

“Well, I’m glad that you think so,” I started to sob, holding myself tightly. “But I don’t want to be some freaky-flying-rodent. I just want to be human.”

Turning on me, totally unaware of my distress, he said with excitement, “Actually bats are more closely related to humans than they are to mice or rats.”

“If that’s meant to make me feel any better, it doesn’t,” I said, choking on my tears. “I don’t want this! I don’t want *any* of this!”

Seeing that I was growing more and more distraught with each passing second, Luke came towards me and snaked his arm around my waist. “Get off of me,” I screamed, pushing his arm away. “Don’t touch me!”

“Kiera...” he started, but I didn’t let him finish whatever it was he was going to say. I just wanted to get out of that room, away from those black and white pictures of my insides. The thought of having black leathery-looking wings hidden beneath my skin made me want to puke. I couldn’t bear the thought of it. Part of me wanted to tear myself open and

pull those disgusting things out of me. I couldn't even begin to comprehend what all of this meant. The thought of not actually being human but some freaky half-breed made me feel almost insane.

Why hadn't my father told me? I screamed inside. Had he even known that my mother was a Vampyrus? And why hadn't my mother told me? I couldn't help but feel an overwhelming sense of hatred for her. How could she have done this to me?

Trying again to comfort me, Luke put his hand on my shoulder. Shoving it off, I stood-up. "I hate the Vampyrus," I hissed at him. "I wish I'd never met you Luke Bishop. I hate you!" Leaving him looking stunned and hurt, I ran from the room.

Chapter Twenty-Four

“Kiera!” Luke shouted as he chased me across the ward and down the stone stairs to the passageway. It was dark, and with tears blurring my vision, I stumbled up the passageway. I just wanted to get out of the manor.

“Kiera, hold-up!” Luke hollered, the light from his lantern splashing up the sticky walls of the passageway. Then I felt his cold hand grip my shoulder and spin me around.

“Get off me!” I screamed, struggling against him. But he was too strong and pulled me against him. Luke held me tight against his chest and stroked my hair as if to sooth me.

“Please just let me go Luke,” I sobbed into his chest. “I just want to be away from here.”

“Running away won’t help,” he whispered in my ear.

“Please,” I cried.

“Where are you going to run to?” he hushed. “Home? You can’t go back there, they are looking for you. You’ll be safe here – I’ll protect you.”

“I don’t...” I snivelled, unable to finish my sentence.

Pushing open the door to his room, Luke guided me inside and closed the door behind him. Leading me over to the bed, he sat me down then placed the lantern on the table. “I know this has been a shock for you,” he started.

“A shock?” I scoffed. “You’ve got no idea.”

“Then tell me,” he said. “Tell me what you’re feeling, Kiera.”

“Why?” I hissed. “What’s the point? I’ve had enough of being analysed over the last six months to last me a life time.”

“I want to help you, Kiera,” he soothed.

“I don’t need your help. I can take care of myself!” I shouted.

Then taking my hands in his, he looked at me and said, “But I need you, Kiera.”

“Really?” I said, not wanting to sound sarcastic – but I know I did.

“You told me that you loved me once, remember?” he said, gently squeezing my fingers against his.

“That was a long time ago,” I said, looking down so as not to make eye contact with him.

“So your feelings have changed for me then?” and he sounded kind of hurt.

“That’s the problem, Luke, I don’t know how I feel anymore,” and this time I did look at him.

Taking my face in his hands, he brushed my tears from my cheeks with his fingers. “I’m here for you, Kiera. I can help you with this,” he said. “You don’t have to go through this alone. I know what you’re feeling.”

“But that’s just it,” I whispered, “you can’t possibly know how I’m feeling. I’m not a Vampyrus, I’m not even *human* – so what does that make me?”

“Something very special,” he said, and his voice sounded soft and gentle in the darkness.

“A freak more like,” I said back.

“No, *special*, Kiera,” he said, stroking the hair that fell against my face. “You have the ability of doing something wonderful now.”

“Like what?”

“You could save all those children up on that ward and any others that come after them,” he said. “None of them may need to suffer anymore.”

“Yeah, but I could also be their nightmare,” I told him.

“How do you figure that?”

“Well, if what Doctor Ravenwood says is true, then once cured they could be at risk of being hunted down by Taylor and Phillips and whoever it is that they work for, and be used to destroy the human race,” I told him.

“And that’s why it’s so important that you don’t leave this place,” Luke said. “This manor is like a fortress, it is protected against vampires.”

“But what if Taylor and Phillips come here – what if they bring others?” I asked.

“They don’t know that we are here,” he explained, “another reason for Murphy’s and Potter’s disguises. Not even the housekeeper knows who they are – she doesn’t even know that I’m here.”

“Does Mrs. Payne know about the children hidden away in the attic?” I asked.

“Yes, she’s always known about them, but she is kept away,” Luke said.

“What about Kayla, does she know?”

“No, she was stopped from coming up here since she was quite small as far as I’ve been told. What with all the tarpaulin and scaffolding, she just believes that this part of the manor has fallen into disrepair,” he said.

“But if Kayla knew that there were others like her, it might make her feel not so alone. She’s struggling to come to terms with what she is,” I told him.

Then pulling me close so that our faces were just inches apart, Luke said, “She doesn’t have to feel alone anymore, she has you, Kiera – you can

help each other.”

“I doubt I’ll be of much support – I don’t understand what’s happening myself – let alone try and make sense of it for her,” I said.

“Ravenwood has just told me that I’ve got wings hidden inside of me – so how does that exactly work? I mean will they just suddenly pop out one day while I’m waiting in line in the supermarket? It could be embarrassing.”

Smiling, Luke said, “I never quite thought of it like that. I don’t know when they will unfold from inside you. It could be today, tomorrow, next week, next year, or never for all I know.”

“But it’s the thought of those little black fingers wriggling about inside of me – it’s disgusting,” I said and shivered at the thought of them.

“These you mean?” Luke said, standing up. Rolling his shoulders back, I heard the unmistakable sound of his skin rippling and stretching and then a flutter as his wings unfolded from inside him. Stretching his arms out on either side, his wings hung down beside him. In the glow of the lantern, I could see what Luke had meant when he said his wings were still damaged from the fire.

They hung limp and tattered looking from his back, whereas I had remembered them to be taut and powerful-looking. At the tip of each wing, I could see those three black bony fingers. Luke looked at me and as he did, the fingers opened and closed as if trying to clutch at the air.

“Come close,” he said smiling, making the middle finger at the tip of his right wing curl like a question mark and beckon me forwards.

Standing, I went to him, wringing my hands before me.

“They’re just like having another pair of hands,” he explained.

“Two hands are enough,” I said moving closer still, not taking my eyes off the bony black fingers that wriggled back and forth.

“You weren’t like this before, back in The Ragged Cove,” he said.

“That’s before I found out I had a set of my own curled around my ribcage,” I cringed.

“Touch them,” he smiled. “Go on – they don’t bite.”

Raising my hand, I leant forward, and as I did, I could see that the fingers swivelled on what looked like a wrist. The fingers were long and pointed, with sharp nails capping each end.

“They’re more like claws than hands,” Luke explained. “In fact, the bones in a bat wing are very much like that of the bones in the human arm.”

“That doesn’t make me feel any better,” I told him. “I’m not meant to be human, remember?” Then with my fingertips millimetres from the claw, it reached out and grabbed my hand. I tried to jerk my hand away, but the black bony fingers were strong and held my hand fast.

“Don’t panic,” Luke laughed. “I’m not going to hurt you – I promise. I just want you to see that what you have inside you isn’t so bad.

It's not something to be scared of."

Looking into his eyes, then back at the claw that had hold of my hand, I started to relax. Despite how they looked, the skin covering them actually felt soft, just like the flesh covering my own hands. The nails, though, were hard and yellow, like ivory. If mine turned out looking like that, I'd have to do something with them. Give them a trim at least.

Luke relaxed his grip, and the claw released my hand. "See," he smiled. "They're not so bad, are they?"

"I guess not," I said, inspecting his wings. "Will these repair themselves?"

"Eventually," he told me. "As long as I stay out of the light and keep hidden away in the dark, they will heal."

"How much longer will you have to stay hidden away up here?" I asked him.

"I don't know. But each day I start to feel a little stronger," he said, folding his arms around my shoulders and pulling me against him. "But my situation doesn't seem so bad now."

"Oh, and why is that?" I asked, looking up into his face, which glowed pale in the light from the lantern. In the semi-darkness, the scars that covered the left side of his face seemed less defined, as if they weren't there at all.

“Because I have you,” he said, leaning forward and kissing me gently on the mouth.

As his lips touched mine, images of Potter came racing to the front of my mind. I pushed those memories of being kissed by him away but it was harder to ignore the warm sensation in my stomach that those images brought with them. Closing my eyes, I refused to think of how Potter had kissed me with such force and passion and those butterflies ebbed away.

Luke must have sensed my hesitation in kissing him back, and whispered, “What’s wrong?”

“It’s nothing,” I said, then kissed him.

At once, I felt those overpowering sensations that I had felt in The Ragged Cove and it was like no time had passed since last being together. Luke ran his hands through my hair and pulled me closer still. I could feel the hardness of his chest against mine and his skin felt cool like marble. He ran his hands down the length of my back, and in my mind’s eye, I could see Potter’s hands all over me like they had only a few hours before. Screwing my eyes shut, I pushed those memories of Potter away again, and kissed Luke with more passion.

Steering me towards the bed in the corner, Luke laid me gently down, blowing out the lantern. In the darkness, I felt him climb onto the bed beside me. Brushing my long black hair from my face, he covered my ears,

cheeks, nose, and lips with the softest of kisses. In that moment, it was like all my fears and worries were swept away. My whole being began to tingle, and with every touch of his, my skin felt as if it were alive. Why my feelings felt so intense and exaggerated when I was with Luke, I didn't know, but the feelings that he stirred within me were overwhelming.

Electrifying with Potter, a voice said inside my head and I told that voice to shut up and go away.

I could feel Luke's fingers working at the buttons on my top, and the warm breath that came from his mouth made my flesh tingle. I kissed him, and with the tips of my fingers, I caressed the scars on his face, and traced them down his chest and back. I arched my back so Luke could remove my shirt and his wings felt soft like feathers against me. The feel of them made me shudder. Wrapping my hands around his neck, I pulled him down onto me, my lips searching for his mouth. He kissed me back, and for the first time that night, I felt his sharpened teeth nip at my lower lip as his passion heightened. Then, working his mouth down my neck, his lips lingered and I felt his body go tense. His lips closed over my throat forming a tight seal. I could feel the pointed ends of his front teeth scratching against the skin just below my jaw line. His whole body shuddered, his back arched and his wings fanned out on either side of him.

Before I knew what was happening, Luke pierced the flesh on my neck with his teeth. His body locked as if in some sort of a spasm, and he growled in the back of his throat. Fearing that he was going to bite me, I pushed him off with my knees and he staggered to the other side of the room.

“What’s wrong with you?” I gasped, blindly reaching for the lantern in the darkness.

“I’m sorry, Kiera,” he said, and his voice sounded different – deeper somehow. “I don’t want to hurt you.”

“Hurt me?” I said confused. Then finding the lantern, I tried to turn it on.

“Don’t turn on the light!” he growled.

But it was too late, I’d already found the tiny dial on the side of the lantern that raised the light. Holding the lantern out before me, I swayed it around the room in search of Luke. Then I saw him, huddled in the far corner, his knees drawn up against his chest and his wings folded around him. Getting up from the bed, I started across the room towards him.

“Luke?” I said. “What’s wrong? I thought you were going to bite me.”

“I was! So don’t come over here, Kiera,” he warned.

“But I’ve already told you, you don’t scare me,” I tried to reassure him.

“I don’t want you seeing me like this,” he groaned.

“I thought we’d got over all of that?” I said, half-joking.

Standing over him, I hunkered down and pulled back the wing that was pulled around him. Then all at once, those black fingers snatched hold of my wrist and yanked my hand away, but in doing so, his wing opened and I saw the face that stared back at me from behind it. Stumbling backwards in shock, I fell onto my arse and sat staring at him.

“Go away!” he roared so loudly that I flinched backwards and away from him. Not only did Luke have fangs, but his mouth was full of razor sharp teeth. His eyes shone fierce green, and his ears had twisted into points and his nose had turned up into something similar to a snout. Bristly black hair had sprouted from his face, but there was a white-coloured patch of skin shining through where he had been previously burnt.

“What’s happened to you?” I gasped, pushing myself back across the floor and away from him.

“I need blood,” he groaned as if in pain. “Human blood - and I can’t go back to The Hollows.”

“But I thought you said that Hunt and Ravenwood had come up with a synthetic...” I started.

“Lot 13,” he gasped. “But it just doesn’t quite hit the spot. Being so close to you like that – I could smell the human part of you surging through your veins. It was wonderful – you have no idea how *wonderful*.”

“What can I do to help?” I asked him.

“Just stay over there,” he said gesturing with his hand and I noticed that it was also covered with thick wiry black hair, which glistened in the light from the lantern that now lay on the floor.

“What’s happened to you?” I said, my voice wobbling.

“This is what I look like – my true self when living in The Hollows,” he said. “I’m a vampire bat, remember?”

“So Murphy, Potter and all of the other Vampyrus look just as you do in The Hollows?” I asked him.

“More or less,” Luke said and winced as if in pain.

Then the sudden realisation that I too was half Vampyrus made my head spin and I felt nauseous at the thought that I might too change into something like Luke if I ever went down into The Hollows.

“Do all the female Vampyrus look like that, too?” I dared to ask him.

Guessing what I was driving at, Luke looked at me with his piercing stare and said, “They look beautiful – you don’t have anything to worry about.” Then he moaned aloud again as if he was hurting in some way.

“What’s happening?” I asked him, trying to mask my fear.

“It’s passing,” he said through gritted teeth. Then rolling onto his side like a drunk, I watched as the hair covering his face faded away, his ears stretched back into shape, as did his nose. The green fire in his eyes faded and his fangs withdrew back into his gums like a cats claws disappearing back into its paws.

Crawling across the floor towards him, I helped him up. His skin felt clammy and was covered in a fine sheen of sweat. Brushing his damp hair from his brow, I looked down into his face.

“Are you okay?”

“Never better,” he said. Then pointing to the table beside the bed, he added, “In that drawer there is a bottle of Lot 13.”

I lead Luke back to the bed where he sat down. Pulling open the drawer, I saw several bottles the size of small test tubes rolling about inside. Each of them was filled with a pale pink glooepy liquid. Taking one, I handed it to Luke. With trembling fingers, he unscrewed the top and tilting his head back, Luke gulped down the mixture. I watched it slide out of the bottle and it almost seemed to cling to the glass sides like slime. Taking the empty bottle from him, Luke shook all over as if caught in a draught and said, “That’s better.”

“Are you okay?” I asked him.

“Just give me a minute or two,” he said, lying back on the bed.

“Scared of me yet?” he asked once he had made himself comfortable.

“It will take more than a few scars and some straggly looking whiskers to frighten me away,” I said. But deep inside, I did feel scared, but not of Luke, but what I might turn into. Then taking his hand in mine, I added, “How come you didn’t worry about scaring Kayla, but you hid away from me?”

Looking at me, Luke said, “I don’t know what you mean?”

“Well you didn’t mask-up when you went in search of Kayla,” I said. “She told me that you had scars all down the side of your face. How come you -”

Sitting bolt upright on the bed, Luke stared at me and said, “I don’t know what you’re talking about. I’ve never actually met Kayla and I definitely didn’t go in search of her.”

“You must have gone,” I said feeling confused. “Kayla told me that she met a guy in London who said his name was Luke and she described him as having scars...”

“Kiera, I’m telling you I’ve never met the girl – I’ve been in hiding up here,” he insisted.

“So if it wasn’t you, then...oh my god!” I gasped. Pulling on my shirt I raced from the room.

Chapter Twenty-Five

With my hands stretched out before me, I darted down the dark corridor, my heart racing in my chest and beating in my ears. Luke was behind me, his lantern sending eerie shadows up the walls and across the floor. In the dim yellow light, my shadow appeared stretched and elongated, and out of the corner of my eye, my back look distorted, just like I had a pair of wings growing from it. Shuddering, I looked away and the deformed-looking shadow disappeared.

Reaching the top of the stairs I raced down them two at a time. Bolting across the landing, I headed up the stairs towards the corridor that led to Kayla's bedroom.

"Kiera!" Luke said from just over my shoulder, "What's wrong?"

Ignoring him, I pushed open the door and ran into Kayla's bedroom. Scanning the room, I could see that she wasn't there. The window leading to her balcony was open and the cold night air billowed the curtains outwards like a sail.

“Kayla?” I yelled, checking her bathroom. Running back into the room, I could see Luke was standing in the doorway and in the light from the many candles, I could see how pale Luke’s face and chest really looked. His skin was almost white and the scars that covered it shone an angry purple and blue. His wings hung from his back, the tips of them nearly brushing the wooded floor and I could see now that the edges of them looked frayed like a piece of lace that had been unpicked.

“What’s going on?” Luke asked, his eyes never leaving me as I darted around Kayla’s room.

“Kayla told me that she met you in London,” I told him, pulling back blankets and kicking aside the clothes that lay strewn all over her bedroom floor. “If it wasn’t you, who was it? And why would they pretend to be you? But more than that, she has been meeting a friend in the woods at the summerhouse...” but then I stopped. Something had grabbed my attention.

Crossing the room to her dressing table, lying on top of a pile of used face wipes, perfumes, and lipsticks, I saw a folded piece of paper. Picking it up, I read what was written on it.

Dear Mother,

I know you believe that you have my best interests at heart – but really you don't. If you loved me, you would trust me – the two go hand in hand, don't they?

I know it's been difficult recently for you with father's disappearance, but it hasn't been easy for me, either. We both know that I'm different from other girls my age and the physical changes that I've undergone have really screwed me up inside. I don't know who I am but more importantly, I don't truly understand what I am.

I know you sent Police Officer Hudson to watch over me and keep me safe, and part of me understood your reasons why and it showed me that you loved me despite the problems I have caused you. But when I discovered tonight you had surrounded me with spies – I knew that you didn't trust me, either. I can't even begin to explain how your lack of faith and trust has hurt me.

I know that I am different – different from you – but I am your daughter. I didn't ask to be made like this – I wish more than anything I could be like other girls my age – but I know that I can't and this I have to come to understand and accept in my own time. But I will never be able to do this if you don't trust me, and by surrounding me with your spies to watch over me, I don't believe that I will ever come to terms with what I am.

Therefore I'm going away – far away from here with my friend Luke Bishop. Yes it has been him that you've seen on the other side of the manor walls. But he has become someone that I can trust – he has become a good friend. Before Kiera tells you what has happened (and I suspect she already knows – you were right you can't get anything past that one) I want to be honest with you. I gave Luke the key to the tunnel that leads beneath the moat, he has been secretly meeting me at the summerhouse in the woods and he has been to my room, he was curious to see where I lived and to see inside the manor.

But mother, you are in great danger from these spies that you have enlisted to watch me. Luke told me that there are two Vampyrus that were behind the disappearance of father – Jim Murphy and Sean Potter, and I've discovered tonight that these are the two that have been masquerading as your chauffeur and handyman. But worse still, Kiera is working with them. You are in great danger. When you find this note get as far away from Hallowed Manor as you can – Luke has told me that Murphy and Potter are soon to overrun the manor with vampires.

Please don't worry about me mother, I'm with Luke and he has promised to protect me.

Forever in my heart

Kayla

Handing the letter to Luke, he scanned his eyes over it, then folding it in half, he looked at me and said, “I don’t understand Kiera, I’ve never met Kayla, so who has she been meeting?”

“I don’t know,” I breathed. “But whoever he is, he’s tricked Kayla into giving him keys to the grounds so that he can come and go, he’s been in her room and the manor and...” but before I’d the chance to finish what I was about to say, snapshots of the nightmares that I’d been suffering from flashed in front of my mind’s eyes. The images were so strong that I wobbled backwards, almost losing my balance.

Gripping my arm to steady me, Luke said, “Kiera, what is it? What can you see?”

Opening my eyes and looking at him, I said, “Kayla’s been meeting Phillips.”

“Phillips?” Luke asked sounding unsure.

“I’ve seen him in my dreams, Luke,” I told him. “He’s scarred down the left side of his face. But not from burns, from where Potter attacked him in the graveyard at St. Mary’s Church.”

“But that means...” Luke started.

“He’s tricked Kayla into believing that he is you – her friend. Without ever meeting you, she wouldn’t have known any different. Kayla is

in danger!” I snapped and raced past Luke and out of her room.

“Wait!” Luke hollered after me.

“We don’t have time!” I shouted over my shoulder, charging down the stairs to the great hall. Reaching the foot of the stairs, I could see Murphy and Potter standing by the front door. There was a hazy blue cloud of smoke hovering just above their heads as Murphy puffed on his pipe and Potter sucked on the end of a cigarette which dangled from the corner of his mouth.

Seeing me come running down the stairs, Potter opened his arms and smirking he said, “Come running back to me, have you?”

Ignoring him, I looked at Murphy and said, “Have you seen Kayla?”

“Not since she discovered us in the gatehouse,” he said.

Joining us in the hall, Luke looked at his two friends and said, “Phillips is here.”

“Where?” Potter said, standing away from the wall and blowing smoke out of his nostrils.

“Impossible,” Murphy growled. “We’ve been watching this place for weeks -”

“It doesn’t surprise me, then, that he’s found a way in,” I snapped more angrily than I intended.

Knocking the smouldering contents from his pipe into a nearby flowerpot, Murphy eyed me and said, “Listen here, Hudson, you don’t know every goddamn thing in the book. We’ve been watching your back here. There’s only been the two of us...”

“Look, I’m sorry, I didn’t mean it to sound like that,” I told him. “It’s just that I’m scared for Kayla – she doesn’t know what Phillips is all about. She doesn’t realise the danger that she’s in.”

Then from behind us, somebody said, “What’s going on here?”

Spinning round, I saw Mrs. Payne come from the shadows beneath the wide staircase.

Looking at Luke, Potter, and Murphy, she said, “And who might you three be?” Before anyone had a chance to answer her, she looked at Potter and said, “And put that cigarette out. It’s a disgusting habit.”

Ignoring her, Potter looked at me and said, “Is she related to you by any chance?”

Turning away from his grinning face, I said to Mrs. Payne, “We don’t have time to explain now, but these are my friends.” Then pointing to Murphy, I said, “This is my sergeant, the smoker is called Potter, but you’ll probably know them better as James and Marshal.”

With a look of confusion splashed across her face, she said, “The Chauffeur? Marshal?” Then pointing at Luke, she added, “Where’s he come

from.”

Pointing to the ceiling, Luke smiled and said, “From up there!”

“But...but -” Mrs. Payne started.

“Look it’s been a pleasure chatting to you old lady,” Potter said, grinding the cigarette out with his heel on her polished floor, “but I’m guessing that we have a more pressing engagement to attend. Is that not right, Kiera?”

Staring at him, I said, “Yes,” and in that moment I could feel his rough hands on me again and his lips pressed against mine.

“Well?” Potter asked.

“Well what?” I asked, looking into his green eyes.

“Where’s the girl, sweet-cheeks?”

Pushing away those images of me and him together in the gatehouse, I pulled open the front door and said, “Follow me.”

Chapter Twenty-Six

A thick fog covered the grounds outside the manor house. It had a murky-yellow tinge to it and was so thick that I could only see a few feet ahead of me. It almost seemed to climb over the walls of the manor house and through the trees like dry ice at a party. The night was cold and damp and through the fog, I could barely make out the moon, which hung in the sky like a monstrous Halloween pumpkin. It had a sickly orange glow to it and its many craters looked like eyes and an evil grin that had been smudged.

We made our way across the lawns which stretched out before us and through the swirling fog towards the trees. Almost blind, we stumbled through the woods in the direction of the summerhouse. The atmosphere felt oppressive and my stomach tightened at the thought of what Philips might have done with Kayla. She would have told him about discovering Murphy and Potter. I doubted that he knew they had been here all the while but now that he knew of their existence, would it frighten him into doing something rash?

My train of thought was interrupted by Potter who said, “So tell me, tiger, how did Phillips get his claws into Kayla?”

“She believed him to be Luke,” I explained. “She honestly believed him to be a good-guy.”

“So if he wants to harm her, why hasn’t he done it before now?” Murphy asked.

“He used her to get into the grounds of the manor,” I told him. “He wants to get to those children up on the ward...and he wants me, remember?”

“But you’re forgetting,” Luke said, “he’s one of us. Phillips has wings. Why didn’t he just fly over the wall?”

“Perhaps he can’t?” I told them. “Remember he got attacked by Potter. I know from my nightmares that his face is scarred like Luke’s. Maybe his wings are damaged, too?”

“Or maybe there’s another reason altogether,” Murphy said, his voice thoughtful as if he were talking to himself.

“Like what?” Potter asked, lighting another cigarette revealing his eyes in the darkness like a pair of green headlamps.

“We know that Hallowed Manor is one of the Vampyrus’ strongholds above ground. If he could take this place, then that would send a message out to all those other Vampyrus that he is someone to fear –

someone not to be reckoned with. The other sacred places above ground would fear his power and some would more than likely cower to him to protect their strongholds.”

“But who is he going to launch his attack with?” Luke asked Murphy. “He hasn’t been able to gather enough Vampyrus to his twisted way of thinking to commit to an all-out attack against Hallowed Manor.”

“Perhaps he’s going to attack with vampires,” I said.

There was silence for a moment. Then Potter said, “Impossible. sweet-cheeks. Remember this place is like a fortress. There could never be a vampire attack against this manor. It’s surrounded by a ring of blessed water that vampires could never cross. The walls of the manor have been permeated with garlic and queets and if Phillips is planning to launch his attack from the summerhouse, then I’m afraid that I personally fitted a crucifix to the wall. Like the rest of the manor, it’s been covered in garlic and queets, and just to make sure, there’s a chamber hidden beneath the floor that I’ve filled to the brim with Bibles, crosses, and more bottles of holy water than you could wish for. There isn’t going to be any vampire attack.”

Turning to face him, I said, “Kayla spoke about giving a key to Phillips that led to a tunnel beneath the moat,” then remembering the padlocked door that I’d discovered, I added, “That tunnel wouldn’t be

hidden beneath a door against the far wall on the other side of the grounds, would it?”

“Yeah, so?” Potter said, the end of his cigarette winking on and off in the darkness as he smoked it.

“Well, I found tracks – lots of tracks - leading from that secret doorway to the summerhouse,” I said, the hairs on the nape of my neck starting to prickle. “And the summerhouse isn’t covered in garlic and queets any longer. Someone has been out there and covered all your hard work in paint. The crucifix you put up on the wall, it’s been removed. As for the Bibles, crosses, and holy water you say you’ve hidden, I can’t be sure if they are still there.”

The three of them looked blankly back at me through the fog. Realising that they seemed to be missing the point that I was trying to make, I gasped and said, “You really don’t see it, do you?”

“See what?” Potter said. “Maybe if you stopped talking in riddles and tried good old fashioned English for a change...”

“Phillips has been using the tunnel under the moat to bring vampires onto the grounds of the manor. He repainted the summerhouse to cover up the garlic and queets and removed the crucifix from the wall,” I explained.

“So what you’re saying is,” Potter said flicking his cigarette away, “This place is actually teeming with vampires and has been for weeks while

he builds his army?”

Slapping my forehead with the palm of my hand, I said, “At last! I think you’ve got it!”

Then coming towards me through the fog, Potter said, “Well tell me this, sweet-cheeks, where have they all been hiding out all this time? Remember vampires don’t like the sunlight.”

But before I could even think about answering his question, Luke had gripped me by the shoulder. “Shhh,” he said, and pointed ahead of us. We had reached the edge of the circular clearing that the summerhouse sat in. Screwing up my eyes, I peered through the fog and could just make out two figures standing off to one side in the centre of the clearing. Crouching down behind the trunks of some large trees, the four of us stared at the figures. Before he had even spoken, I knew that it was Phillips and Kayla.

“You don’t have to hide,” Phillips said, and his voice sounded smooth and calm, and I still had difficulty in believing that he had once been my sergeant at training school. He had been a colleague; but more importantly, a friend.

“There is no point in hiding amongst the trees, my friends. Kayla heard you coming the moment you stepped into the woods.”

Standing, the four of us stepped out of the fog and into the clearing. I stood silently between Luke and Potter, and Murphy stood alone to one

side.

“Hello again,” Phillips smiled, and his eyes almost appeared to beam through the swirling fog.

Ignoring him, I looked at Kayla, I said, “Whatever he’s told you, Kayla, this guy is *not* your friend. His name isn’t Luke Bishop – it’s Craig Phillips.”

Smiling, Phillips said, “Will the real Luke Bishop step forward?” and as his words left his lips, both Luke beside me and Phillips in the clearing took a step forward.

“Kiera is right, Kayla,” Luke said, his voice soft. “I’m Luke Bishop. The guy standing next to you only wants to hurt and use you.”

“He told me you would say that,” Kayla said. “He told me that you would try and mess with my mind – play tricks on me.”

“The only person playing tricks here is the man standing next to you,” I told her, inching forward. “He tricked me once, Kayla, and I nearly lost my life because of it.”

“Liar!” Kayla spat. “I trusted you Kiera! I told you stuff and showed you things that I’d never shown anyone else, and all the time, you were spying on me with your friends!”

“That’s not true,” I said. “I didn’t know who James and Marshal really were.”

“Liar!” Kayla said again, but this time her voice wavered as if trying to stop herself from crying. “If you didn’t know who Marshal was, why were you making out with him in the gatehouse? I saw you through the window. You looked pretty friendly to me!”

At once, I could almost sense Luke’s eyes boring into me. Not taking my eyes from Kayla, and too uncomfortable to look at Luke, I said, “It wasn’t what it looked like, Kayla. I thought he was somebody else.”

“Oh yeah?” Luke said, from beside me. “Who?”

“You, of course!” I snapped, turning to him. “You don’t really think I’d make out with that jerk, do you?”

“Now that’s not nice,” Potter said from behind me.

Spinning round, I turned on Potter and shouted, “Why don’t you just try shutting your mouth for once in your life! You know I thought -”

But before I’d a chance to say anything else, Potter had stuck another cigarette between his lips and said, “Easy, tiger. Stop getting so excited.”

“You’re impossible!” I hollered back. “Tell Luke what really happened!”

Then, from the centre of the clearing, Philips said to Kayla, “See? How can you trust any of these people, Kayla? They don’t even trust each other.”

Just as the last of his words left his mouth, Potter had shot across the clearing in a blur of shadows and had Phillips gripped by the throat. Even by his own Vampyrus speed and agility, Phillips looked momentarily stunned at how quickly Potter was upon him. With his fingers digging into the scarred flesh around Phillips throat, and without taking his eyes from him, Potter shouted across the clearing at Luke.

“Kiera loves you, Luke. There is no doubting that. It was an accident. Yes, she did kiss me, but only because she believed me to be you. She saw the bandages and the disguise in the gatehouse and thought you had been hiding yourself from her.” Then turning to look at me through the fog, Potter said, “I was to blame for what happened, Luke, not Kiera. I realised her mistake, but instead of pushing her off, I let her kiss me and I kissed her back.”

Averting my gaze, I looked down at the ground. I was grateful for Potter’s honesty, but it just confused me even more. When I’d thought I’d made up my mind that he was a complete and utter jerk, he then went and did something completely unexpected and nice – like pulling my car from the snow and now taking all the blame for what had happened at the gatehouse.

“But I made two big mistakes, Luke,” Potter continued. “The first was believing someone like Kiera could ever be interested in someone like

me,” then turning to look back at Phillips, he snarled, “and my second big mistake was not killing you back in The Ragged Cove.” Within an instance, fangs had protruded from his gums and he was lunging at Phillips’ throat.

Raising a hand to her face, Kayla screamed and leapt backward. Seeing this, Murphy shot forward in a haze of shadows and had taken hold of her, bringing her back to me. Before I’d the chance to say anything to her, a figure stepped from the fog on the other side of the clearing.

“Kill Philips if it will make you feel better, Potter. But it will change nothing. You are all going to be dead before dawn,” Taylor said, limping forward. On his head, he wore that wide-brimmed hat, he was naked to the waist and his wings twitched and fluttered around his scrawny frame. Limping towards Potter, who still had hold of Phillips, he chuckled and said, “Go on, I dare you. If it makes you feel any better, rip his throat out, tear the lungs from his body.”

Lurching forward, still believing that Phillips was her friend, Kayla shouted, “No! Don’t kill him! Please!”

Eyeing Kayla, then Potter again, Taylor said, “Go on, Potter, show the girl what a monster you truly are. Go on, kill a defenceless Vampyrus in front of her.”

“Please!” Kayla whimpered.

Taking her by the shoulders, I shook her gently and said, “Kayla, he is not your friend. He cares nothing about you...or me.”

“Why would he care about you anyway?” Kayla said, her voice angry and confused.

Staring her straight in the eyes, I said, “Kayla, I’m like you. Me and you are the same.”

“How?” she sneered.

“I’m half human and half Vampyrus,” I tried to convince her.

“Phillips and that wizened-up guy, Taylor, over there want the both of us.”

“I don’t believe that you’re like me,” she said. “Prove it.”

“I can’t,” I said, shaking my head at her. “But I have wings, just like you.”

“Where? Show me!” she spat.

“They haven’t come...come *through* yet,” I told her.

“How convenient,” Kayla said and almost seemed to sneer at me.

“Luke just wants to protect me from people like you.”

“He doesn’t want to protect you,” I insisted. “He wants you – us – because we are unique. You and me have special abilities that they want and there is another like us called Isidor Smith. That’s where your mother has gone – she’s looking for him.” But I could see by the way that she looked at

me that she wasn't convinced. There had to be some way to prove to her that I was telling the truth.

"You heard that phone call Kayla," I said. "You heard my friend suffering. You saw how much that hurt me. That was another Vampyrus just like Philips and Taylor who hurt him. They were trying to track me down."

"I don't believe you," she said again.

Thinking back to that last conversation I'd shared with Sparky, something suddenly struck me. He had said "texts". *I received your texts*, he had said. But I'd only sent him the one since arriving at the manor. So who had sent the others? Whoever had found my phone when I'd fallen from the wall. Looking at Phillips still being gripped by Potter, I turned back to Kayla and holding out my hand, I said, "Give me your phone."

"Why?" she asked.

"Just give it to me, Kayla, and I'll prove to you that Phillips was behind the murder of my friend."

Reluctantly, Kayla pulled her mobile phone from her jeans pocket and handed it to me. Taking it, I dialled my own mobile phone. Pressing it to my ear, I turned to face Phillips and waited for the sound of my mobile phone to start ringing from his direction. Within seconds the night was broken with the shrill tone of my mobile ringing – but it didn't come from the direction of Phillips as I'd suspected. The sound of the ring tone came

from behind me. As if on cue, all of us turned to face the woods, even Phillips glanced in that direction as Potter gripped him.

My mobile phone still continued to ring from the slices of darkness between the tress and then it stopped as if cut dead. From within the trees and the fog that curled amongst them, I caught sight of a fleeting movement.

“Who’s there?” I called out. Then as if in answer to my question, Mrs. Payne stepped from the tree line, my mobile phone held in her hand.

Chapter Twenty-Seven

Mrs. Payne's wings fluttered in the wind, which made the fog swirl around her as if she were a magician stepping onto a grand stage. Still dressed in her grey frumpy dress, thick woollen tights and uncomfortable black shoes, she came towards me and said, "Surprised that I'm one of them?"

"Not really," I said, there didn't seem to be much that would surprise me any longer. Then my head rocked back as images of her hair flecked with white raced to the forefront of my mind. And again I was standing at the foot of the stairs leading up to the '*forbidden*' wing. In my mind's eye, I could see that her hair was coated in tiny white flecks of... *paint*. It was then that I knew it had been her that had repainted the summerhouse to cover up the sticky coating of garlic and queets. It had been Mrs. Payne that had removed the crucifix from the wall and it had been her who had been paving the way for Taylor and his vampires.

"Would you like your phone?" Mrs. Payne smiled, her tone was insincere and full of loathing.

“Just give it to me,” I said opening my eyes and holding out my hand.

Placing the phone in my palm, she let her long, ivory nails scrape across my flesh. Yanking my hand away, Mrs. Payne smiled and looked at Kayla.

“Sweet little Kayla,” she said, and brushed the girl’s hair with her fingernails.

Kayla knocked the old woman’s hand away and said, “How come you had Kiera’s phone?”

“I found it, that’s all,” she said.

Searching through my sent messages, I found two that had been sent to Sparky. Both had been sent after I’d fallen from the wall. The first read:

***Remind me of your home address Sparky,
I have a surprise that I want to send to you.***

Kiera x

The second read:

***Thanks Sparky. I’ve changed my mind,
I’ll bring the surprise to you myself.***

Be home tomorrow, but make sure you are alone ;)

Kiera x

Reading those texts, I realised how easily they had tricked my friend into disclosing his home address and arranging for him to be alone. Sparky wouldn't have had any reason to suspect that those text messages hadn't come from anyone else but me. Poor Sparky, what had they done to him? I prayed that he hadn't suffered because of me. With rage beginning to swell inside of me, I turned to Kayla, and shoving the phone under her nose, I said, "Go on, take a look, Kayla. See what your precious friend has been up to." Kayla looked down at the screen and read what was written there.

"But Mrs. Payne had your phone – it was her who sent those texts," she said shaking her head as if not wanting to believe that she had been deceived by Philips.

"And who do you think it was you heard at my friend's address?" I snapped. "It wasn't the old-woman – it was your friend over there," and I pointed in the direction of Phillips who was still hanging from the end of Potter's fist.

Looking over at Phillips, her eyes wide, Kayla said, "Luke, is this true?"

But before he could fill her head with more lies, Potter was tightening his grip around Phillips' throat. Even if he'd wanted to reply to Kayla, I doubted if he would've been able to squeeze any words out.

"Oh god, this is all just so tiresome," Mrs. Payne said as she walked across the clearing and went to join Taylor. The two of them stood, half hidden by the fog, their wrinkled skin giving the appearance of two mummified statues. "Can't we just get this over and done with," she said, sounding bored. Then turning to Taylor, she added, "Let's just keep to the plan. You kill Potter, Murphy, and Bishop, and I'll take the two girls."

Hearing this, Kayla inched closer to me.

Then slowly unbuttoning his shirt and stepping forward, Murphy said in a calm voice, "Oh I'm sorry, I thought the plan was for me and the two boys here to rip your throat out, old woman, then feed you in tiny pieces to Taylor and Phillips. And if I'm feeling in a good mood, I'll let them die before Potter starts feeding them small chunks of your brains. Now that sounds like a plan."

"Jim Murphy," Taylor smiled, "You never change, do you? The only people that are going to die tonight are you and your two sidekicks, Potter and Bishop."

"How do you figure that?" Luke said, moving forward to stand next to Murphy.

“Because your friend Kiera won’t let us die,” Taylor smiled. Then looking at me, he said, “Isn’t that correct, Kiera?”

“I don’t know what you’re talking about,” I hissed at him.

“I have some people here that want to say hello to you, Kiera,” Taylor smiled, flashing his yellow-stained fangs.

“What are you talking about?” I murmured, my stomach tying itself into knots.

Then looking back over his shoulder into the woods, he said, “You can come out now.”

With Kayla standing beside me, I watched as the shadows between the trees on the opposite of the clearing appeared to move. Then I gasped as Doctor Keats stumbled forward out of the fog. The last time I’d seen her she’d looked like a headmistress, now she resembled a bag lady. Her hair was dishevelled and clumps of it stuck out in thick wisps from each side of her head. Her smart tweed suit was covered in dirt and grime, her tights were torn at the knees and her shoes were missing. With her hands secured behind her back, she wandered into the clearing. She was sobbing and her cheeks were covered in thick, black lines where her mascara had run down her face.

“Doctor Keats?” I whispered in disbelief.

“Yes that’s right, Kiera,” Taylor smiled, “Your doctor.”

“What’s she doing here?” I said, unable to take my eyes from her.
“She has nothing to do with this!”

“Kiera? Kiera, is that you?” Keats croaked as she fought back her tears.

“Yes it’s me,” I said. I’d never really liked the woman, but I’d never wished her any harm. Stepping through the fog, I moved closer so that she could see me, I didn’t want her to feel alone.

“Taylor, let her go,” I said.

“Oh you want to bargain?” and he flashed his smashed-looking teeth at me again. “Okay. How about your friend Potter releases Phillips? That would be a start.”

With his hands still fixed around Phillips’ throat, Potter looked over at Taylor and said, “The doctor means nothing to me.”

“But she does to me,” I told him. “I can’t just let her die.”

“She’s gonna die anyway,” Potter said, looking at me.

“Please Potter,” I groaned.

Looking at Keats standing in the clearing, head bowed forward and arms tied behind her, Potter released his hold on Phillips. Dropping to the ground, Phillips rubbed his throat with his hands and pulled himself up. Potter sauntered back across the clearing and stood next to Murphy.

“Now let her go,” I said to Taylor.

“Oh Kiera, I wish it was as easy as that,” Taylor said, his eyes sparkling in the gloom.

“I told you,” Potter said, looking at me while lighting another cigarette.

Ignoring him, I stared at Taylor and said, “Please, she has nothing to do with this.”

“But she does,” Taylor said. “Thanks to you, she knows way too much about us – about the Vampyrus.”

“But she never believed a word that I told her,” I tried to assure him. “She thought I was mad...making the whole -“ but before I’d the chance to finish, Mrs. Payne had sprung through the air as if being launched from a cannon and clung to Doctor Keats’ shoulders. Looking like a giant moth, the old woman swarmed around Doctor Keats as she buried her fangs into her neck. With her arms fastened behind her back, Keats wobbled and stumbled then tipped over onto the ground. Mrs. Payne swooped upwards, her wings shining orange in the light from the moon, then darted back towards the ground and her kill. Thrashing her legs out and screaming, Doctor Keats tried to roll away as blood pumped in a black stream from her throat. Her screams sounded as if she was gargling on a throat full of water as blood jetted from her mouth. Smelling the blood, Mrs. Payne lunged at her again, her wings flitting back and forth behind her. Pulling Kayla close

to me and turning away, I couldn't help but notice the look of hunger in Murphy, Potter, and Luke's eyes as they watched the old woman feed.

Within moments, Doctor Keats had stopped kicking out. Her legs twitched once or twice more then fell still. Climbing from her body, Mrs. Payne wiped away the black-coloured blood that swung from her chin and swooped back towards Philips and Taylor.

"I'm sure that was rather unpleasant for all concerned," Taylor said, his voice was soothing as if he actually cared about the way we felt. "So to avoid any further unpleasantness, Kiera, offer up either Murphy, Potter, or Bishop."

"In exchange for what?" I asked, my heart racing in my chest. "For one of these," Taylor smiled, and from behind him, two figures were shoved into the clearing. Like Doctor Keats, the hands of the two people were secured behind their back.

Screwing up my eyes and peering through the fog, I tried to make out the identity of the two people now standing in the clearing. I could see that they were both male, and at first I didn't recognise them. But as the fog cleared a little in front of them, I could see that one of the males was the owner of the pawnbrokers in Havensfield and the other was David Evans, the gardener who had stolen Mrs. Lovelace's wedding ring. Realising who they were, I shouted across the clearing at Taylor and said, "You've got this

all wrong. These people mean nothing to me, Taylor. You might as well let them go.”

Then without a moment’s hesitation, Taylor said to Mrs. Payne and Phillips, “You heard her, they mean nothing to her.”

Then just before he fell to the floor under the weight of Phillips, I heard the gardener say, “I’m sorry I took the old woman’s ring.” Then he was gone in a spray of red, as Phillips ripped his throat almost in two. Just like the gardener, the pawnbroker disappeared behind Mrs. Payne’s wings as she brought him to his knees and began to feed on him.

As the two of them fed, Taylor looked at me and said, “Perhaps in time, we will come to someone that you really do care about.” Then clicking his bony fingers he shouted. “Next!”

Then it was my turn to drop to my knees as I saw Mrs. Lovelace and Sparky stagger from the tree line. Mrs. Lovelace looked tired and confused, her face drawn and gaunt looking. Sparky stumbled, then righted himself as he peered through the fog.

“*You can’t do this!*” I screeched at the top of my voice. “Taylor, please I beg you – don’t hurt them!”

“At last we have someone that you *do* care about, Kiera Hudson,” Taylor smiled.

Almost grovelling on my hands and knees, I lurched forwards, my hands held out before me as if in prayer. “Please, I beg you,” I cried. “Don’t hurt them. They have done nothing to you!”

“Then perhaps you would like to nominate two of your friends to take their places,” Taylor said, his voice now cold and demanding.

“But I can’t do that either,” I sobbed. “They’re my friends, too!”

“I’m growing tired of this sentiment...” Taylor started.

“Take me,” I pleaded. “Take me in place of all of them. I’m important to you, aren’t I?”

Ignoring me, Taylor said again, “Which of your friends is it to be?”

“I can’t!” I screeched at him, slamming my fists against my knees. “Please don’t make me choose!”

Then I felt a hand against my shoulder, and looking up I could see Luke smiling down at me. “It’s okay, Kiera,” he whispered.

Realising what he was about to do, I pulled myself up and held onto him. “No! You can’t do this, Luke. I won’t let you!”

Pulling me tight, he whispered in my ear, ‘It’s okay, Kiera.’

“It’s not okay,” I sobbed against him.

“It’s the only way,” he said, pulling from me.

“No!” I cried and held onto his hands, refusing to let him go.

Then pitching out his cigarette, Potter stepped forward, and blowing smoke from the corner of his mouth he said to Luke, “Come on, lover-boy, let’s get this over with.”

Leaning forward one last time, I kissed Luke gently on the lips as he stepped away, crossing the clearing towards Taylor, Phillips, and Mrs. Payne.

Looking back over my shoulder, I could see Murphy standing with his arm tucked around Kayla’s shoulder. He looked suddenly haggard and old as he watched his friends hand themselves over and Kayla’s eyes spilt tears onto her cheeks. Turning back, I watched as Luke and Potter knelt down before Taylor.

Chapter Twenty-Eight

“This is all my fault!” Kayla shrieked from behind me and before I’d even the chance to turn round, she was soaring over my head. And as she did, I saw her wings tear through her shirt and ripple out on either side of her back. But to my surprise, they were no longer the delicate butterfly-type wings I’d seen before, but they were now strong and powerful, just like a bird of prey.

Before Philips knew what was happening, Kayla was yanking him back through the air and away from Luke who knelt before him. Philips made a grunting sound as he slammed into a nearby tree.

“You lied to me!” Kayla screamed, and I could see that her mouth was full of razor-sharp teeth. “You said you were my friend but you used me to get at those that really care about me!” Then she was off again, tearing through the fog towards Phillips.

From above, the sky boomed as if being ripped apart. Looking up, I could see Murphy screaming overhead, his shirt falling away in jagged strips. With the force of a rocket, he smashed into Taylor, sending him

crashing into the branches of a tree. It wobbled and lurched, its roots ripping from the earth under the full force of Taylor smashing into it.

There was an ear-splitting scream as Mrs. Payne took off into the air like a firework and raced towards Murphy. Seeing my chance, I raced through the dirty fog to Sparky and Mrs. Lovelace.

“Kiera, what’s going on here?” Sparky shouted over the sound of falling branches and the roaring of thunderclaps overhead.

“I don’t have time to explain now!” I hollered back, unfastening the cable that bound his wrists. “Just get Mrs. Lovelace away from here.”

Looking at me while rubbing his wrists, his mouth opened and closed like a fish. Breaking Mrs. Lovelace’s bonds, she peered at me through the fog and said, “Is that really you, Kiera my dear?”

“Yes,” I told her, trying not to show the panic in my voice.

“This is all terribly exciting,” she said, gripping my arm with her liver-spotted hands.

Looking over her shoulder, I said to Sparky, “Just get her out of here!”

“Where to?” Sparky asked, his forehead and cheeks glowing red from the acne that still ravished his face.

“On the other side of the woods,” I said pointing into the distance, “you’ll find the manor house. Take her there and lock all the doors.”

“But what about you?” he asked, his voice as caring as usual.

“Don’t worry about me,” I said. “I’ll meet you back there later – *now go!*”

“We’ll have a nice cup of tea waiting for you,” Mrs. Lovelace said as Sparky led her away towards the trees. “And that new gardener you got me is marvellous...” But the rest of what she had to say was lost as she disappeared into the fog with Sparky.

Turning around, to my horror, I saw Kayla struggling with Phillips. He had her round the waist and they were tumbling out of the sky towards me.

“*Help me!*” Kayla screamed, as the ground rushed up towards her. Then there was a blaze of shadows as something swooped in and snatched Kayla from Phillips’ arms. The shadow rocketed towards the ground, then stopped suddenly just inches above the grass and I could see that it was Potter who had saved her. He held her tight in his thick-set arms and his bare chest looked taut and hard.

“Don’t just stand there admiring the view,” he snapped at me. “Get her out of here.”

“I’m not going anywhere!” Kayla said in defiance. “I caused this!”

Ignoring her, Potter stared at me and said, “Get rid of the kid.” Then he was gone, ascending into the sky.

“That guy’s such a dick!” Kayla hissed.

“You know it,” I said back.

Glancing up into the night, I could just make out a series of shadows racing back and forth through the fog. I couldn’t see who was who or what was what. Then taking Potter’s advice, I gripped hold of Kayla’s hand and we raced together towards the shelter of the trees. But before reaching them, Taylor swooped out of the sky, landing on the ground before us. With his wings unravelled on either side of him, he raised his arms, tilted his head back and called out, “Vampires, wake!”

Then, as if it had all been planned, the trees surrounding the clearing began to shake. Branches bowed and snapped, showering the ground with leaves. Looking up, I screamed as pale-faced vampires leapt from the tree tops and into the clearing. Just like the vampires I’d witnessed in The Ragged Cove and my nightmares, they appeared frenzied and crazed as they sniffed the air and drool ran like goo from their fangs. The vampires’ eyes rolled in their sockets like burning coals in black holes. Spinning round, I watched as vampires leapt into the clearing, not only from the treetops, but from the black spaces between them. They screamed and snapped their jaws at the air like rabid dogs. Pulling Kayla close, I heard the sound of groaning behind me.

Spinning round, I watched as the corpses of Doctor Keats, David Evans, and the pawnbroker began to twitch and stir at my feet.

“What’s happening to them?” Kayla asked. “I thought they were dead!”

“They were and they are -” I breathed. “They were bitten by the Vampyrus, so now...”

“Now *what?*” she asked, her voice brimming with fear.

“Now they’re vampires,” I told her.

Doctor Keats sprang up like a jack-in-the-box, her neck making a clicking noise as she straightened her head on her torn neck. Blood ran in thick streams down the front of her tweed suit and splattered Evans’ writhing hand. Smelling the blood, Evans stuck his fingers into his mouth and sucked the blood from them like a child with a soother. The pawnbroker dragged himself to his knees, then, as if receiving some kind of electric shock, he jumped to his feet.

“Hungry,” he groaned and came forward.

Whichever way I turned, crazed-looking vampires approached Kayla and me. Their eyes glowed red through the fog, their snapping fangs chattering in the dark. Doctor Keats reached for Kayla and like a wild animal, Kayla lunged at her hand, tearing three of her fingers off with her

fangs. Scrunching up her face as if her mouth were full of acid, Kayla spat the fingers away, her wings humming beside me.

Raising her hand, Doctor Keats looked at the spaces where she had once had fingers and smiled through the gap at Kayla. Then lunging forward at Kayla, Doctor Keats was yanked backwards into the sky. In her place stood Luke. The scars on his chest and face glowing blue and black, his tattered wings arched high above his back. Throwing out his arms on either side of him, Evans' and the pawnbroker's heads flew from their shoulders, disappearing into the fog. Their bodies stood momentarily as unaware that their heads were now missing. Then they started to spasm and jerk until they collapsed to the ground.

"How we doing?" he asked.

"Not good," I said, scanning the vampires that closed in on us from every direction.

"Nothing's changed there then," he said. Fluttering past me in a spray of shadows, he was tearing to pieces several of the vampires that had drawn near. Blood rained down and spattered the ground.

Through the fog came the sound of thunder. I peered into it and my left eye began to weep red tears. A flash of blinding white light penetrated my skull then everything went black then grey. Tendrils of fog swirled around me, and as I looked into it, I realised that I could see through it.

Ahead of me I could see Potter and Murphy cutting their way through the vampires. But it was more than just seeing through the fog, it was like the whole world had slowed down and I could *see* everything in minute detail. It was only then as I watched Potter and Murphy tear the vampires to shreds that I realised their true power and ferocity. In what would have taken place in a blink of the eye, I watched played out in slow time. Potter's arms shimmied as his claws sliced through the bodies of the unsuspecting vampires that made their way towards Kayla and me. Murphy's teeth tore open their faces, ripping their tongues from their throats and spitting them away like bloated worms. Potter punched his fingernails through the chests of vampires, tearing out their hearts. The two of them worked with such speed, that the vampires only realised what had happened to them by the time several others had experienced the same fate. They toppled over like a stack of dominoes in zero gravity.

Then it was gone, as the flash of light popped in front of my eyes again. I toppled backwards as if I'd been punched in the face, and before I knew what was happening, someone had steadied me by taking hold of my arm.

"Easy, tiger," Potter whispered in my ear, then he was gone again, cutting and slicing his way through the never-ending wake of vampires that

streamed into the clearing. He was followed by a trail of shadows and I guessed this was Murphy taking out any of the vampires Potter missed.

I'd been so blinded by these visions that I hadn't noticed Phillips and Mrs. Payne swoop down in the clearing and land next to Taylor. The space that Kayla and I occupied became smaller and smaller. We were within touching distance of them.

"Now, let's take what we really came for," Taylor said, stepping closer to Kayla and me.

Taking Kayla's hand in mine, we both flinched as Mrs. Payne threw herself at us. Her fingernails almost seemed to touch my chest and I could feel her stale breath against my face as a spray of shadows appeared behind her. Before I could truly understand what was happening, Kayla had let go of my hand, sprang into the air, got behind Mrs. Payne, and gnawed through her neck with her fangs. I was only aware of what had happened when Mrs. Payne opened her mouth to scream. She made a belching noise as a rush of air shot through the opening that Kayla had made in her throat. Realising that something was wrong, Mrs. Payne glanced back and in doing so, her head swivelled on her neck like an owl, then fell off. With her body still hovering before me and her wings buzzing, Kayla flung it aside.

"Boy did that woman suck," Kayla said, wiping blood from her lips, "but not anymore." She looked at me and winked, and then she was gone,

snatched up into the fog by Phillips.

“Kayla!” I screamed, watching her disappear above me.

“Where is she?” Luke said, appearing at my side.

“Phillips has taken her!” I yelled pointing into the sky.

Luke leapt into the air, but wasn’t quick enough. One of the vampires that circled us sprang into the air. Sinking its fangs into Luke’s leg, it dragged him back to the ground. Within seconds Luke was overpowered by gnashing and shrieking vampires. Helpless to do anything, I watched as he was pulled to the ground, where he disappeared from view beneath the mountain of vampires that swarmed over him.

“So that just leaves me and you,” a voice said, and I spun around to see Taylor leering at me through the fog. He came forward, a cluster of vampires behind him. I had nowhere to go. Then I was grabbed from behind. I shrieked and looked around to see Murphy looking at me.

“Run, Kiera!” he boomed, just as a set of vampire claws dug into his bare shoulders and dragged him to the ground. Within moments, like Luke before him, he was drowning beneath a wave of starving vampires. With my knees starting to buckle and the world swimming in and out of focus before me, I turned around to see Taylor reaching for me.

“Come with me, Kiera, my master has been dying to meet you,” he smiled. But through the fog in my own mind and the fog that wafted all

around us, I saw his smile fade, as a thin stream of blood ran from the corner of his mouth. His eyes rolled back in their sockets, then out onto his cheeks popped two claw-like fingers that wiggled from deep in his eye sockets. Covering my mouth with my hands, there was a sickening squelching sound as the fingers disappeared back into his skull and Taylor dropped forward onto his knees revealing Potter behind him. His fingers were covered in blood and something which looked close to grey-coloured jelly.

“I’m blind,” Taylor groaned at my feet. But before he’d a chance to say anything else, Potter had kicked him over then crushed his skull with the heel of his boot. Reaching for me, Potter pulled me close, out of reach of the vampires that circled us.

“Philips has taken Kayla,” I said trying to pull away from him. “And the vampires have...have...” I couldn’t bring myself to say anymore, as tears ran down my cheeks, washing away the blood that had come from my eye.

“Let’s get to the safety of the summerhouse,” Potter growled at me, his fangs looking pink where they had been smeared with blood.

“But...” I started.

“We’ve got to get to the chamber beneath the summerhouse. That’s where I buried the crucifixes and holy water!” he reminded me.

“But...” I tried again, looking back over my shoulder at where Luke and Murphy had disappeared beneath a sea of vampires.

“There’s too many of them!” he shouted into my face. “We have to get to the summerhouse!”

Then standing in front of me like a shield, he pin wheeled his arms like a set of rotary blades and began to cut a path through the vampires as he led me to safety. The vampires hissed, spat and lunged at us, as Potter carved his way through them. I wondered why he hadn’t just picked me up and flown over them, but as I looked at his wings, I could see they had big, gaping holes in them, tears and rips where he had been attacked by the vampires.

Reaching the summerhouse, Potter shoved me forward and up the stairs to the white-painted front door. With his back pressed against mine, Potter lashed and kicked out at the vampires that pursued us up the steps. Grabbing hold of the door handle, I twisted it and the door flew open. Pushing me inside and slamming the door shut behind us, Potter dragged a chair away from the table and wedged it against the door.

“I don’t think that’s going to hold them for long,” I shouted over the shrieks and groans of the vampires that were now circling the summerhouse outside.

“It only has to last long enough for me to get this hatch open!” he yelled back. Throwing the table aside, he pulled back the carpet beneath it and revealed the hatch. Looking back at me and smiling, he said, “Now this is what I call good planning.”

Without wasting another moment, Potter yanked back the hatch, looked inside, and immediately closed it again.

“What’s wrong?” I shouted, seeing the fear in his face.

“This is not my fault,” he said, staring at me, his mouth open in shock.

“What’s not your fault?” I screamed at him, the chair holding the door closed now scraping against the floor under the weight of the vampires.

“You know you said that Phillips would have to have kept the vampires hidden somewhere out of the light?” he said.

“Yeah?” I said. Then reading the fear in his eyes, I added, “You’re kidding me! Please tell me that you’re joking!”

Shaking his head and looking back down at the hatch, Potter shouted, “They’re hidden beneath us!”

No sooner had the words left his lips, the hatch started to open. White fingers curled up from beneath the hatch and made a grab for Potter’s foot. Ramming his boot down hard, the hatch snapped closed again.

“I’m not going to be able to stand on this forever,” he shouted at me.

Then from behind him, the window broke in a shower of glass, as the vampires reached in at us. The door began to buckle against its frame as the vampires charged at the door from outside. Parts of the door had begun to splinter and the hinges had started to come away from the wall. I looked at Potter as he wobbled to and fro on top of the hatch as the vampires beneath us fought their way out. The sound of scuttling from above was almost deafening as vampires clambered over the roof, desperate to find a way in.

“Come away from the door!” Potter shouted, holding his hand out.

Taking it, he pulled me into his arms and wrapped his tattered wings around me. It was as if it was his last attempt at protecting me. As I looked up into his rugged face, I didn’t ever think that I would spend my last living moments held in his arms. Pressed against his chest, I could feel his heart racing and mine matched it.

Looking into his blazing eyes, I said, “I want to know one thing before I die.”

“Oh yeah?” he said, looking down at me. “What’s that?”

“Did you mean what you said out there?” I asked him, as the door started to come away from its frame.

“What did I say?”

“You said that you made a mistake thinking that a girl like me would be interested in a guy like you,” I reminded him.

Then smiling down at me, he said, “Don’t go getting yourself all excited, sweet-cheeks, I said that for Luke, not for you,” and he kissed me.

The sudden sound of screaming came from outside. But it was more than screaming, it was the sound of people crying out in agony. Then the arms that were reaching in through the windows, exploded into chunks of dust and the fingers curled around the edge of the door broke away like ash.

Pulling myself free of Potter, I ran to the window and peered out. Like a shadow fleeting past in the fog, I could see someone or something moving at great speed.

“There’s someone out there,” I whispered, “and they seem to be slaughtering all the vampires.”

“That’s impossible,” Potter said. “There’s too many for just one person to -” but before he’d had the chance to finish, the door to the summerhouse flew inwards and off its hinges. A figure stood in the doorway, a black silhouette against the orange moon.

“Where’s Kayla Hunt?” the figure asked, the voice male, but still young.

“Who are you?” I asked, stepping forward in an attempt to get a better look at him.

“Where’s Kayla Hunt?” he asked again, his voice flat and even.

“They’ve taken her,” I told him.

“Taken her where?” and now his voice sounded agitated.

“That’s the million dollar question,” Potter said.

“Who *are* you?” I asked him again.

Stepping out of the shadows so I could see his face, he looked at me with eyes that seemed to penetrate my very soul and he said, “My name is Isidor Smith and I’ve been sent to rescue Kayla”

Chapter Twenty-Nine

Pushing Potter and me aside, Isidor went to the trap door. Looking back at Potter, he said, “Are you ready for this?”

“Bring it,” Potter smirked, egging Isidor on.

No sooner had the hatch been yanked open, Isidor and Potter disappeared into the darkness beneath it. Teetering on the edge of the hatch, I looked down but all I could see was a blur of shadows and hear the ear-splitting sound of vampires dying.

Then silence.

Scrambling from the darkness, Isidor and Potter appeared from beneath the hatch. Both stood and wiped blood from their mouths and I noticed Potter had it smeared across his chest.

Isidor stared at me from beneath a navy-blue baseball cap. His right eyebrow was pierced with a small silver stud and his otherwise sharp and clean cut look was spoilt by a short, stubby beard that hung from his chin. An intricate pattern of black flames tattooed the left side of his neck and

licked just beneath his jaw line. His eyes were such a dark shade of brown that they were almost black. He was tall and his frame was lean.

I remembered Doctor Ravenwood saying that Isidor was eighteen years-old, and despite the tuft of beard, piercing and tattoo, he still had a boyish quality about him. Turning his back on us, Isidor stepped back onto the porch and out into the night. As he went, I noticed what appeared to be a strangely-fashioned crossbow slung over his back and a rucksack that was full of wooden stakes. He wore a long dark brown coat that hung just above his knees, blue jeans, and red baseball boots.

As he left the summerhouse, I looked back at Potter who raised an eyebrow at me. Peering out through the splintered doorway, I could see that the clearing was covered in mounds of what looked like snow. But, standing on the porch, I could see that it wasn't snow at all, but a thick blanket of ash that now covered the ground. It was all over the walls and roof of the summerhouse, and some of the chalky remains of the vampires floated in the air like snowflakes.

Realising that the immediate threat of the vampires had gone, I rushed past Isidor and down the porch steps.

"Did you see Luke?" I asked, praying that perhaps he'd managed to escape.

“Be careful,” Isidor warned. “There might still be some of those bloodsuckers out here.”

Ignoring him, I said, “Did you see Luke – he was out here, the vampires were -”

“Duck!” Isidor shouted, and in a blink of an eye he took the odd-looking crossbow from his back, loaded and fired it over my head.

Crouching, I looked back to see a vampire tearing from the woods at me, its teeth violet with blood, eyes crazed and bulging from their sockets. Within touching distance from me, the stake that Isidor had unleashed ripped through the chest of the approaching creature, tearing it back through the air. Clutching at its chest, the vampire exploded into a shower of dust which erupted into the air like a flour bomb.

Even before the powdery remains of the vampire had hit the ground, Isidor had thrown the crossbow across his back and said, “So who’s this Luke guy you keep yapping on about?”

“He’s my friend,” I told him, making my way back through the mist and fog to where I’d seen Luke fall.

“More than a friend, I sense,” Isidor said, coming down the porch steps towards me. Then sniffing the air like a wolf he smiled and added, “No, he’s more than a friend to you.”

“How do you figure that?” I asked, kicking over piles of ash with the tip of my boot in a desperate search for Luke.

“It’s your pheromones!” he said matter-of-factly.

“My what?” I asked, not really paying too much attention as I searched the remains of the vampires that littered the clearing.

“They’re scents you give off when you’re aroused,” he explained.

“It’s a pretty easy concept to grasp. What they do is allow animals to attract each other on a subconscious level. They activate the more basic instincts in animals -”

“I’m no animal,” I said without looking back at him.

“Well maybe not, but I can sure smell that you’ve got it bad for this Luke dude,” he said.

Then I remembered Ravenwood telling me that Isidor had a heightened sense of smell just like my sight and Kayla’s hearing. Looking back at him, I saw Potter step from the now derelict summerhouse and out onto the porch. Isidor looked at him, sniffed the air, then stared at me.

“What you staring at?” I asked him.

“Jeez, and I thought your hormones were raging – that guy reeks,” he said. Then smiling he added, “Perhaps it isn’t this Luke dude you’ve got the hots for...”

“Give me a break,” I groaned, looking back at Potter who now had a cigarette dangling from the corner of his mouth while he inspected his wings. “Don’t just stand there Potter, help me find Luke and Murphy!”

“What about Kayla?” Isidor chipped in.

Then as if my prayers had been answered, a muffled groaning sound came from somewhere nearby within the fog. “Over here!” I shouted at Potter and waved my arm in the air to grab his attention. Looking up at me, he flittered from the porch in a haze of shadows and was next to me. Making our way towards the sound with Isidor at our heels, my heart began to pound in my chest at what I might stumble across. Ahead, I could just see an outstretched arm sticking up from beneath a mound of silver ash. Running towards it, I shoved the ash away like a broken sandcastle and pulled at the arm.

He’s alive! I thought to myself with tears standing in my eyes.

Reaching into the ash, Potter grabbed the other arm and pulled Murphy from within it. His hair was covered grey as was his face and bare chest. He looked as if he’d just climbed out of a chalk pit.

“Where’s Luke?” I asked, taking him by the shoulders.

Rubbing his eyes with the backs of his hands then shaking the vampire remains from his hair, he looked at me and said, “I saw him break free.”

Hearing this, my heart leapt into my throat. “Where is he?” I said looking around at the piles of ash.

“Dunno,” Murphy croaked and started to cough the dust from his lungs. “He just took off.”

“Took off where?” I asked, desperate to know what had happened to him.

“He went after the girl,” Murphy explained, shaking the ash from his wings like a dog shaking sea water from its fur.

“Kayla?” Isidor said, stepping forward. “He went after Kayla?”

“Who are you?” Murphy asked, eyeing him with some suspicion.

“Which way did they go?” Isidor asked, eager to get after them.

“Somewhere up there,” Murphy said, pointing into the night sky.

“Unless you got yourself a set of wings kid, you won’t be catching ‘em.”

“I’ve got wings,” Isidor said, unfastening his coat.

As he pulled it opened, I gasped, but not at the sight of the many sets of rosary beads that hung against his bare chest, nor the many wooden stakes that had been attached to the inside of his coat, but at the sight of his wings. These were nothing like the wings I had seen on any of the other Vampyrus. Unlike their wings, Isidor’s wings hung from beneath his arms and were attached to his ribcage. As he stood with both arms extended on

either side of him, it looked almost as if he had two large black webs concealed beneath his arms.

Looking at Isidor's wings and the collection of rosary beads that swung from around his neck, Potter said, "Okay, Madonna, I think we get the picture. Now zip your coat up before you catch a cold."

Looking a little hurt, he turned to Potter and said, "I saved your butt, dude, and don't you forget it!"

"I'm sure having you around will be a constant reminder," Potter said flicking his cigarette away.

"And that's another thing," Isidor growled. "I have a very sensitive sense of smell and if we're gonna be on the same team -" "Team!" Murphy and Potter said together.

"Now don't you go getting any funny ideas, kid," Potter started.

"Who you calling 'kid'?" Isidor said, striding towards Potter.

"Enough already!" I shouted. "Kayla's been snatched, if you'd forgotten, and Luke's gone after her and god only knows how badly injured he maybe and all you two can worry about..." I started and my bottom lip started to tremble.

"It's okay, Kiera," Murphy said, placing his hand over mine.

"It's not okay! If you hadn't noticed, we barely got out of this alive tonight!" Then looking at him, I said, "And how did you manage to

escape?”

Uncurling the fingers of his other hand, Murphy revealed the small silver crucifix tiepin that I’d seen him wearing on the very first day that I’d met him in The Ragged Cove. Winking at me he said, “I told you, Kiera Hudson, this little thing will offer you more protection than any gun, Taser, or baton.”

“What about Luke?” I asked. “How did he manage to escape?”

“That, I don’t know,” he said, shaking his head at me. “But he got away somehow and wasted no time in going after Philips and the girl.”

“So are we gonna stand here all night yapping or are we going after them?” Isidor said, almost seeming to hop from foot to foot with energy.

“No,” Murphy said, walking away and heading out of the clearing towards the woods.

“No?” Isidor said going after him. “You don’t seem to understand – I’ve been sent to rescue her.”

“Goodbye then,” Potter said, following his sergeant.

But -” Isidor started.

“No buts,” Murphy said, turning to look at him. “We need to get back to the manor house.”

“Why?” Isidor pushed.

“If you hadn’t of noticed,” Murphy said, “we ain’t in too good a shape. My boy Potter here needs to rest those wings, and I feel like I’ve been kicked and punched to hell and back.”

“But what about Luke?” I asked.

“What *about* Luke?” someone said from over my shoulder.

Turning, I watched Luke step out of the fog that continued to swirl around the trees and clearing. Running, I threw my arms around him.

“Be gentle,” he winced. “I’m hurting.”

“Sorry,” I whispered, but still held onto him as I guided him towards the others. I noticed that as he walked, he almost seemed to shuffle and stoop. “I’m so happy to see you!”

“I’m sorry,” he said, using me as a support.

“For what?” I asked.

“For losing Kayla,” he said. “Phillips had too much of a head start on me. And what, with my wings in tatters, I just couldn’t keep up. I really did try.”

“It’s not your fault,” I told him. “We’ll find her.”

“When?” Isidor asked, catching the tail end of our conversation.

“Can’t you see he needs rest?” Potter cut in, dismissing Isidor and helping support Luke by gripping him under the arm.

“But -” Isidor started again.

“You don’t listen too good, do ya kid?” Murphy barked. “We ain’t gonna be no good to Kayla like this. But if you think you can do better on your own, so long and good luck.”

“I’m not afraid of any vampires,” Isidor said puffing out his chest. “Can’t you see what I did here tonight?”

Stepping so close to Isidor that their noses were almost touching, Murphy said, “What happened here tonight was nothing compared to what’s coming. This was a mere sideshow. You think because you harpooned a few vampires you’re ready to take on a whole army? Because that’s what’s coming, kid – an army – and a war like you couldn’t imagine in your wildest hallucinations. So if you want to be on *our* team, as you put it, shut your face and fall into line.”

Without waiting for a response, Murphy disappeared into the shadows and fog as he headed back towards the manor. Making sure that Potter had hold of Luke, I went over to Isidor who stood looking glumly at the ground.

“He isn’t so bad,” I said, remembering how Murphy and Potter had first treated me back in The Ragged Cove.

“The guy’s a dick,” Isidor muttered under his breath.

“I thought that at first – but he kind of grows on you,” I half-smiled. “Even Potter has his moments I guess.” Tugging at the sleeve of his jacket,

I led him through the woods and towards the manor.

“I want to go after Kayla as much as you do,” I told him. “But Murphy’s right, they won’t be any good tracking her in their state.”

“I guess,” Isidor said.

We walked in silence for a while, always keeping Luke, Potter and Murphy in sight as they staggered and limped between the trees. They looked like the last of the Calvary heading home from the battlefield.

We cleared the woods and headed across the vast lawns to the manor. Turning to look at Isidor, I could see that he looked troubled. I guessed he was worried about what Lady Hunt would say to him when she realised he had failed to save her daughter. Knowing that I had failed her too, I said, “Don’t worry about Lady Hunt. I’ll tell her what happened.”

“Lady Hunt?” Isidor said, raising an eyebrow at me. “She’s dead.”

“Dead?” I asked, not believing what I was hearing. “How?”

“The guy who sent me to find Kayla – he murdered her,” Isidor explained.

“What was his name?” I asked, confused.

“He didn’t give me his proper name,” Isidor said, “He just told me to call him Sparky.”

Chapter Thirty

“Sparky?” I said, believing that I must have misheard him.

“Yeah, some lanky dude, with a face like a pizza,” Isidor groaned.

“Why, do you know him?”

“Yeah maybe,” I whispered, trying to make sense of what he had just told me. “Why did he ask you to come and get Kayla for him?”

“Because, he said if I didn’t he was gonna kill my mother,” Isidor said. “She went missing a few months ago – then this Sparky showed up out of the blue a few days ago and said that he had her – but I could save her life if I did this one thing for him. Now you can see why I’m so desperate to get this Kayla back for him.”

With my knees feeling as if they were going to give way beneath me, I tried to suck in breath. Then as if being hit by a freight train my head rocked back and there was a brilliant flash of white light and all I could see was those half-breed children lying in their beds clutching at the air as their breathing apparatus was unplugged. I could see broken images of Doctor Ravenwood as if he was being reflected back at me in a thousand broken

pieces of glass. He looked asleep – unconscious – dead? These were followed with crystal-clear memories of sitting in my flat with Sparky, as he listened intently to what had happened to me in The Ragged Cove. And in my heart I now realised why he was the only one who had believed me – because he was one of them – sent to befriend me, hoping that I would lead him to my friends. That’s how Phillips and Taylor knew who I’d had contact with since returning from the Cove. Their names and addresses. And the phone call – what were the chances of me ringing on the very same day and time that Phillips was sent to capture Sparky? Taylor and Phillips had wanted me to fear for his safety so Sparky could use himself as a bargaining tool when the time was right. I had seen everything but had *seen* nothing at all. While my friends and me were fighting for our lives at the summerhouse, Sparky was to sneak away back to the manor and....those images of the half-breed children swam before my eyes again...I could see myself pointing Sparky in the direction of the manor and telling him to go and hide there. But what was it Sparky wanted...?

“Are you okay?” someone said in my ear. “Kiera, wake up!”

Opening my eyes, I could see Luke, Potter, Murphy, and Isidor looking down at me.

“Kiera, what’s wrong?” Luke asked, kneeling beside me.

“Her eye’s doing that bleeding-thing again,” Potter pointed out.

“He just wants a way inside the manor,” I mumbled.

“Who does?” Murphy said. “Who are you talking about?”

“Sparky,” I said, trying to get up.

“Who in the hell is Sparky?” Potter grumbled.

“I thought he was my friend!” I cried and ran towards the manor.

“Kiera!” Luke shouted behind me. “Kiera, what’s going on?”

Pushing against the big oak door, I stumbled into the great hall.

“Sparky!” I screamed. Then looking to my right I could see that the door to the drawing room was open. “What have you done?” I whispered, seeing the crumpled body of Mrs. Lovelace lying on the floor. Racing into the room, I dropped to my knees and rolled her over.

“Mrs. Lovelace,” I said, my voice trembling. Feeling something warm and sticky covering my fingers, I pulled them free of Mrs. Lovelace and winced at the blood that covered them. Her eyes stared blankly up at me, but it wasn’t her eyes that made my heart almost stop, but the look of sheer horror engraved into her face and the opening that ran from just beneath her wrinkled chin to her chest bone. From behind me, I could hear the sound of footsteps as the others came running into the hallway. Holding Mrs. Lovelace’s cold hand in mine, I stroked the tissue-thin skin that covered it.

“I’m so sorry,” I sobbed. “I’m so sorry.”

Feeling a hand fall upon my shoulder, I looked up to find Luke next to me. “What’s going on here?”

“I was tricked, Luke,” I cried. “I thought he was my friend – but all he really wanted was to get...”

“You,” he said, helping me to stand and taking me in his arms while the others looked from the doorway.

“No, not me,” I said. “If it was me that he wanted then he had plenty of opportunities. He wanted something else.”

“But what?” Luke asked, wiping away my tears.

“The half-breeds on the ward,” Murphy said, his voice low and grim. Then turning in the doorway, he limped as fast as he could towards the stairs.

Letting go of me, Luke ran towards the door, his wings trailing behind him like a torn cape. Looking at Potter, he said, “How you feeling, my friend?”

“Pissed off! I was ready to die for that loser.” Then glaring at me, he added, “Some friend he turned out to be.”

“It’s not my fault!” I hissed and raced up the stairs after Luke and Murphy.

“Can someone tell me what in the hell is going on here?” I heard Isidor shout as he stood alone at the foot of the stairs.

“Why not tag along and you might find out!” Potter hollered back at him.

Reaching the foot of the stairs that led to the *‘forbidden’* wing, Luke snatched up a lantern from the small table on the landing and we ran as hard and as fast as we could along the passageway to the narrow staircase that led to the secret ward in the attic. With my heart pounding in my chest and lungs burning, I followed my friends through the door at the top of the stairs and into the ward. The sight that Luke captured in the glow of the lantern made me want to scream.

Covering my face with my hands, I stumbled back against the wall of the attic. It was too late, the sight of those half-breeds lying half in and out of their beds would haunt me forever. Some were lying on the floor as if they had crawled after the oxygen tanks that had been taken from them. Others lay like alabaster statues, their hands clawing at their throats as they had struggled for breath, their tortured looks of pain forever engraved on their faces. These images seared themselves into my mind and I doubted I would ever be rid of them.

Isidor was last to enter the room and stumble across the devastating scene. He stood motionless, his mouth wide open in shock. Stepping over the lifeless bodies, Murphy made his way to the room at the far end of the ward where Doctor Ravenwood had examined me.

“Ravenwood?” he called out opening the door to the examination room. Then within seconds, he was back in the ward again. “He’s been taken,” he informed us. “But by the mess in there, it looks as if he put up a fight.”

“But why would they want Doctor Ravenwood?” I asked him.

“He was working on a cure with Lord Hunt that would have helped these half-breeds,” he explained. “They’ve already taken Lord Hunt so they’ve come for the other part of the team.”

Looking about the room, I suddenly noticed something missing, but it wasn’t just something – it was two of the half-breeds that Ravenwood had earlier introduced me to while they had slept– the girl, Alice, and the boy.

“Two of them are missing,” I breathed.

“What?” Potter snapped.

“Alice and the boy, they’re gone,” I told him. “There were ten beds and ten half-breeds. There are still ten beds but only eight bodies.”

“You’re right, Kiera,” Luke said.

“Can someone tell me what’s going on here?” Isidor asked again.

“Shut it!” Potter barked at him.

“They must have taken the two of them,” Luke said, looking at me then at Murphy.

“But why only two?” Murphy wondered, combing his grey hair from his brow.

“Perhaps they only wanted the half-breeds that might survive,” I said. “After all, they would need to test this cure on a living half-breed – wouldn’t they?”

“That’s why they wanted Kayla,” Isidor said from the doorway. Turning, we all looked at him and in the glow of the lantern that Luke held up before him, Isidor’s young and boyish looks appeared to have faded and he now looked old – almost haggard.

“What did you say?’ Potter asked.

“He’s right,’ I said, my heart feeling like a lump of stone inside of me. “Think about it. Kayla is sixteen, about the same age as the two other half-breeds who have been taken. But unlike them, she isn’t ill. Kayla has just started to develop her abilities. Doctor Ravenwood has already taken DNA from her and this has had some results in helping the others. That’s why they wanted Kayla; they want to force Lord Hunt and Ravenwood to continue their tests on her.”

“To find the cure,” Luke said.

“But you and Van Helsing over there,” Potter said eyeing Isidor, “are both half-breeds. Why not take you two as well?”

I thought about this for a minute and Isidor stood and stared at me. I guessed he was surprised to learn that I was like him and Kayla.

“We need to talk,” I half-smiled.

“I know the reason,” Isidor said.

“Speak up then,” Murphy grumbled.

“Because they know we will go after Kayla and try and bring her back,” Isidor said. “They don’t have to come looking for us any longer, as we’ll go looking for them. They know we’ll want to bring her back.”

Stepping away from the examination room doorway, Murphy fixed us all with a cold stare. His eyes seemed to blaze beneath his eyebrows that furrowed down and almost touched the bridge of his nose. Then, in a calm but calculating voice that simmered with anger, he said, “We *are* going to find this man who hides in the shadows, this monster who sends his agents to kill our friends and take the people that we love. I tell you this, we won’t stop searching, tracking, and hunting until we have brought him to his knees and we have brought those that we cherish home.”

Never before had I seen Murphy so grave, his face so ashen and his eyes so keen. “We have learnt that we can trust no one, those we believed to be our friends and allies have betrayed us and we have no one but each other. So get some rest, because we leave tomorrow night and I believe the

journey which lays ahead for each of us will test the nerve of our very souls, take us to the brink of our sanity, and I fear not all of us will return.”

Without saying another word, Murphy limped over to one of the dead half-breeds lying on the floor, knelt, gently raised them into his arms and placed them back onto one of the beds. With his back turned to us, he whispered, “Please, I just want to be left alone.”

Closing the door behind us, we made our way down the stairs, and reaching the bottom, I heard the unmistakeable sound of Murphy sobbing from above us.

I sat on the edge of the balcony which led from my room. The fog had started to clear, leaving behind a moon that shone a milky yellow. The sky was star shot and the wind crisp as it blew in off the moors.

Looking down, I watched Murphy carry one of the murdered half-breed children across the lawn and into the woods. Despite his limp, he cradled the child in his arms. He returned a short time later and carried another from the house and he didn’t stop until he had carried them all into the woods. On his last journey, Murphy took a spade with him and I knew then that he was going to bury the children along with the others in the tiny graveyard I’d discovered hidden beneath the weeping willows. From my hiding place, I saw Potter step from the shadow that fell across the lawn.

Silently, Potter approached Murphy, and taking the spade from him, he wrapped an arm around Murphy's shoulders and hugged him. I watched this unusual display of tenderness by Potter, and again I felt confused by him. I then heard the unmistakeable sound of Murphy weeping again. Potter said something to his friend, but from my hiding place I couldn't hear what. Then with one arm still wrapped around Murphy's shoulders and the spade in his free hand, Potter led him into the woods towards the graveyard.

I didn't want to be alone, so leaving the balcony, I went in search of Luke. As I'd passed Kayla's room, I saw my iPod on her pillow. Taking it, I made my way up to the room that Luke had used as his hiding place. As I reached the landing, I saw Isidor sitting on the top stair. His back was arched, and he rested his head in his hands. Isidor's eyes were closed and swinging from between his fingers was a set of the rosary beads I'd seen him with earlier. Without saying anything, I turned away, leaving him to his prayers.

Reaching Luke's room, I pushed the door open and stepped inside. He had pulled the tarpaulin away from his window, and as I'd been doing, he'd been watching Murphy take the bodies of the half-breeds into the woods. In the eerie light from the lantern, Luke looked back at me.

"I can't sleep," I told him, stepping into the room.

"Neither can I," he said.

Crossing the room, I went to the window and stood beside him.

“Why is Murphy so saddened by the death of those half-breeds?” I asked.

Turning towards me, his face wan and tired-looking, Luke said, “Two of those half-breeds were his teenage daughters.” Then blowing out the lantern, Luke said, “Hold me, Kiera.”

Lying together in the dark, wrapped in his wings, I knew that for the first time in my life I couldn’t see anything. As Luke slept beside me, I eased my iPod from my pocket and switched it on. I was curious to know what the last song Kayla had been listening to before racing upset and angry into the arms of the person she believed she could trust. Putting in the earphones, I heard the gentle voice of Annie Lennox singing ‘*Why*’.

Why? I wondered. Why hadn’t my mother told me that she was a Vampyrus? Why had I been born able to see more than I should – more than I sometimes wanted to? Why had I been made with wings?

And as I lay in the dark, I felt scared. I was scared of what I really was and what I might become. I wasn’t human and I wasn’t Vampyrus – I was what Doctor Ravenwood had called a *half-breed*. But I didn’t want to be a half-breed and as the darkness seemed almost to press itself against me, I knew that I no longer knew who or what I was.

Tomorrow, I would leave this place with Luke and the others; and while their mission was to find Kayla and the man who was behind the misery we all suffered, I would be searching for someone else – for my mother. In my heart, I knew that it was my mother who had the answers to the secrets that would help me discover who and what I really was.

Unable to sleep, I climbed from beside Luke and went and sat by the window. Looking down at the lawn, I watched Potter step from the tree line of the woods. I guessed he had finished helping Murphy bury the children. Taking a pack of cigarettes from his pocket, he lit one, the end of it winking on and off in the dark. Looking back at Luke, I heard him murmur in his sleep. Turning back towards the woods, I stifled a gasp as I saw Potter staring up at me from below. His eyes were fixed on mine and those images of us in the gatehouse flooded my mind again. Stepping back into the shadows of the room, my heart racing, I realised that there was something different about those images – something wrong.

Closing my eyes, I could see that we weren't in the gatehouse at all, but somewhere dark as if below ground. He was holding me in his arms and kissing me all over – but I didn't feel the urge to push him off in disgust like I had before. This time I could see myself clinging to him and needing him as much as he needed me.

Snapping open my eyes and forcing those images away, I peeked out of the window again at where Potter had been standing, but he had gone. Where? I didn't know. But what confused me more than his sudden disappearance was why I felt so disappointed that he had gone.

Looking out across the moors, I sat and waited for the blood-red glimmer of the sun to slowly rise up over the rugged horizon. I knew that it would bring a whole new day with it. But that's all I knew for certain...my future and the path that stretched out before me was unknown. Where would it lead me? I didn't know...but that was the excitement I craved wasn't it? Why else would I have ever come to Hallowed Manor, right?

And however much the not knowing of what lay ahead scared me... I knew I just wouldn't be able to stop myself from running towards it.

Vampire Hunt
(Kiera Hudson Series One)

Book Three

By

Tim O'Rourke

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This book is a work of fiction. The names, characters, places, and incidents are products of the writer's imagination or have been used fictitiously and are not to be construed as real. Any resemblance to persons, living or dead, actual events, locales or organisations is entirely coincidental.

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This one's for Jennifer Goehl

Thanks for everything!

Chapter One

The sound of helicopters thundered above us, their engines screaming into the night like angry wasps. We fled the carcasses of the two Vampyrus that had been sent to hunt us. Murphy, Potter, and Luke had needed to feed; the last of Lot 13 had run out two nights ago. Isidor and I kept lookout at the mouth of the alley while the others had killed the hunters. With my eyes now being able to see through the dark, I looked away as they fed. The sound of gnawing and tearing was enough. I looked at Isidor, and he had a hand placed over his nose and mouth as he tried to block out the smell of ripe innards and intestines.

Torchlight arced into the night sky illuminating the sheets of cold October rain that swept in all around Kendal, the small town in the north of England that we had fled to. Above the noise of the helicopter's rotary blades, I could hear the sounds of police officers yelling frantically out into the night and the crackling of static from their walkie-talkies.

“Over here!” one of the voices shouted.

“This way!” hollered another.

The sound of feet trampling over broken beer bottles, upturned trashcans and litter could be heard. The five of us hid in the shadows of a shop doorway and waited for the sounds of their booted feet to pass and disappear in the direction of the mutilated bodies that my friends had left behind.

Once they had gone, Murphy whispered from within the gloom, “Go now. But keep low and in the shadows.”

“I’m sick of all this sneaking about,” Potter hissed back, and through the darkness I could see a piece of flesh caught between his fang and front tooth.

Why did I have to see so much more now? I wondered as my stomach leapt in disgust.

“Let’s just get out of town,” Luke said back in his usual calm tone. Taking my hand in his, he added, “Things will seem clearer once we’ve rested.”

Stepping from the shadows, we followed Murphy out into the rain, which bounced up off the road and ran down the curb, sloshing into the nearest storm drain. Across the street, there was a children’s park and beyond, a small cluster of trees that lurched back and forth in the wind. Reaching the park, Murphy motioned for us to get down. Crouching, we made ourselves as small as possible against the slide and roundabout. The

swings swayed to and fro as if they were being played on by the ghosts of dead children.

“There are cars heading this way,” Isidor said, sniffing at the air like an animal. His pierced eyebrow glinting in the light of the moon that shone through the passing clouds.

“There are no cars coming,” Potter snapped.

“Police cars – two of them,” he said, ignoring Potter and looking over his shoulder at me. “I can smell the diesel.”

“There’d be lights and sirens...” Potter cut in.

“Not if they were coming on silent approach,” Luke told him.

“Now why would they want to go and do a thing like that?” Murphy whispered to himself.

“So they don’t spook us off,” Isidor whispered.

“I’m so glad that we have you here to explain this stuff to us,” Potter said, giving Isidor an unfriendly stare.

“Leave the kid alone,” Murphy told Potter, watching as a marked police car parked on the road about twenty feet away from where we were hiding. Just as Isidor had said, the emergency lights were out.

Peering into the darkness, I watched a police officer climb from the car, and as she pulled the collar of her coat up against the driving rain, I realised again how much I missed being a police officer. I know it sounds

crazy, right? Why would I miss going out on patrol on a cold wet night? Because, each time you went out on patrol, you and your partner would never know what lay hidden around the next corner. And I liked the idea of that.

I could see by the silver chevrons on the officer's shoulders that she was a sergeant. The helicopters that had been circling above like a swarm of angry bees swept away, and I heard Isidor whistle a sigh of relief through his teeth. Now that they had gone, I could hear the police sergeant talking into her radio.

"I'm going to contain the area, but I don't have enough officers to put in a cordon."

"Alpha-Zulu-three-seven from control, we do have more officers assigned. They have an ETA of two-zero, that's two-zero minutes," a female voice crackled back via her radio.

The police sergeant sighed and pushed her cap to the back of her head, and I understood her frustration. I could remember in training, the nights fighting with the drunks outside the clubs and pubs in Havensfield as I waited for backup.

Hooking her radio back onto her fluorescent coat, she leant against the police car, folding her arms over her chest, as if conditioned to the idea that she would be waiting a while for reinforcements. Then, quicker than I

think she'd expected, headlights of approaching vehicles glistened off the rain streaming down the centre of the road.

"Keep down," Murphy warned us from beneath the darkness of the slide.

I watched the police sergeant step away from her vehicle and shield her eyes against the glare of the oncoming lights. From my hiding place, I couldn't see the vehicles, but I could hear them slow to a halt. Several car doors were swung open, then slammed shut. The sound of footfalls on wet tarmac came closer, until four more police officers came into view. But their uniforms were different – they looked more like military, and if it hadn't have been for the luminous 'POLICE' logos on the back of their uniforms, I would have thought them to be soldiers. They stopped abruptly in front of the sergeant.

"Who are you?" she asked them. Obviously they weren't known to her.

They were dressed all in black. They wore padded coveralls, which were tucked into sturdy looking boots. Their hands were covered in thick black gloves, which gripped MP5 machine guns.

"We're the S.T.U. officers that you requested," one of the officers said to her.

"S.T.U.?" the sergeant asked bemused.

“Special tactics unit...” he started.

“I know what S.T.U. stands for,” the Sergeant snapped, “But I never requested you!”

“You and your officers can stand down now. We’re taking control of the site from here,” he instructed her.

“Under whose authority?” she demanded to know.

“That’s on a need-to-know basis,” the officer said, while the others stood and stared at her.

“I’m gonna have to check this out with my control room,” the sergeant said, reaching for her radio.

She hadn’t even activated the talk button when the lead police officer gripped her wrist, pulling her hand away from her radio.

“That’s a negative,” he said, his voice low but firm. “This whole area needs to be shut down. We have two mutilated bodies back there, but more importantly, we believe that Hudson is in the area.”

Hearing him say my name, I flinched back into the darkness and Luke squeezed my hand.

“What do they want with me?” I whispered at no one in particular.

“Shhh!” Murphy hissed, raising a finger to his mouth and glaring at me.

“Hudson?” the sergeant asked, yanking her arm free of the officer’s grip. “Even if she is here, you won’t catch her. Every police force in the goddamn country has been looking for her for weeks now and no one has even come close. They say she travels with -”

“She’s close by and she’s with Murphy and his crew,” the officer said. “Now why don’t you be a good girl and book off duty and have an early night?”

Hearing this, I glanced at Potter in the darkness and said, “He isn’t a relative of yours by any chance?”

“Cute,” Potter whispered back without even looking at me.

“I don’t know who the hell you think you are,” the sergeant said as she looked at the officers that stood before her, “but I want your names, ranks, and numbers -” but before she had the chance to finish, the lead police officer lunged forward and bit away a lump of flesh from her throat.

It happened so quickly that the sergeant just stood there looking at the police officer who had just removed a large part of her neck. Then, as if she had only just noticed the stringy blood swinging from his chin, she raised one pale-looking hand to her throat, then collapsed against the hood of the police car.

I gasped in horror at what I had just witnessed, and Potter shot forward, placing his hand over my mouth.

“Keep it nice and cool, sweet-cheeks,” he whispered in my ear and his breath felt hot against my face. “We don’t want them to hear us now.”

“She’s okay,” Luke hushed, taking Potter’s hand away from over my mouth.

Looking back at the police car, I watched as the officers sprang onto the hood and began to feed. With arms and legs flapping in the air as if throwing a fit, the sergeant fought desperately under those that fed on her. Jets of black blood squirted up into the night and splashed the windscreen of the car.

Once the sergeant had stopped twitching and jerking, the officers slid backwards off the hood. Wiping their mouths with the backs of their gloves, the leader of the group said, “Hudson and the others couldn’t have gone far. Find them.”

Spreading out along the road, they made their way towards the park.

Chapter Two

Huddled next to my friends, I held my breath. I willed myself to stay still, not to move an inch as I heard them marching towards us in the dark. I'd known for some time that Vampyrus had managed to infiltrate themselves into positions of power in society – Rom, Philips, and Taylor had been proof of that, but nothing could have prepared me for what I'd just witnessed. The shock of seeing a group of so-called police officers kill that sergeant in such a savage way numbed me.

My heart slammed against my chest plate and I could hear the frantic *boom-boom* of its beating in my ears. I thought of Kayla and guessed that if she'd been next to me, the sound would have been deafening to her.

As the vampire-cops came closer, I heard Isidor release the safety catch on his crossbow. My right arm was pressed against Luke and he felt as hard as stone next to me – unmovable like a statue. I couldn't hear a sound from Potter or Murphy, not even the sound of them breathing. Both of them sat crouched on all fours as if ready to pounce at any moment.

The officer's footfalls stopped, and so did my heart as the sound of rustling came from a few feet from where we hid. Torchlight suddenly lit up

the ground, only inches from us. The tension was unbearable. Isidor raised his crossbow, and both Potter and Murphy arched their backs like sprinters on the start line. Luke squeezed my hand.

The light from their torches swept by us then stopped.

“It’s just a fox,” one of them said.

“Where?” asked one of the others, not sounding so sure.

“Look! Over there!”

There was silence for a moment. Then the doubter said, “Okay, I see it. Let’s keep moving.”

We continued to crouch in the dark and the damp, until the sound of their footfalls disappeared into the distance.

Cautiously, Murphy got to his feet and peered out from beneath the slide. Feeling secure that the immediate area was free from danger, he looked back at us and whispered, “Let’s go!”

Trusting in Murphy, we got to our feet and followed him out of the park. With our backs bent over, we followed Murphy out onto the street where the police sergeant lay lifelessly on the hood of the police car. Scraping my wet fringe from my eyes, I looked down at the face of the dead police sergeant. Her eyes were wide open and staring blankly up into the

night sky. At first, I thought she was crying, but then, I realised it was raindrops splashing into her eyes and spilling down her cheeks.

“Potter, you know what to do,” Murphy whispered, pulling open the driver’s door of the police car and peering inside.

Wiping the rain from his face, he bent over the police sergeant sprawled across the bonnet in a black pool of blood.

Realising what he was intending to do, I pushed him aside. “You can’t do it,” I told him, looking up into his green eyes.

“Look, we don’t have time to start getting out the police tape, sealing off the area, and crawling around on our hands and knees looking for clues,” he said. “This isn’t one of your crime scenes...”

Scowling at him, I said, “I didn’t mean that.” Then reaching out, I took hold of the police sergeant’s wrist and checked for her pulse.

“She’s dead,” Potter said. Then grinning he added, “But not for long.”

Placing a hand on my shoulder, Luke said, “Kiera, it’s not nice, but if she isn’t destroyed then she’ll only become...you know...”

“A vampire,” Isidor finished for him, raising his crossbow and aiming at the dead officer’s heart.

Snatching the weapon from Isidor’s hands, Potter glared at him and said, “You make me nervous every time you get this thing out, wonder-

boy.”

Turning his baseball cap backwards on his head and stepping toe to toe with Potter, Isidor hissed, “Give that back and my name’s Isidor – not ‘kid’, not ‘Van Helsing’, ‘wonder-boy’ or anything else.”

Without taking his eyes from Isidor’s, Potter aimed the crossbow over his shoulder and fired a wooden stake into the dead officer’s chest. Handing Isidor the crossbow, Potter smiled and said, “It’s all yours, Rambo.”

Before Isidor had the chance to respond, the dead officer sat bolt upright and screeched. The noise she made sounded as if she were in unbearable agony. Looking down at the stake protruding from her chest, she fumbled for it with her blood-spattered fingers. Rolling her head back, her eyes rolling wildly in their sockets, she screamed then exploded, coating the car in a shower of grey dust. This was followed by a squeaking sound as the wipers started to pass back and forth across the windscreen, clearing away her dusty remains.

“Are you lot just gonna stand there chatting all night?” Murphy said from behind the steering wheel of the car as it rumbled into life, “Or are we going to get out of here before they come back?”

Without needing any further prompting, I raced around the front of the car. Nudging Potter out of my way, I clambered into the front seat next

to Murphy.

“Easy, tiger!” Potter hissed. “I travel up front. I’m the sarge’s navigator.”

“Not today,” I smiled back at him and slammed the door shut. He looked back at me through the window and his nostrils flared out on either side. I could tell that he was pissed at me. Good.

“I don’t need this shit,” Potter snapped, climbing into the back of the vehicle. Glancing back over my shoulder, I could see that Luke and Potter sat on either side of Isidor, who looked squashed between their muscular frames.

Facing front, I looked again at where the officer had disintegrated and watched as the last of her remains blew from the hood of the car.

Murphy lurched the vehicle forward. It stalled then rumbled into life again.

“C’mon, Sarge,” Potter moaned from the back, “sun’s up soon.”

“Okay! Okay!” Murphy shouted. “This thing has got a gear stick - I’m used to an automatic!”

“I could drive!” I said.

“No thanks,” Murphy said as he crunched the stick into gear, “I’ve seen the state of your Mini.”

Pressing down hard on the accelerator, ramming the gear stick into first, the police car shot forward, almost into the path of an oncoming vehicle that was racing towards us. Throwing the car to the left, Murphy veered out of its way. Glancing in the wing mirror, I could see that the vehicle we had narrowly missed was another police car. With my heart in my throat, I watched as it spun around in the road and came tearing after us, its sirens and emergency lights blazing.

Chapter Three

Murphy snaked the car from left to right, and gunned it forward at an ever-increasing speed. The car rocked and rolled and bounced up and down, throwing me up out of my seat. Potter's arm was suddenly holding me down, while his other hand pulled the seatbelt across my chest.

Clicking it into place, he whispered in my ear, "Hold on, tiger!"

Murphy took a quick sideways glance at me and gave a grim smile. "I don't know how we're going to get out of this one," he said, as if acknowledging the look of fear on my face.

Suddenly, we were thrust forward as the police car that gave chase rammed into the back of us. The rear end of our car skidded back and forth across the road, as Murphy desperately fought to keep it under control.

Again they smashed into us and the car shot forward, this time nearly sending us headlong into a ditch.

“They can’t do this!” Isidor shouted from the back. “They’re police!”

“If you hadn’t noticed, Einstein,” Potter snapped at Isidor, “they ate one of their colleagues back there!”

Cops that eat other cops could do anything, couldn’t they? I thought to myself and however much it pained me, I knew that Potter was right – these cops weren’t normal, they just wanted to kill us.

Murphy pressed harder on the pedal and we raced forward, the tires screaming against the rain-soaked tarmac as he desperately tried to keep the car on the road. Staring through the windscreen, I could see a roundabout ahead and Murphy raced us towards it. At the very last minute, he eased on the brake, and with a screech of burning rubber, Murphy pulled on the wheel and we sailed around it and headed towards a duel carriageway.

Now that we were on a straight and wider road, Murphy pushed the accelerator all the way to the floor and we flew forwards at a terrifying pace. Glancing at him in the gloom of the car, I could see that his bright blue eyes were fixed on the road ahead; his face was a mask of grim determination. The police officers who pursued us showed no signs of backing off.

“I hate to be the one to tell you this, Sarge,” Luke said from the back of the car, “but we’ve got more vehicles approaching from behind.”

Snapping around in my seat, I could see that Luke, Potter, and Isidor were all twisting their necks to see out of the back window.

“That’s not our only problem!” Murphy shouted back at him.

Swiveling in my seat, I stared straight ahead at the helicopter which was now hovering just ahead of us, its powerful searchlight sweeping back and forth across the road.

“Oh you’re kidding me!” I cried in disbelief.

“That’s it! We ain’t ever gonna get away now!” Isidor groaned.

“Why not” Murphy snapped over his shoulder at him.

“Haven’t you ever watched ‘Cops’ on the T.V.?” Isidor shouted over the roar of the sirens screaming behind us.

“Cops?” Murphy said sounding bemused, as he threw the car to the right and tried to block the police car that was now trying to pull up alongside of us.

“What you blabbing on about kid?” Potter cut in. “We don’t need to watch no cop shows – we *are* cops!”

“You could have fooled me,” Isidor shouted, then added as if to make his point, “Those helicopters have infrared thermal imaging cameras... and lots of other Gucci-shit! You can’t ever get away from ‘em!”

“He’s right, you know! We can’t outrun those helicopters!” I said.

With that grim smile, Murphy glanced at me again and said, “We’ll see!”

From behind me, I heard Potter spray laughter as if he were sharing a private joke that only he knew the punch line to.

“You’re actually *enjoying* this?” I gasped, looking back at him.

Staring at me from the darkness, Potter winked and said, “I thought you craved excitement, sweet-cheeks?”

“Knock it off, will-ya,” Luke barked and elbowed Potter in the ribs.

Ignoring Potter, I faced front as Murphy threw the car to the right and smashed into the side of one of the police cars that had managed to draw level with us. Both cars rebounded off each other and veered apart. The police car then came back at us and crashed into the driver’s side, throwing Murphy violently towards me. I looked at him as he frantically tried to keep our vehicle traveling in a straight line.

Staring into the police car that had pulled alongside us, I could see two officers seated in the front. They were dressed identically, and were the ones we had hidden from in the park. Both were dressed in black. Their faces were sickly white and drawn-looking.

The one sitting in the passenger seat turned his head slowly and looked at me. Then winding down the car window, he thrust his arm out,

and began to fire wildly with the gun he was holding in his gloved fist.

In an instant, Murphy's window exploded inwards, and he ducked to avoid the shot.

Taking hold of his crossbow, Isidor roared, "They can't do this! They're *cops*!"

"But not like the ones you've seen on T.V., right?" Potter quipped as he began to slide out of his long dark coat.

"They're not normal cops, Isidor," Luke shouted back at him, as he too loosened his jacket. "These are like the ones who killed that police officer back there."

The cold night air that swept in through the smashed window blew my hair about my face and I shouted, "I think you're right."

"What do ya mean?" Isidor shrieked.

Before I'd had the chance to answer him, Murphy swung our vehicle back towards the police car. Once he'd drawn level with it, Murphy shot his arm through the window at lightning speed and drove the tiny silver crucifix that he carried with him into the face of the cop that had been firing at us.

Immediately, the police officer began to screech as if in agonizing pain. I looked at his face and it was as white as snow and covered in thick blue veins. The officer clutched at the air as if drowning as a row of razor-

sharp fangs broke through his red gums. But then his face began to perish. It looked as if it had been sculpted from sand which was now being sucked inwards through its mouth, leaving a huge, gaping hole in the centre of its face. But what freaked me out more than his crumbling face, was how his blood-red eyes stared at me. The vampire-cop threw its gloved hands to its face and began to wail.

My whole body went cold, and I prayed that I'd never have to hear that awful cry again. I watched with fear and revulsion as the vampire-cop started to thrash its arms about and jerk with violent and sudden convulsions in the front of the speeding police car.

"Help me!" the cop screeched, as it turned and blindly began to flay its arms at the cop driving their car.

Peering past Murphy, I watched as the driver fought madly to maintain control of their speeding vehicle. Losing it, the police car darted away from ours. Looking back over my shoulder, I saw it collide into the crash barrier, where it flipped into the air and spun away like a toy car being thrown from a 'Scaletrix' track. It landed on its roof and spun into the path of an approaching police car. This vehicle smashed into the overturned car, sending it careering forward in a shower of sparks and causing them both to ignite into a seething ball of fire. The force of the explosion sent our car flying forward and the helicopter into a violent spin overhead.

“I bet they haven’t shown anything like that on T.V.,” Potter yelled at Isidor, and I could tell by the sound of his voice that he was pumped-up, as if enjoying every moment of what was unfolding around us.

Then, Luke roared, “Sarge! Beside you!”

Instinctively, we all glanced to our right to see the third police car racing along beside us. The window had been lowered and the cop in the passenger seat was leaning out and firing shots wildly at our car. Bullets thudded into the side of our vehicle, and whizzed about our heads.

Ramming our car into theirs, Murphy desperately fought to knock it off course and into the crash barriers.

“Where’s your crossbow, kid?” Potter hollered at Isidor

“It’s here,” Isidor said, holding it up.

“Don’t just sit there looking at it - fire!” Potter roared as the cops let off another round of shots. Without further hesitation, Isidor began to spray the pursuing police vehicle with stakes.

“Do you have another one?” Luke yelled at him.

“Another what?” Isidor shouted, not taking his eyes from his target.

“Oh for crying-out-loud,” Potter shouted. “Another crossbow!”

“No, of course not!” Isidor hollered over the sound of screeching tires, sirens, and humming rotary blades from above. Then, glancing

quickly at Potter, Isidor flashed a fake smile and said, “Who do you think I am, Buffy-the-bleeding-vampire-slayer!”

Cutting over them, Murphy shouted, “Look, I’m not going to be able to hold them off forever – somebody help me out here!”

Removing his coat, Potter raised his right arm above his head. Where he once had fingers, he now had a set of claws. Groaning, he rolled his head back as if in pain. Then snapping his head forward, he rolled back his lips and I could see that his mouth was now full of gleaming fangs. Reaching up and flexing his claws, Potter began to rip a hole in the roof of our car. His nails sliced through the metal as easily as a can opener cutting open a tin of food. Once he had made a hole big enough, he climbed through it and disappeared onto the roof of our car.

I heard him stomping around above, and then watched as he slid down the windshield and onto the bonnet. I could see that he had now lost his shirt and his wings hung from his back. They still looked worn and tattered in places from the damage caused by the vampires who attacked us at Hallowed Manor some weeks ago. Seeing Potter balancing on the hood of the car, the vampire-cops released a volley of fire at him. As the bullets screamed over his head, Isidor released a burst of bolts at the police car to draw away their fire. I then heard a deafening thud as Potter thrust his right claw into the hood of our car, and in one swift movement tore it free.

Propped against the windscreen, Potter held the hood in the air, using it as a makeshift shield.

“Move out of the goddamn way!” Murphy roared, as he strained to see past him, throwing the car left and right to avoid the police car that continued to ram us from the side. The helicopter hovered restlessly back and forth ahead of us, its searchlight trained on our every move.

From behind me, I heard movement. Spinning round, I just caught a glimpse of Luke’s feet disappearing through the hole in the roof. Peering up and through the windscreen, I watched Luke bound through the sky and land on the roof of the police car that raced along beside us. Tearing his shirt, Luke’s wings sprung out of his back like a jack-in-the-box and flapped on either side of him. Like Potter, Luke’s wings were not fully healed nor were the scars that ran down his chest and back. Leaning over the front of the car, Luke smashed one claw-like fist through the windscreen, and in a flash of movement had reached in and yanked out one of the vampire-cops.

Thrusting his head forward, Luke buried his teeth into the face and neck of the cop, who began to convulse. The vampire-cop began to thrash about uncontrollably, as he tried to claw at Luke who was savagely eating away at him. Within moments, the cop began to fall away, like sand slipping through Luke’s claws. Then, as if still hungry, Luke licked his lips

and turned to face the driver. He smothered him behind the wheel, as he began to eat. The car roared away, hurtling into the crash barrier, where it crumpled like a piece of soggy tissue.

“Luke,” I yelled, throwing my hands to my face. But through my fingers, I watched him soar from the wreckage moments before it became engulfed in flames.

“He’s okay!” Isidor yelled. “He got out!”

Slamming his foot on the accelerator, Murphy sped the car forward.

“We’re all clear behind,” Isidor said, poking his head between the two front seats.

With his face a mask of concentration, Murphy tried to see around Potter and the light from the helicopter that dazzled him from above.

“What about that helicopter?” Isidor yelled. “We can’t out run that!”

As if reading Isidor’s mind, the air observer in the helicopter released a volley of bullets at us. They skimmed off the surface of the road and thudded into the hood of the car, which Potter was still holding up like a large shield. Crouched behind it on the engine of the car, he glanced back at us. His eyes glowed green like a set of cat’s eyes. Showing no emotion at all, Potter stood on the hood as we continued to dash up the carriageway. His wings rippled all around him against the rush of air. He continued to hold the bonnet out in front of him, protecting us and him from the gunfire

coming from the helicopter above. Then, Potter staggered momentarily, as another tirade of bullets thudded into his makeshift shield. I gasped, fearing he was going to lose his footing and fall beneath the wheels of the car. Potter righted himself; then without warning, he flung the car bonnet into the air towards the helicopter. It spun around and around as it sliced through the night like a giant discus traveling faster than any human could have thrown it.

The twisted and damaged sheet of metal ripped into the cockpit and tore it open. The helicopter immediately began to tailspin out of control, its rotating blades whining as it plummeted towards the road ahead of us. The tail end of the helicopter clattered into the hard surface of the carriageway, sending up a shower of sparks into the night sky. The helicopter bounced back into the air and started to cartwheel towards us.

It tumbled through the night like a stunned dragonfly, as Potter hurriedly clambered back across the roof of the car and dropped back through the hole he had made. As he landed on the backseat, the helicopter roared overhead in a ball of flames, its rotary blades tearing at the top of the car. The sky lit up with an orange explosion of light as it ripped apart in the centre of the road behind us.

Then poking his head through the hole in the roof of the car, Luke said, "Room for one more?" and climbed inside.

Murphy veered the car off the dual carriageway and weaved a path along a series of dark and narrow country roads. Occasionally, I looked back, and could see a tower of grey smoke corkscrewing its way into the night sky from the helicopter that lay burning back on the carriageway. As I glanced back over my shoulder, I saw Potter looking out of the car window and into the night, his face stern – as if troubled in some way. He caught me staring at him, but he just met my curious gaze with his green eyes, then looked away.

Chapter Four

As we raced away from the town, smoke started to billow from beneath the hood of the police car and spiral up into the night. The car rattled, began to slow, then stalled.

“The engine’s fried,” Murphy said, steering the battered, bullet-ridden car off the road and into a nearby field.

“We’ll go on foot from here,” Murphy told us, pulling the collar of his coat about his throat to protect himself from the driving rain.

I stood next to Isidor and watched Luke and Potter conceal their wings beneath their coats and hide their naked chests. Their shirts lay in tatters back on the carriageway. With rain streaming down our faces, Isidor slung his crossbow over his back, and pulling his baseball cap low over his brow, he said, “I don’t know why we can’t just fly...what’s with all the walking?”

Wiping rain from his face, Murphy looked at him and said, “Listen kid, you fly off from here and you’ll be telling every goddamn Vampyrus that’s tracking us where we are. You might as well send up a couple of flares and scream at the top of your voice ‘*Here we are!*’ Besides, my boys

still haven't recovered from what happened at Hallowed Manor. Their wings -"

"My wings are just fine,' Isidor cut over him. "I don't see why Luke and the wise-guy over there should hold me back from finding Kayla – my mother's life depends on it."

"And what are you going to do even if you find Kayla, huh?" Murphy asked, his eyes narrowing. "Do you really think I'm going to let you use her as some kind of bargaining tool so you can get your mother back? What's the plan? How are you intending to trade Kayla for your mother?"

"I don't know," Isidor said.

"You don't know much," Murphy muttered.

"But my mother..." Isidor started.

"Is probably already dead," Potter cut in.

I saw Isidor clench his fists as if to punch Potter, but instead, he said through gritted teeth, "I don't need this shit. I'm outta here."

"Listen, boy-wonder," Potter continued, and I noticed rivulets of rain pouring down his face and chest where his coat hung open. "Nothing would make me happier than to see you fly away from here and never come back, but like the sarge says, you start beating those pretty wings of yours and -"

“And what?” Isidor said, not backing down.

“What my friends are trying to say, Isidor,” Luke said, coming forward in an attempt to calm the situation, “is that those Vampyrus sent to hunt us have been chosen for a reason. They use echolocation to track us.”

“Echo-what?” Isidor smirked.

“Echolocation is similar to sonar,” Luke explained, his voice, unlike Potter’s, was calm and full of patience. “Every time you beat your wings they create a vibration – an echo – and it’s these vibrations that the hunters will use to locate us.”

“That’s such bull-crap,” Isidor said, stroking the short beard that protruded from his chin. “If that were the case – they’d be hunting every sparrow and crow...”

“It’s not the same,” Luke explained. “Our wings are far bigger than that of any other flying animal, and they give off massive vibrations far bigger than any other bird.”

“Give it up, Luke,” Potter said from the corner of his mouth as he tried to light a cigarette in the rain. “You’re wasting your breath.”

Placing my hand on Isidor’s arm, I looked at him and said, “Listen to what Luke says. You can trust him, Isidor. I know you want to save Kayla...we all do.”

“But it’s more than that,” Isidor said staring at me from beneath the brim of his cap. “They have my mother.”

“They have my mum, too,” I told him and gently squeezed his arm, “but if we are to save any of the people we love, we have to make sure that we don’t get captured ourselves or we won’t be any use to anyone.”

“When you’ve finished, Doctor Phil,” Potter said looking at me, “perhaps we can get going?” Then, throwing a soggy-looking cigarette to the ground, he walked away.

“Are you coming?” I asked Isidor and with a faint smile, I tugged at his arm.

Without saying a word, Isidor turned and started off in the direction that Potter had taken. Glancing at me from the darkness, Murphy winked at me and then walked away. Taking me by the arm, Luke whispered, “Thanks.”

“What for?” I asked him.

“For being you,” he smiled, and we made our way after the others.

All of us walked in silence for a time, not a word was spoken between us. It had stopped raining, but the fields were boggy and uneven and it made our progress slow. Our feet made squelching sounds as we made our way from the abandoned car across the fields. During the weeks since leaving Hallowed Manor, Murphy had led us across country, avoiding

all major towns and roads. Most of our journey had been made during the night on foot, sleeping the days away in cheap motels. Once or twice, Potter had managed to haggle the price down on second-hand cars and we had made part of our journey in those. They were the better days, as often I could snuggle-up on the back seat and sleep against Luke. Murphy had led us to the north west of the country and we now found ourselves in Cumbria, where we had spent the last two days crossing the rugged terrain of the Lake District. The scenery at times was breathtaking as we reached a high summit and looked out across the lakes and the streams that threaded their way through the hills like silver strips of silk. Murphy had made much of the journey in silence. Since discovering the bodies of his two daughters and those other children in the attic at the manor, Murphy had seemed different – distant. He hardly spoke to any of us and when he did, it was usually a command or a brief summary of where we were headed next. Even though we followed him, he never once said where he was leading us, and none of us asked. When we did have the luxury of a car, he did most of the driving. For hours he would go without sleep, and often I would wake while the others slept crammed in the car around me. Sometimes I would steal a quick glance at him. He looked drawn and tired in the gloom of the car, his face severe-looking as if it had been carved from alabaster. But despite his wan complexion, his eyes shone the fiercest of blues, like

nuggets of ice, as if his soul had frozen over with rage. I couldn't even begin to understand his suffering. How would any father come to terms with the murder of his children? On those lonely nights, when the others were huddled asleep on the back seat, I often felt like talking to him, but I couldn't think of one thing to say. So I would close my eyes and pretend that I, too was asleep and leave him to his thoughts and pain.

Often in those quiet moments, I would think of my mum and wonder where she was. Since meeting Kayla and Isidor, I understood that I wasn't the only one who had one of my parents taken. Like I'd often thought about confiding in Murphy, I thought many times about talking to Isidor about our missing parents, but like with Murphy, I just couldn't find the right words to say. Maybe I couldn't find the right words because I didn't truly understand what was happening myself. I would often watch Isidor, and despite his cocksure demeanor, the tattoos that covered his neck like black flames, the eyebrow piercing and trendy little beard, I knew much of it was bravado. But if I were to be honest with myself, I hated that part of me, too. It was more than just hatred – I was *scared* of what I might yet become. Out of all of us, Isidor, Kayla, and I had much in common, and as far as I knew, there were only the three of us. I wished that I'd had a chance to speak with Kayla about it – maybe I could've helped – maybe we could've helped each other come to terms with the fact that we were both

half-breeds. I had so much I wanted to talk to her about, I had so much to tell her, but the hardest thing I would have to explain to her was that her mum wasn't coming back – that her mum was dead – murdered by my 'friend,' Sparky.

By the time the first shards of daylight filtered through the rain-swollen clouds, I was almost numb with cold. My hair and clothes were still wet from the heavy rainfall, and they clung to me like a heavy layer of skin. It seemed that we had trekked for miles through the night. Murphy had always impressed on us the importance of finding shelter by daylight, as since being banished from The Hollows, their skin had become hypersensitive to daylight.

Just as the night began to turn grey, I could sense Murphy, Potter and Luke's fear that we wouldn't find a place to hide and get some much-needed sleep and shelter from the sun. But as Potter began to light one cigarette after another, and Luke started to claw at the scars that marred his face, we came across an empty battered barn on the outskirts of a farm. The barn itself looked disused and housed a broken-down tractor, and to my delight, masses of dry hay to rest on. From the doorway of the barn, I could see the farmhouse someway off in the distance. The warm glow of lights seeped from the windows and smoke tumbled up out of the chimney. I

imagined sitting by the warmth of that fire, curled in a large comfortable chair and falling into a deep, refreshing sleep. Not only was I tired and cold, but also incredibly hungry. I couldn't remember the last time that I had eaten anything and I wondered how many days Luke, Potter, and Murphy would last without blood before they started craving for it.

Murphy beckoned us into the barn and closed the door behind us. We sneaked to the back where Luke and I lay on the large piles of hay next to each other. Isidor sat against the barn wall. He pulled the baseball cap down over his eyes and cradled the crossbow in his lap. Murphy sat by the barn door as if on guard and Potter sat beside him.

"How are you doing?" Luke whispered in my ear.

"Tired," I said, resting my head against his chest.

"Try and get some sleep," he hushed and gently stroked my damp hair.

Listening to the soft beat of his heart, I looked across the barn at Isidor who was already asleep. His knees were drawn up, and his hands laced together with his head resting against them like a pillow. Then I heard the gentle sound of Luke's breathing and I knew that he had fallen asleep. Trying not to disturb him, I rolled onto my back and stared up at the large wooden planks that formed the underside of the barn roof. I wondered where Kayla was and I hoped that she was safe. Where had Phillips taken

her? What had he done with her? Then I turned my thoughts to Sparky and it still hurt me to think of how he had betrayed me – betrayed all of us. How hadn't I *seen* it coming? I was meant to be able to *see* things, right? But I was glad of one thing, over the last week or two, my eye had stopped bleeding. I still got the *visions* – if that's what they were, but no blood and I was grateful for that. When the visions did come, they seemed more controlled. They still came suddenly and when I least expected it – but somehow I seemed to be able to have power over them. When they came, it was like I was looking through the lens of a camera, which I could pan, tilt, and turn three hundred and sixty degrees. I was able to focus the images too – almost as if I could zoom that lens in and out.

The nightmares came too, but they were less frequent now –all of them portrayed twisted glimpses of an apocalyptic future where Vampyrus had over taken the cities of the world. I still didn't know if these nightmares or visions were snapshots of horrors yet to come or just my fears and anxieties manifesting themselves inside of me. And it was with these thoughts charging around the corridors of my mind that I fell asleep.

Chapter Five

The crying at first was faint. A gentle sobbing that dripped into my unconsciousness like a tap that hadn't been turned off probably. I moved through the darkness, one careful step in front of the other. The walls of the corridor were covered in pale green wallpaper that hung in long, tattered strips. It was spattered with dark patches of mildew. My trainers made a whispering sound as I passed along the corridor. Although I was in complete darkness, I didn't need the aid of a torch or lantern to see my way – I could see perfectly in the dark now.

Moving forward, I followed that sound – the one that sounded as if someone was being hurt. With my heart racing like a trip hammer in my chest, my breath came out of my mouth in short shallow bursts.

“Hello?” I called out, my voice echoing back at me from down the corridor. “Is anyone there?”

“Help me!” a voice came back, but it sounded as if it came from behind me. Spinning round, I saw just the briefest glimpse of something large move in the darkness behind me.

“Who’s there?” I called out.

Whoever it had been didn’t make a sound. Wringing my hands together, I retraced my steps and headed back down the corridor towards whatever had been lurking in the dark.

Then the sobbing started again, but this time it was more than sobbing, it was yelps of pain that I could hear.

“Help me!” the voice came again, but this time it sounded cracked and broken – raw as if the person calling out were in agony.

“Where are you?” I cried out, my voice sounding shrill from the fear that was creeping into it. “I can’t help you unless I know where you are!”

“This way,” the voice called back, and again it had switched direction and was now coming from behind me again.

Turning, I caught sight of that large shape again – but for just a moment longer this time. It was huge and bristled with hair. Then it was gone again, almost slinking into the darkness.

With my legs feeling like lumps of lead, I headed towards it, my heart now feeling as if it might just explode inside my chest.

“Hurry!” the pained voice called out, echoing all around me.

Quickening my step, I headed back down the corridor, now feeling disorientated.

“Please!” the voice came again, but in the confines of the corridor, it was distorted, and I couldn’t tell if the voice were male or female.

Heading towards it through the dark, the strips of wallpaper almost seemed to clutch at me, like clawing hands. Starting to run, I raced down the corridor, my hands stretched out in front of me. Ahead of me in the blackness, I could see a door. It looked old and warped in its frame.

“Help me!” the voice came again.

Reaching the door, I pushed against it with my shoulder and it swung open on a set of rusty hinges. Flying into the room, and nearly losing my balance, the voice called out again.

“Help me!”

Scanning the darkness, I could see a bed in the far corner of the room, and there was someone lying in it.

“Quickly!” the voice came again.

Heading towards the bed, I could clearly make out the shape of...

Chapter Six

...I woke to the sound of Murphy's voice and the smell of pipe smoke. He was whispering. I then heard Potter speaking back to him. Then Murphy continued, "The situation is far worse than I first thought."

I kept my eyes closed, and lying perfectly still next to Luke, who still slept, I listened to their conversation.

"How do you mean?" Potter asked in a hushed voice.

"Those police officers that were chasing us...some of them are obviously Vampyrus," Murphy said, his voice tinged with fear.

"We've always known that our race has infiltrated positions of authority within human society," Potter said emotionlessly. "After all, we've been masquerading as cops for years."

"I know that," Murphy almost seemed to snap at him. "But we were trying to live honest lives above ground – we weren't eating one another."

"But what about Rom and Phillips?" Potter said. "They did their fair share of killing."

"That's just my point. I thought that it was just them who had wormed their way into the police force, intent on using the power that the

job gave,” Murphy sighed. “But it appears that many more Vampyrus have imbedded themselves into positions where they will be able to pave the way for...”

“But who is he?” Potter asked.

“That’s the million dollar question, Potter,” Murphy said. “If we knew the answer to that, then we wouldn’t be banished from The Hollows, chased across the length of the country, and hiding out in this godforsaken barn.”

“But we don’t even get close,” Potter whispered. “The agents he sends after us are agents of agents. It’s like the one that we need to find is invisible.”

“But whoever he maybe,” Murphy said, “I fear that his plans are far more advanced than we originally thought.”

“Because of those cops?” Potter asked.

“Not just because of that. He always seems to be several steps ahead of us,” I heard Murphy say. “He manages to maneuver his agents into position...Phillips, Rom, Mrs. Payne, this friend of Kiera’s – Sparky, to name just a few. It’s almost as if he has...” Murphy tailed off.

“Has what?”

“The answer is too troubling to think of,” Murphy whispered.

They sat in silence for a moment, I kept myself as still as possible so they didn't suspect that I was listening to their conversation. After a few moments, I heard Potter ask, "Sarge, where are you leading us to?"

"There is a saying that my father used to tell me when I was a boy," Murphy said. "If you want to know where a man is going you stay behind him. But if you know where he is going you need to get ahead of him."

"And?" Potter said.

"This invisible man, whoever he may be, is not the only one who can maneuver people into place," Murphy whispered.

"What's that s'pose to mean?" Potter asked, sounding intrigued.

"I have a friend...someone who, let's say owes me a favour," Murphy said.

"And what's this favour?"

"Let's just say that I know where Kayla is," Murphy said.

Hearing this, my ears pricked-up and my whole body stiffened.

"Where is she?" Potter asked.

"You don't need to know...not yet," Murphy told him.

"Why won't you tell me?" Potter hissed, sounding confused. "You can trust me."

There was a pause, then Murphy said, "I'm sorry Potter, I no longer know who I can trust."

“After everything we’ve been through,” Potter almost seemed to gasp. “I can’t believe what I’m hearing!”

“Keep your voice down!” Murphy barked. “I’m not saying I don’t trust you...it’s...”

“It sounds exactly like you don’t trust me,’ Potter said and I could hear him stand up. “I’ve always had your back, Jim – I’ve always done everything that you’ve asked me without question and now you say that you can’t tell me where Kayla’s at.”

“I’m sure that’s what Kiera thought about her so-called-friends...Phillips...Sparky and -”

But before he had a chance to finish the list of those who had betrayed me, Potter said, “I’m nothing like those people...I am your friend.”

Then, I heard the barn door swing open and then close as Potter stormed away. Lying perfectly still, I thought of those I had put my trust in...my friend and colleagues, Phillips and Sparky. But Murphy was going to add another name to that list before he had been cut short by Potter. I wondered who else it was that had betrayed me.

Suddenly, Isidor shot bolt upright and screamed. I opened my eyes to see him sitting, clutching his crossbow to his chest and panting wildly. Sweat was streaming from his brow and his eyes were wide like saucers.

Murphy darted across the barn and was on him in an instant. He threw one arm around his shoulder and covered his mouth with his free hand.

“Shhh...we can’t afford to let anyone hear you,” Murphy hushed.

Isidor looked nervously about, as if he were totally unsure of his whereabouts. Slipping out from beneath Luke’s arms, I got up, crossed the barn, and crouched down in front of Isidor.

“What’s going on?” Luke said, looking up from the hay, bleary-eyed.

“Shhh, Luke,” Murphy told him.

“Isidor, it’s me, Kiera,” I told him, taking one of his hands in mine.

His eyes met mine and I could see the fear in them.

“Calm down. It’s okay...we’re safe,” I tried to reassure him.

His breathing began to slow and his body began to loosen. Seeing this, Murphy removed his hand which was still covering Isidor’s mouth.

“I was having a nightmare...it was horrible...” he gasped, pulling his hand free of mine.

“It’s okay...you’re safe...it was only a bad dream,” I reassured him.

“No, you don’t understand...it wasn’t me in danger...it was Kayla...”

“Kayla?” I whispered. “What do you mean?”

“She’s being kept in a darkened room at the end of a long corridor. She’s in a bed and calling out for us to help her,” he said, looking wide-eyed between Murphy and me.

Looking back at him, I said, “I think I just had that same nightmare.”

“So you know it’s a trap then?” he asked, still sounding breathless.

“What do you mean, kid?” Murphy said.

“Someone has already told them that we are coming,” Isidor gasped.

Hearing this, Murphy looked at us and said, “Get your stuff together, we’re moving out.”

Chapter Seven

While we had slept the day away, more rain had fallen and we sunk into the mud outside the barn. The night sky was now clear of clouds, and was shot with a speckling of stars. The moon sat high, looking bright and perfectly round against the night. Potter was lent against a nearby tree, a cigarette winking on and off in the dark as he sucked on the end of it. He looked alone, and a part of me felt sad for him. A part of me wanted to go to him. I hated those feelings. Looking away, I glanced at Luke who had been watching me. I smiled at him and he winked back.

“This way,” Murphy said, setting off across the fields, a trail of blue smoke wafting from his pipe.

I stole one more quick glance back over my shoulder at Potter, who had stepped away from the tree and was now following us. His hands thrust into his coat pocket and his face looking grim.

Just like a sulky school boy, I thought. Smiling to myself, I began to follow Murphy.

“Hang on!” Luke called out. “I want to check out that farmhouse first.”

“Why?” Murphy asked. “It is not essential to our -”

“I’m starving!” Luke half-smiled.

“Me too,” Isidor said.

Looking them up and down, Murphy said, “Okay, but we’d better be quick. I want to keep moving,” he didn’t sound angry, but impatient. Turning, we followed him in single-file across the field towards the farmhouse.

We crept around the side of the building and ducked along the outside of the back wall. We came to a door and Isidor pointed to a set of footprints in the mud, which headed away across the fields.

“These tracks are fresh. Whoever lives here has gone for the time being,” he said.

“Not another one,” Potter groaned.

“Another what?” Isidor asked, looking at him through the gloom at the rear of the farm house.

Then glancing at me, Potter said, “We’ve already got one Nancy Drew on the team – we don’t need another.”

Ignoring him, I said to the others, “Wait here while I go check out the front of the house.” Before anyone of them could say anything, I was gone.

Peering around the side wall of the house, I could see a small front garden and a path that ran from the front door to a muddy driveway. Slipping from my hiding place, I edged along the front of the house. Peering in through the front window, I could see the house was in darkness. Turning away, I passed a trash can and two rubbish sacks. There was a small car parked outside a small wooden shack. After peering into the car, I turned away and made my way back to the others who were hiding at the rear of the farmhouse. Reaching my friends, Murphy cocked an eyebrow and said, “So? Is the coast clear?”

“For the time being,” I told him.

“What’s that s’pose to mean?” Potter said.

“Shhh,” Luke hushed him. “Let Kiera speak.”

“Three people live here,” I started. “One man and one woman – married – Mr. and Mrs. Kenner. They have a daughter. She’s a toddler – no more than three-years-old. They own two cars. The one out front and another – some kind of four-by-four – a Range Rover, I think. They left in that vehicle about an hour ago. The husband has taken his wife and daughter somewhere – to stay with relatives in all probability. The mother and child will stay – but he will be back and not before too long.”

Clapping his hands slowly together and smirking at me, Potter said, “Very good Miss Marple...is that it?”

Staring back at him hard, I said, “Before they left, the family sat down to a meal which consisted of roast chicken and corn on the cob. Mrs. Kenner uses L’Oreal shampoo and likes to listen to Beyonce. Mr. Kenner reads The Times and has recently started to dye the flecks of grey in his hair...”

“Okay, Kiera, I think you’ve made your point,” Murphy said. “Are you definitely sure about what you’re telling -”

“There’s only one way to find out,” Potter said as he shoulderbarged the back door open and stepped inside. Glancing around to make sure we weren’t being watched, we followed him.

“If nothing else, Kiera’s right about that roast chicken,” Isidor said, sniffing the air.

“Potter, have a look around. See if there is anyone home,” Murphy told him.

“I’ve already told you...” I started, looking at Murphy.

“Don’t take it personally,” Murphy said, “I just want to make sure.”

“Like he said, Kiera,” Potter smirked, “don’t take it personally, the guy’s just having some trust issues.” But before Murphy could say anything back, Potter had disappeared on his search of the farmhouse.

We were in a kitchen with a cooker, fridge, and a wooden table and chairs. I could see a half-eaten plate of food and a knife and fork. To my

delight, I saw a cooked chicken, and smiled to myself. It had been half-eaten, and had slices of meat cut from it. It smelt wonderful. My stomach began to rumble and my mouth watered at the sight of it.

Without any hesitation, Luke shot his arm out and tore off one of its fleshy legs. He raised it to his mouth and began to devour it like a ravenous wolf.

“Do you think you should be eating that” I asked him.

Luke made no reply, his mouth was full of chicken, and he had a look of ecstasy splashed across his face. Seeing this, I reached out and ripped the other leg free and rammed it into my mouth. It was still warm and its taste was wonderful. Then Murphy was pulling at it and stuffing chunks of meat into his mouth. The three of us stood there, the meat’s juices running from our chins, as we chomped our way through the chicken. Isidor looked at us, then realising that within moments the chicken would be gone, he started to eat, too.

Potter reappeared in the kitchen doorway and said, “Like she said, the house is empty - you selfish pigs! What about me!” Then elbowing us out of the way, he snatched up what was left of the meatless carcass and began to groan.

“I can’t believe it – you’ve eaten it all!” he said.

Ignoring him, I licked my fingers clean and went to the fridge. Inside I found a bottle of ice cold milk. The chicken had made me thirsty, so I gulped down as much as I could.

Luke appeared beside me and said, “It didn’t take you long to get the hang of this stealing lark, did it?”

“I’m not proud of it,” I said, but my hunger kept my normal feelings of guilt at bay. I handed him the bottle and he raised it to his lips. I watched his Adams apple bob up and down as he gulped from the bottle. When his thirst was quenched, he put the bottle down and I wiped a white, milky moustache from his top lip with my finger. He then passed the bottle to Isidor.

“How are you feeling?” I asked Luke.

“Better now I’ve eaten.”

“I didn’t mean that,” I said. “Your cravings – for blood?”

“It’s not ideal, but the blood we’re taking from those vampires is kinda doing the trick,” Luke explained. “Murphy and I will manage – we have to.”

“What about Potter? Do you think he will get by on just their blood?”

“I hope so,” Luke said, looking at me. “He’s more ferocious than normal – but that’s just him coping with his cravings. As long as there are

plenty of vampires for him to rip into – he should be okay.”

Although I didn’t want to come in contact with any more of those vampires, there was a small part of me that hoped we did – for Potter’s sake.

I crossed back over to the table where Potter was gnawing on the bones of the chicken. Murphy was reading a newspaper that he’d found on the kitchen table. Looking up at me I could see concern – no it was more than that – fear on his face.

“Remember those nightmares you had about the London Underground?” he said, handing me the newspaper.

Taking it, I stared down at the thick black headline splashed across the front of it.

Unexplained animal attacks on the Underground!

With my heart beginning to race and my mouth turning dust-dry, I started to read the article.

Hundreds die in gruesome animal attack...

But before I'd got much further, Potter had snatched the paper from me and began to read it to himself.

"What's it say?" I pestered, but he was too engrossed to make a reply. "You're such an arrogant jerk!" I hissed, storming from the kitchen. I then found myself in a cozy-looking lounge.

On the far side of the room was a roaring fire – which again only reinforced my theory that Mr. Kenner would be back soon and that he hadn't gone far. No one would leave a fire burning in the grate if they didn't intend to return to the house soon. How had the others missed the smoke coming from the chimney? Opposite this was a T.V. and I crossed the room and switched it on. Holding the remote, I flicked through the channels and every one of them was dominated by news stories, each one informing the world of the weird animal attacks that had taken place in London and were believed to spread across the U.K.

Amateur video footage showed images of commuters racing from the tunnels beneath the ground and up onto the streets of London. There was footage of these terrified people being rounded up and escorted away by police officers wearing the same uniforms as the ones that had chased us the night before. I flicked through the channels and stopped when I saw Murphy's face appear on the screen.

"Come and look at this!" I hollered over my shoulder.

The others rushed into the room behind me and we all gathered around the T.V., as video footage from a helicopter was being played out across the screen. To our shock, it showed us being pursued in the police car that we had taken the night before. The footage showed Isidor firing a weapon out of the back window at the pursuing police vehicles. Then it cut to clips of the police cars crashing and exploding into seething balls of flames. The video footage had been cleverly edited together to make us look like the aggressors.

“It didn’t happen like that!” Isidor protested. “They were trying to kill us!”

I glanced round at Murphy and he was looking blankly at the TV, his sharp blue eyes showing no emotion whatsoever.

“They’ve obviously manipulated the film,” Luke said bitterly.

“But why?” I asked.

“To make us look like we’re the killers. To make people fear us,” Murphy said, and his voice was flat.

I turned back to the screen to see a mug shot of Potter.

“Oh for god’s sake!” Potter snapped. “Why did they have to go and use that picture? Of all the pictures they could have shown on T.V. why they have to go and use that one? I look like a pervert!”

Ignoring his vain complaints, Luke said, “The whole thing just makes us look like ruthless cop killers.”

“And that’s exactly what *they* want!” Murphy said, now sounding angry.

“Who does?” Potter asked.

“*Them!*” Murphy snapped, pointing at the T.V.

I turned to see Phillips seated behind a long table at a police press conference. He was dressed immaculately in police tunic, which now had three silver pips on each shoulder.

“Somebody’s gone and got themselves a promotion,” Potter said and made a whistling sound through his front teeth.

Phillips’ thick silver hair was combed to one side, he was clean-shaven and looking sleek apart from the scars that ran down the side of his face. I could see the faintest hint of a smile tugging at the corners of his mouth as he sat before a throng of reporters, lapping up the attention. There was a mass of microphones attached to the podium. Around each microphone was fixed a smaller collar with the names of the television crews in attendance. Present was the BBC, ITV, Sky News, CNN, FOX and many others – it seemed that almost every country in the world was represented.

“You were right then, Luke. Phillips did survive,” Isidor said.

“I didn’t doubt it,” Luke whispered as if to himself.

“And so did your friend, Kiera, what’s-his-face,” Potter said and pointed at the T.V. screen.

As I looked and in the background, I could see Sparky, dressed smartly in his police uniform. Snatching up the T.V. remote, I pressed the volume button and increased the sound level as Phillips addressed the nation.

“As you know, several major incidents have occurred across England in the last twenty-four hours. As of yet, we are not fully aware of the true nature of these incidents. On early investigations, it would appear that some unknown wild animal or animals went berserk on the London Underground...”

“That lying -” Potter started to say.

“Shhh!” Murphy ordered. “I need to hear what he has to say.”

“...yesterday morning,” Phillips continued. “Early enquires revealed CCTV footage of these people acting suspiciously on the Underground minutes before the attack.”

As Phillips lied to the country, along the bottom of the screen, our faces appeared and the words ‘*Suspected Fugitives*’ flashed past.

“I ain’t no fugitive!” Isidor grumbled as his face flashed across the screen.

“Shhh!” Murphy said again.

“These five suspects have quickly been identified as James Murphy, Sean Potter, Luke Bishop, Isidor Smith, and Kiera Hudson.”

“Is it true, Chief Inspector Phillips, that four of these suspects are police officers?” one reporter called out.

“*Were* police officers,” Phillips corrected the reporter.

“Is it true that the female – Hudson – is also wanted in the connection of the missing persons from Havensfield?” another asked and a series of cameras flashed.

Phillips laced his hands together on top of the table and looked grimly into the sea of flashing cameras. “Yes, I can confirm that Kiera Hudson is wanted in connection of those persons who have gone missing from Havensfield.”

“Why has it taken so long for you to apprehend her?” another reporter yelled off camera. “Doesn’t this show police incompetence? Or perhaps it’s because she is one of your own that you have been so slack in apprehending her?”

“Not at all,” Phillips smiled confidently. “The previous investigating officer has been reassigned to another case -”

“I bet he has,” Potter cut in.

“Who have you appointed in his place?” yelled another reporter.

Phillips almost seemed to pause before replying, and then he grinned into the cameras and said, “I am very grateful to the newly-appointed Superintendent Jessica Reeves from our Special Tactics Unit, who will now be leading the enquiry not only into the missing persons, but also the attacks on the London Underground.” Then standing, Phillips looked to his right and held out his arm to welcome the new superintendent to join him at the table. I couldn’t help but think how he reminded me of some second-rate T.V. game show host, as they greeted the contestants onto their show.

The superintendent stepped up to the table and my heart stopped. Stumbling backwards into a nearby chair, I threw my hands to my face, I watched my mother take her seat next to Phillips at the press conference. I remembered how Phillips had told me that my mum had changed her surname to Reeves when undercover in The Ragged Cove.

“That’s Jessica Reeves - *Hudson*,” Murphy gasped as he recognised her from the time they spent working together at The Ragged Cove.

I nodded my head numbly, not believing what I was seeing. Not *understanding* what I was seeing. Without question I knew it was my mother, her dark raven black hair, high cheekbones, and bright hazel eyes, which were just like mine.

“Gee,” Potter whistled, “I never remembered her looking that hot!”

“Potter!” Murphy growled viscously. “Shut your mouth!”

“What is she doing on there?” I whispered breathlessly. “She’s my mum!”

“It seems impossible,” Luke said, hunkering down beside the armchair and taking my hands in his.

“Why?” I asked, fearing the truth. “Why is she with Phillips?”

I looked into Luke’s eyes, hoping that maybe he had the answers. My heart was pounding in my chest and I felt as if I was going to be sick. But before Luke had the chance to say anything, someone shouted from behind us, “Right, you goddamn *freaks*...move and I’ll shoot the lot of ya!”

Chapter Eight

I turned around to find myself looking down the long barrel of a shotgun. The man holding it was fat and balding, with a bushy grey beard that swarmed around his chin and neck. His hair looked unnaturally black and I realised I'd been right about him dying his hair.

"I know who you all are!" he roared angrily. "The news reporter said that you had last been seen in the area and we should keep all our windows and doors locked."

That's why he took his wife and child away tonight – he wanted to protect them from us, I thought to myself. And knowing that I'd been right about that too, didn't bring me any comfort – not tonight.

"We're not who you think we are, Mr. Kenner," Murphy said.

"How do you know my name?" he almost seemed to squeal.

"Ask sweet-cheeks over there," Potter said, striking a match and lighting-up a cigarette. "Your wife doesn't like Beyonce by any chance, does she?"

Glaring at Potter, who was only making the situation worse, I said to the man with the shotgun, "It's not like you think..."

“Keep it shut, lady, you ain’t fooling me!” Kenner barked. And waving the gun at us, he said, “Move over there. All of you stand against that wall.”

We did as he ordered and stood by the fireplace, which snapped and hissed behind us. “And put that cigarette out!” he ordered Potter. “Who said you can smoke in here? This is *my* house!”

“No problem,” Potter said, drawing deeply on the cigarette and blowing streams of bluey-grey smoke through his nostrils and mouth. Then, flicking the half-smoked cigarette at the farmer, Potter said, “Here, catch!”

Instinctively, Kenner raised his arms to protect his face, and in doing so he accidentally fired the shotgun. The cartridges tore into the ceiling, sending down a shower of plaster all over our heads. Before I even realised what was happening, Potter had flashed across the room in a spray of black shadows and disarmed Kenner of his gun. The first he knew about what had happened was when he glanced up to see Potter pointing his gun at him.

“You need to calm down, soldier, or you’re going to end up hurting someone,” Potter said. “So sit down and stop getting so excited.” Throwing his hands into the air and sounding petrified, Kenner screamed, “Don’t hurt me! *Pleeeeee* don’t hurt me!”

Crossing the room, Murphy took the shotgun from Potter and placed it on the floor. “No one here is going to hurt you, Mr. Kenner,” Murphy

said, “you have my word about that.”

“Please don’t hurt me! I have a wife and child. Pleeese...!”

“Like my friend said, no one is going to hurt you,” Luke tried to reassure him.

“But I saw you all on the T.V...they said you were...”

“We’re not killers,” Isidor said, sliding his crossbow over his back.

“What’s your first name?” Murphy asked him.

“Tom...I’m called Tom.”

“Well, listen to me, Tom. Whatever you’ve seen on the T.V. about us...it isn’t true. We aren’t going to hurt you...we’re not the enemy,” Murphy tried to reassure him.

“But on the T.V...I saw you...” he blustered as he glanced fearfully at Potter.

“Hasn’t anyone ever told you not to believe everything you see on T.V?” Potter asked, as he lit another cigarette.

Seeing this, I couldn’t help but wonder why Potter had to be so difficult. Then realising that he might be of some use, I said, “Potter, take off your coat.”

“Easy, tiger,” Potter grinned. “This isn’t the time or the place, sweet-cheeks, maybe later -”

“Just take it off!” I yelled at him.

“I never had you down as the dominant type...” he started.

“Just do it!” I shouted again. Then turning on the rest of them, I shouted, “All of you!”

Without question, Murphy, Potter, Luke, and Isidor, began to strip to the waist. As their coats and shirts fluttered to the floor, their giant black wings unfurled from the backs of their pale bodies.

Then I heard Potter say, “I don’t think she meant you, dude.”

Following Potter’s stare, I turned around to see that Kenner was unbuttoning his shirt too, his oversized belly spilling into his lap like a pile of white dough.

“What are you getting undressed for?” I asked him, shaking my head from side to side.

“You said we all had to take our shirts off,” Kenner replied, his lower lip trembling. “You’re not all...you know...kinky, are you?”

“Kinky!” Potter barked as if he had just been deeply insulted. “Who are you calling kinky? I’m not kinky!”

“Oh please!” I groaned. “I wasn’t talking to you, Mr. Kenner. And they’re not kinky, as you like to put it, they are Vampyrus.”

“Vampyrus?” Kenner asked, buttoning up his shirt and looking past me at my friends who now stood before him. “What’s Vampyrus?” Then, seeing them standing there with their long black wings trailing behind them,

and Isidor's wings hanging between his arms like the webbing between a ducks toes, he started to scream all over again.

"Now look what you've gone and done," Potter snapped at me.

"I just wanted to show him that you were monsters – but good monsters if you understand that," I said, hoping that I hadn't hurt their feelings.

"You're a monster too," Isidor said pulling his shirt and coat back on. "Don't forget that, Kiera."

How could I? I thought to myself. Then turning on Kenner, who sat quivering in the armchair, I said, "Well?"

"Well, what?" he mumbled.

"As you can see, these guys here are...*different* from you...but they never killed those people on the London Underground," I told him. "and they're not going to kill you."

"But how can I believe you?" Kenner whimpered, unable to take his eyes off them.

"If they were going to kill you, wouldn't they have done so by now?" I said. "They've had plenty of time and reason, what with you waving that shotgun around. And let's face it – you're pretty remote all the way out here – I mean who's going to hear you scream?"

“Can you see now that we are not the enemy?” Luke asked, standing by the fire. The light from it made the scars on his chest and face glow. Flapping his wings gently, as if to show Kenner that they were real and not some party-trick, he came forward and said, “Kiera is right, we are different...monsters, if you like, but that doesn’t mean we are killers. We are in as much danger as you and your family are.”

“Danger?” Kenner asked his eyes wide.

“We don’t have time to explain now, but leave this place,” Luke told him, pulling his coat back on. “Go to your wife and child and get as far away from here as possible...and don’t come back.”

“But why?”

“Look,” Murphy said, buttoning his shirt, “Your race is in danger and we are the only ones, at this moment in time, who can help you. It’s those who you see and hear calling us killers who are the real enemy. We don’t intend on harming any human. We just want to leave here and continue with our mission. So do we have your word that as soon as we are out of the door, you won’t go calling...?”

“It’s too late for that,” Kenner said sheepishly. “I called the police as soon as I saw that you had broken into my home!”

And no sooner had those words left his mouth, we heard the sound of sirens and the thunder of helicopters as they approached in the distance.

“I’m sorry,” he said.

“Yeah, so am I,” Potter said, heading straight to the window, where he twitched back the curtain and peered out into the night and across the fields.

“We’ve got company and lots of it,” Potter said without the slightest trace of fear in his voice. He closed the curtain and looked at Murphy, who in turn looked at Luke, Isidor, and me.

“Get your stuff, we’re getting out of here,” he said, his voice full of urgency.

Isidor slung his backpack over his shoulders, and I looked up at the ceiling as the sounds of several helicopters screamed overhead.

Leaping from the armchair, Kenner shouted, “Follow me!”

He raced into the hallway and flung open a door which sat beneath the staircase. “Get down there. You’ll find a tunnel which runs for a couple of miles underground. It leads to a disused well. My grandparents used it during the war.”

We piled in and hurried down a set of rickety old stairs. At the bottom, I glanced back and could see Tom Kenner standing in the doorway.

“Good luck!” he hollered and waved.

Then I heard the sound of breaking glass from above. Kenner slammed the door shut and I heard him shout at someone.

“You’re too late! They left about five minutes ago...they headed east across the fields!”

There were more sounds of smashing and crashing from above. Then I heard him shouting again. “Get back! Get back or I’ll shoot!” Then the night seemed to explode with the sound of his shotgun firing. The air was immediately filled with the ear-piercing screams of those vampire-cops shrieking and gnashing their razor-sharp teeth together. This was followed by the sound of bones snapping and breaking, and the hideous noise of slurping and sucking. My mind swam with pictures of those vampire-cops feeding on Kenner and I knew what he would soon become.

“This way, Kiera. This way!” someone shouted at me. Breaking my trance, I turned to see Luke yanking me towards the entrance of the tunnel, which led into a well of darkness.

From over my shoulder, I heard the door above us explode inwards in a shower of rough splinters as those *cops* appeared at the top of the steps.

“Run!” I screamed, darting into the tunnel behind the others.

Chapter Nine

Murphy took the lead and illuminated the tunnel ahead with the Zippo lighter he used to light his pipe. We raced down the tunnel as several of those cops poured in behind us.

“Faster!” I screamed, almost tearing my throat raw. “They’re right behind us!”

Looking back over my shoulder, I could see them racing towards us. Shoving me behind him, Isidor aimed his crossbow, and with lightning speed fired off a volley of shots into the dark. Through the blackness, I watched several of those finely-sharpened stakes slice into the chests of some of the cops who raced after us. They flew backwards, clutching their chests as they went slamming into the walls of the tunnel and exploding into a spray of white ash. Again Isidor fired, shot after shot with such speed and agility that his arms were just a blur in the darkness as he reloaded the crossbow. Again those cops flew backwards into the dark, screaming, hissing, and spitting as they went. One of their heads made a sickening thud as it bounced off the stone wall, then disintegrated. The vampire-cop collapsed to the floor and the others charged over him as if he wasn’t there.

Racing forward again, I followed the light from Murphy's lighter, even though I didn't need it to help me see in the dark.

"This way!" Murphy kept shouting back over his shoulder at us.

The sound of the vampire-cops breathing grew ever louder from within the darkness as they made up ground and got closer to us. Glancing back over my shoulder again, I was horrified to see that they were now only feet away. Isidor fired off another volley of shots, sending the cops in a shower of dust back down the tunnel.

Then one of them saw the wooden stakes slicing through the air at him and he leapt against the wall of the tunnel. To my amazement, it gripped hold of the wall and scurried along it like a huge spider. He crawled up the wall and came at me along the ceiling of the tunnel. Its face looked wizened as if contorted through pain. Its eyes burnt red as it lunged at me. Then, I felt an arm snake around my waist and drag me backwards. Looking back, I could see that it was Potter who had taken hold of me, and he pressed me against him. Images of what had happened between us in the gatehouse at the Hallowed Manor flashed across my mind. Before I'd had the chance to shove those memories of him away, Luke flew over my head and clattered into the vampire-cop that had lunged at me.

"Get off me," I hissed at Potter as he held me close, and I could feel his unshaven face against mine. In the darkness, I could see his eyes and

they were staring at me. Their intensity was almost frightening – but in his arms the fear didn't last long and my feelings began to soften.

“This isn't the time,” I said, looking back into his eyes. “Please, just let me go.”

And he did. There were no wisecracks. He just let go of me and that just confused me even more, and I think he knew that. Breaking our gaze, I looked away, to see Luke clawing and biting away at the cop, who only moments before, had nearly been upon me. Then I saw Isidor go down in a flurry of beating arms and legs, as he was swamped by a mass of vampire-cops.

Without looking at Potter, I said, “Help him!”

But instead of flying forward in defense of Isidor, Potter hesitated. Turning to face him again, I said, “Please, Potter. I know you don't really like him, but do it for me!”

Then he was gone, and he moved so fast it was almost as if he had just disappeared before my eyes. Spinning around, I saw him dive through the air, slicing through the approaching cops as easily as if they were made from paper. I'd seen Potter lose his temper before, but today he seemed almost savage as he hacked, bit, and ripped at the approaching cops with his claws and fangs. Luke showed as much ferocity, but he moved with more

precision as he hacked and bit, as if his anger, unlike Potter's, was controlled.

Another vampire-cop broke free and scurried above me, throwing itself through the air. I ducked and it shot over my head clattering into the floor of the tunnel. Jumping over him, I raced towards Luke who was lunging down at one of the vampire-cop's upturned faces. The tunnel was filled with the sound of screaming and it hurt my ears. Another sprung at Luke and I saw him topple over. With my heart racing, he looked back and I saw his eyes wide and green staring at me from out of the darkness. I reached for him and as I did, I could feel the burning sensation of hot breath against the back of my neck. Looking back again, I saw a hand reach out of the darkness and grab hold of my shoulder. I screamed and pushed out at the vampire with both of my hands. Then it was gone, flying backwards down the tunnel. At first, I wasn't sure of what had happened and I half-expected to see Murphy standing in the place where the vampire had stood. But he wasn't there. Then, I felt something warm and hot sliding through my fingers. I looked down to see that my right hand was covered in blood. I shook my hand and the vampire's blood splattered against the tunnel wall.

How had that gotten there? my confused mind wondered. Had I really thrown that vampire so far down the tunnel? I couldn't have done, right? Where had that sudden burst of strength come from?

Then from further down the tunnel I heard a voice.

“C’mon Kiera! Run!” Murphy roared at me, the flame from his Zippo bobbing to and fro.

He turned his back and raced away from me. In shock from the realisation that I had somehow launched that vampire down the tunnel with a shove of my hands, I stood rooted to the spot. I was unable to move.

What was happening to me? Was this the start of my changing?

Then I was shoved from behind, and it was Luke as he forced me up the tunnel. I looked at him, and his usual pallor was now crimson, splashed with the remains of the vampires he had just slaughtered.

“Move it!” he hollered at me, snapping me from my trance-like state.

“Potter?” I said, sounding confused and disorientated. “We can’t leave without -”

“Thanks for the concern,” I heard someone say as they rushed past me like a breeze. Spinning round, I saw Potter half-dragging Isidor up the tunnel towards Murphy.

“Run, Kiera! Run!” Luke roared.

Then turning, I clambered down the tunnel with Luke at my heels. We veered to the left and dashed around the bend. I could see Murphy standing at the foot of a wooden ladder that led up out of the tunnel.

“Run! Run!” Murphy ordered as the vampires that chased us were now frantically scurrying all over the tunnel walls and dropping through the air like giant spiders.

“Up the ladder!” Murphy yelled.

Without needing to be told twice, I took hold of the rungs and began to race up the ladder with the others close behind me. As I made my ascent, I could hear Murphy’s fangs snapping and slicing as he fought off the approaching vampires.

I reached the top of the well and clambered out, falling into a muddy, sodden field. Isidor was next to climb out over the edge of the well and clatter to the ground. Then Potter appeared, followed by Luke and Murphy.

The head of one of those vampire-cops loomed over the edge of the well and Murphy took it off with one quick swipe with his claws. In the light of the moon, I could see the creamy-white skin of the vampire’s head, knotted and twisted with blue-green veins, wither and crumble away into a pile of ash.

There was a strong looking bolt attached to a wooden lid that covered the mouth of the well. Swinging it closed, Murphy forced the bolt into place, sealing the well closed.

Without pausing to take a breath, Murphy was charging across the remote field we now found ourselves in. He headed towards a line of trees that stood in the distance. We raced behind him as he shouted over his shoulder, “This way! This way!”

Reaching the knot of trees, we found ourselves in a deeply wooded area. The trees stretched up tall around us, and the moon cast silver streams of light through the branches. Leaning against a tree, Murphy caught his breath.

“Take two minutes,” he said, “but that’s all. It won’t take long for them to smash through that well.”

Dropping to my knees, I sucked in mouthfuls of cold night air. Then I noticed those streaks of black blood on my hand. Almost gagging at the sight of it, I snatched up handfuls of fallen leaves and began to wipe my hand clean.

Luke crouched beside me and said, “Are you okay?”

“No, not really,” I told him, wiping the last of the blood from my fingers.

“Do you want to talk about it?” he asked, gently knocking the fringe from my brow.

Standing, I folded my arms around him. Then kissing him softly on the cheek that still showed the scars from The Ragged Cove, I whispered, “Later.”

As he stood and held me, I noticed Isidor tear a piece of cloth from the inside of his coat and tie it around his hand which was bleeding. He had a large scratch across his forehead, which bled into his eye. Wiping the blood away with his sleeve, he went to Potter who was slouching against a tree and smoking.

Holding out his good hand towards Potter, Isidor said, “I just wanted to say thanks for what you did back there.”

Looking down at the hand of friendship that had been offered to him, Potter said, “What did I do?”

“Saving me like that,” Isidor said, his hand still held out before him. “I was hoping, you know...perhaps we could just get along with each other from now on?”

Drawing deeply on the cigarette that dangled from the corner of his mouth, Potter said, “Don’t go getting any funny ideas, kid.” Then, blowing smoke in Isidor’s face, he added, “I didn’t do it for you, I did it for somebody else.” Then glancing over at me, Potter flicked the cigarette away, barged past Isidor and headed towards Murphy.

Chapter Ten

We ran all night, Murphy our guide in the dark. Occasionally, he would find another path, one which led away from towns and main roads. Most of our escape was spent clawing our way through undergrowth, snaking between trees. At one point, we walked for miles upstream to hide our tracks from any of the vampires that may still be hunting us.

Most of our journey was spent in silence, each of us lost in our own thoughts. My own mind was filled with doubt and feelings of betrayal.

Why had my mum been with Phillips and Sparky on the T.V.? Was she working for this invisible man? She couldn't be!

But if she were aligned to him, what part did my mum play in all of this? Then I remembered the tiny body of the boy lying in the woods at The Ragged Cove, his tiny hand clutching hairs from my mum's head. Had she killed that boy? Never! Knowing my mum like I remembered her – she would never get involved in anything that would harm another person. Maybe she was pretending to be a part of it – perhaps to save her own life. That had to be it – or perhaps she didn't realise the danger she was in.

My head throbbed and I felt sick. I felt as if I no longer knew myself, either. In my mind's eye, I saw that vampire flying backwards down the tunnel beneath the well. I knew I had done that, but how? Was this the Vampyrus coming out in me? Was I at last changing? But what did that mean? Would I, too, grow fangs like the others? Would those wings with their wriggling black fingers work their way out of my back? I shuddered just thinking about it. And then a thought hit me like a freight train. *Would I start thirsting for blood?*

I desperately needed to know. So as we waded up stream, the icy cold water numbing my toes through my boots, I caught up with Luke.

"Do you think my mum is a part of all of this?"

"I don't know, Kiera. I really don't know what to think," he said gently.

"But how would that be possible?" I asked him.

"I don't know," he said again.

"But you were one of the last people to have seen her the night she disappeared back at the Cove," I pushed.

"She had gone by the time I got back to her," he said, and I could see that he was struggling to find the right words to comfort me. "Phillips and Taylor took her. They told you as much themselves."

We kept moving upstream towards a large hill that loomed against the night sky like some giant ogre. The water sloshed about our shins, and the cold wind snatched at my long hair that bellowed about my shoulders.

Not being able to hold back my fears anymore, I said, "Luke, I think I'm changing."

Slowing beside me, Luke looked at me and said, "How?"

"Back in the tunnel," I started, not being able to meet his gaze, "I lashed out at one of those vampires and I threw him nearly a hundred yards or so back down the tunnel. But not only that, I think that I pushed him so hard that my hand actually broke through his skin, because I ended up with his blood all over my hand. I shouldn't be that strong, right?"

"What else?" Luke asked.

"Well, I can pretty much see in the dark now," I said. "It's like I'm kinda seeing in black and white. I can distinguish shapes, faces, stuff like that. I wouldn't need a torch in the dark to see my way, that's for sure."

"What about your eye and the nightmares?" he asked.

"The eye doesn't bleed anymore," I said, "and the nightmares are less, but when they do come, they are different."

"In what way?"

"It's like I can control them somehow," I tried to explain to him, not that I really understood it myself. "I still have visions and when I do, it's

like I'm looking through a video camera. I can turn it around, up, and down – get a three hundred and sixty degree view.'

"What did you see in the last vision you had?" Luke asked me, stepping over a series of rocks that jutted-up out of the frothing water.

"I saw Kayla," I told him. "She was lying in what looked like a hospital bed. She was scared and calling out to me, but..."

"But what?" Luke asked, taking my hand and helping me over the rocks so I didn't slip and fall straight on my arse.

"There were these creatures," I said lowering my voice so none of the others could hear me.

"What kind of creatures?"

"I'm not sure. They were huge, though, and covered in hair," I said.

Then looking into my eyes, he said, "Just like me when I changed back in that room at the manor?"

I remembered how he had looked in the dark of that room, lying on the floor, completely covered in black, bristling hair, his mouth full of jagged fangs. Then looking at him, I said, "I guess."

"They are probably the Vampyrus that are guarding Kayla," Luke said, turning and heading after the others.

"I guess," I said again, but deep inside I wasn't sure. Sloshing after him, I pulled at his arm and said, "So do you think I'm changing then – you

know – the Vampyrus side is starting to come out?”

“Perhaps, perhaps not,” he said, looking at me. “I know that the other half-breeds developed their abilities during adolescence, but it’s hard to know for sure as only three of you ever lived past the age of sixteen.”

“I’m twenty,” I groaned, “Shouldn’t I have noticed something by now?”

“I guess so,” he said, and again, I got the sense that he wasn’t sure what to say.

“What’s wrong?” I asked him.

“I just don’t know the answers to your questions, Kiera,” he said, his voice soft and caring. “I know that you are confused and scared and I hate seeing you like this. I wish...I just wish I could help you.”

“You do help me,” I whispered.

“How?”

“By just listening to me,” I half-smiled. But Luke was right, I was scared and confused. How I wished that my friend Kayla was with me. I missed our girlie chats and better than anyone, she would understand what I was going through.

“Maybe...maybe...” Luke started then stopped.

“Go on...tell me what you are thinking...please,” I said.

“Isidor has been through it,” Luke said. “What I mean is, that he must have had to come to terms with being a half-breed. Maybe you could talk to him about the confusion you’re feeling.”

Looking ahead in the dark, I watched Isidor as he walked alone up the stream, his head cast down, crossbow slung across his back. He cut a lonely figure in the moonlight. Isidor seemed okay, but I knew that Potter didn’t like him, and I couldn’t understand why. Then looking back at Luke, I said, “Maybe I will try talking to him. After all, his mum went missing too.”

For the next two days and nights we followed Murphy as he led us further across the hills and the Cumbria Mountains. We slept during the day in any deserted outhouse or shed that we could find. But Murphy was always the first up at twilight, racing ahead of us, calling back into the night, “This way! This way!”

On the third day, we settled in a derelict signal box that was situated next to a disused railway line. Again, I felt exhausted and starving hungry. Using my long coat as a blanket, I lay down and listened to the sound of my stomach rumbling with hunger.

Luke lay beside me, and within moments of his head resting against the dusty floor, his eyes were closed and he was asleep. Potter sat on the

other side of the signal box, his knees drawn up and his head slumped against his arms. Isidor sat away from him and was reading a book that he had taken from his rucksack. I hadn't had the chance of speaking with him like I'd planned, I'd not found the right moment – or built-up the courage. I didn't know what was stopping me – but there was something. Murphy had positioned himself by the door again, as if he were on guard. I decided that I would wait for him to fall asleep, and if Isidor were still awake, I would speak to him about being a half-breed.

Struggling to keep my eyes open, so as not to drift off, I looked at Potter. Although he was slumped against the wall, he looked taut and tense and I sensed that he was troubled about something. He had been quiet the last two days, barely speaking to anyone. He had either walked alone behind, or got ahead and waited for the rest of us to catch up. Sometimes, I caught him giving me a sideways stare, but when he caught me staring back, he would quickly look away. Pulling his coat about him and closing his eyes, I wondered what was going through Potter's head.

I lay for what seemed like hours – just watching him, and my mind went back to what had happened between us at the gatehouse and then how he had kissed me in the summerhouse when we believed that we were both going to die. I closed my eyes and tried not to think about it. The passion it stirred inside of me left me feeling scared and confused – and I'd had

enough of those feelings to last me a lifetime. And what of Luke? Every time those confusing feelings that I felt for Potter came to the foreground, I would feel pangs of guilt for Luke. I felt as if I were betraying him and he deserved better than that. Maybe it was a good thing that Potter had kept his distance – perhaps seeing me and Luke share that kiss beneath the tree in the woods had made him think that I wanted Luke and not him.

Trying to rid my mind of Potter, I opened my eyes again and looked at Murphy, who still sat by the door. Although his chin was slumped against his chest, I could see that his eyes were open. Isidor was still reading his book, which he held close to his face, so as to read the words in the gloom. Knowing that it would be some time before they slept, I rummaged in my coat pocket and pulled out my iPod. It seemed like forever since I'd listened to any music and I missed it – like so many other aspects of the life I'd had before. Closing my eyes for just a minute or two – it wouldn't hurt just to close them for a second – I started to listen to Will Young sing *Jealousy*.

Chapter Eleven

...I was underground. No, it was a cave of some sort. Huge and vast like a cavern. Water dripped from overhead and ran down the walls. drip-drip-drip...I was alone...but wait a minute, there was someone close by. Somebody was hiding in the shadows.

“Who’s there?” I called out.

Silence. Just the constant dripping.

Then I caught a glimpse of something. It was large and covered in sleek dark hair. It slinked backwards and forwards in the shadows.

“What do you want?” I shouted.

Silence.

I tried to move forward, but something was holding me back. Looking down, I could see that my arms were chained to rock..

“Hey!” I hollered. “Unchain me!”

Silence.

Yanking on the chains, they rattled like shards of broken glass in a box. Then something else rattled, no rumbled, and I knew that it was the

sound of my stomach leaping with hunger.

I tried to call out again, to demand that I be freed, but my throat was dry and sore as if water hadn't passed my lips in days. My lips felt swollen, blistered, and cracked. Looking ahead of me, the shadows moved again and out of them stepped not the hairy black shape that I'd seen, but my mother. Her black hair curled around her shoulders in long ringlets. Her lips were blood red and her eyes shone a brilliant hazel just like mine. She wore a black dress that clung to her perfectly, just like an extra layer of skin. Her hands were held out before her and they dripped blood onto the cave floor.

Drip-Drip-Drip

"Mum!" I managed to whisper.

Coming closer, she smiled at me, just like she had before disappearing three years ago. I wanted to run to her, wrap my arms around her, to be close to her. But I couldn't because the chains held me fast.

"My poor darling," she soothed as she came closer. "What have they done to you?"

"Help me," I croaked.

"Why have they done this to you?" she said, her hands continuing to drip blood all over the cave floor.

"Who's done this to me?" I asked her, my head beginning to pound and my throat feeling raw.

“Murphy and the others,” she said. “Look what they’ve done to my precious daughter.”

“But they’re my friends,” I tried to tell her.

“Friends wouldn’t chain you down and deny you food and drink,” she told me coming closer still, her brilliant eyes fixed on mine.

My stomach groaned again and my throat burnt.

“Are you hungry, Kiera?” she asked me, her voice filled with compassion.

It hurt too much to speak now, so looking at her with a pair of pleading eyes, I nodded.

“You don’t have to be hungry anymore, my beautiful Kiera,” she soothed. “I’ve brought you something.” Then shoving her hands in front of my face, I could see that she was holding a bleeding piece of flesh.

Recoiling away from it, I gasped and the inside of my throat felt as if I’d swallowed a box of hatpins. “I can’t,” I whispered.

“But you’re hungry,” my mum hushed. “Eat and you will feel better.”

Looking down at the lump of flesh, I could see streams of blood seeping from it and running between her white fingers. And deep down inside, I wanted to lunge at it, suck the blood from it, to cool my burning throat.

*“Go on, Kiera,” she urged, bringing the flesh closer to my mouth.
“Just a little bite and you’ll feel so much better.”*

Although I shook my head in disgust, I couldn’t help but think the smell of the flesh was inviting. I could feel the inside of my mouth start to water and it felt so good. Maybe my mum was right, just one little bite wouldn’t hurt. I mean I’d never have to eat it again, just this once to help these agonising pains of hunger and thirst pass me by.

But another part of me, the human part was screaming at me. “No! Don’t touch it Kiera, not even one little drop! You won’t ever be able to go back! Your hunger and thirst won’t be sedated – it will grow worse!”

“Go on Kiera,” my mum coaxed me. “Would I ever give you something that was bad – something that would hurt you?”

I looked away from the flesh that she held before me, and up into her eyes. She smiled down at me, and I felt warm tears spill onto my cheeks.

“I love you, Kiera,” she smiled.

And hearing those words – God, how I’d needed to hear her voice say those words to me during the last few years – I lunged forward and sunk my teeth into the flesh that dripped from between her fingers and it tasted...

Chapter Twelve

...sitting up, I coughed and spluttered, trying to rid myself of the disgusting taste that was in my mouth. My tongue tasted coppery, as if I'd been sucking on a bunch of old pennies. Rubbing my throat with my hands, I leant over and gagged, but nothing came up. The images of the nightmare still raced around my mind, and I was momentarily convinced that my mum was with me.

Tucking my iPod back into my coat pocket, I whispered, "Mum?" But of course she wasn't there and as I glanced around the beaten-up old signal box, I remembered where I was. Luke was still asleep. Potter was curled on his side, with his coat pulled up over his head. I looked at Isidor and he lay on his back, with his book beside him and his crossbow clutched in his hands. He twitched and jerked in his sleep and I wondered if he were sharing the same dream as me – like we had before. He murmured and let out a soft groan, almost as if he were weeping in his sleep. Getting up, I went to him, wanting to wake him and bring him out of that nightmare, but then I realised that Murphy had gone.

Looking quickly around the signal box, just to make sure that he wasn't slumped somewhere in a darkened corner, I double-checked - he wasn't there. Once I was certain, I eased open the signal box door, stepped out, and closed it behind me. The sun was setting over the mountains, casting a thin ribbon of pink across the evening sky. Climbing down the rickety old steps that led from the signal box, I stepped onto the disused railway tracks. Looking ahead, I could see the tracks winding up into the hills for as far as I could see. Turning around, I saw the grey, chalky boot prints on the sleepers where Murphy had headed off in the opposite direction.

Keeping off the tracks, my footsteps were just too loud as they crunched over the chalky-coloured ballast, I walked in the cess and headed in the direction that Murphy had obviously taken. I hadn't gone far, when I noticed that some of the thickest undergrowth on the embankment had been broken and trampled over. Knowing that this was where Murphy had left the railway tracks, I clawed and pulled my way to the top of the embankment. Reaching the top, I kept low and scanned the horizon for any sign off Murphy. As I crouched amongst the thorns and thistles, I wondered why Murphy had slunk away while we'd been sleeping. I knew that he hadn't simply gone for a leak – he had come too far just for that – and knowing most men were quite happy to take a whiz anywhere that suited

them, I knew that there must be another reason for his sudden disappearance.

Peeling back the undergrowth, I inched my way forward. On the other side of the embankment, I could see a dilapidated outhouse of some kind and just off to the other side of it were the remains of a gutted farmhouse. All that was remaining were three granite stone walls and part of a black-slatted roof. Then, from within the remains of the farmhouse, I saw movement. Ducking low, I peered through the undergrowth and could just make out the shadow of a person moving around inside – no – there were two shadows.

Sitting on my bum, I worked my way down the steep embankment. At the bottom, I bent low and raced across the field to the ruined outhouse. Hiding in the broken down doorway, I peered around the doorframe to get a better look at who was in there.

Screwing-up my eyes, I gasped as I saw Murphy pass by one of the empty window frames set into one of the granite stone walls. I could barely see him, as the sun had dipped so low behind the mountains, it was almost dark. And although I could see well enough at night, much of Murphy was hidden by the wall. Then I saw the second shadow move towards Murphy and it was long and black. The shadow seemed too long as if it had been stretched; either that or the person it belonged to was a giant.

From my hiding place, I watched the black silhouette of the second person pass by the empty window. And I'd been right, whoever it had been was a giant. As Murphy had passed the window, I had been able to see his head and shoulders, but when the second person had passed by it, I had only been able to see the upper part of their chest. Murphy was at least six feet tall, so whoever the second person was must have put them at about seven feet tall. They disappeared from my view and all I could see was their shadows cast across the grass and weeds that grew around the remains of the building.

They were too far away for me to hear what they were talking about and I wished that I had Kayla with me, so she could listen in on their conversation. I wanted to move closer, but I feared that I might be seen. So, crouching low in the doorway of the outhouse, I watched their shadows. I could tell their conversation was sometimes heated, as I could see the shadows of their arms gesticulating up and down as they spoke together. This went on for some time, then I saw the taller shadow hand Murphy something, which he took and stuffed into his trouser pocket.

Murphy's face appeared in the empty window and he looked out across the field as if checking that they weren't being watched. Jumping backwards into the outhouse so as not to be seen, I felt someone take hold of me and pull me inside.

“Get off me!” I hissed, lashing out at whomever it was that had grabbed me.

“Easy, tiger,” Potter whispered back. “You shouldn’t be out here on your own. It’s not safe.”

With his arms snaked around my waist, I tried to pull away. “You can let go of me now,” I told him. But he didn’t, instead bringing his face in closer to mine. In the gloom, and I could see his eyes shining.

“You don’t really mean that,” he whispered and I could feel his warm breath against my neck. Gooseflesh ran over my skin.

“Yes, I do,” I said, but I knew I didn’t sound convincing and I hated myself for it.

“Why?” he breathed.

“Because you’re dangerous,” I told him, feeling his arms tighten, as he pressed himself against me.

“You like dangerous,” he said, bringing his mouth closer to mine.

“No, I don’t,” I whispered back, a strange sense of excitement racing through me.

“Yeah, you do,” he said, “or you wouldn’t be here now.” Then, leaning into me, he covered my lips with his. His stubble felt rough against my face as did his hands that worked their way around the back of my neck so he could pull me even closer against him.

My heart raced in my chest and the urge to just give into him was suddenly so overpowering that it made me feel dizzy. Then, knowing in my heart that what was happening was wrong, I pulled my lips from his, and pushed him gently away.

“I can’t,” I whispered. “I just can’t.”

“Why?” he asked, and he didn’t sound angry – just confused.

“Why do you think?” I said, doing my best to not look at him.

“What about what happened in the gatehouse?” he asked, coming close again, close enough so I could feel him brushing against me.

“That was a mistake and you know it,” I told him, trying to make my voice sound as hard and indifferent as possible – but I knew that it wasn’t working.

“What about the summerhouse?” he reminded me. “Was that a mistake, too?”

“I thought I was going to die,” I said, then realising how bad that must have sounded to him, I tried to take it back. “Look, I didn’t -”

“Just forget it, Kiera,” he said, moving away from me.

“It’s just that I have feelings for Luke,” I tried to explain.

Looking back at me, he lit a cigarette, and said, “But he’s so boring, don’t you think?”

“That’s your friend,” I reminded him.

“I know,” he said, shaking his head. “I didn’t mean that.”

“What did you mean then?” I asked him, wrapping my arms around me.

“Nothing,” he half-smiled.

Taking a step closer to him, I said, “Who was it, Potter?”

“Who was what?” he said, looking back at me over the glow of his cigarette.

“Whoever it was that hurt you?” I said.

“Why must I have been hurt, for crying-out-loud,” he snapped, pitching out his cigarette.

“It’s just that I thought...” I started.

“Well you thought wrong, sweet-cheeks,” he almost seemed to growl as he came towards me. “I never let anyone close enough to hurt me...but you should watch your back.”

“What’s that supposed to mean?” I said, watching him head for the broken-in doorway.

“Isidor,” he said looking back at me. “I wouldn’t trust him as long as I’ve got a hole in my arse.”

“Why not?” I said feeling suddenly bewildered.

“Think yourself a great detective do you?” Potter said, now almost seeming to gloat. “Don’t you think it’s a bit odd that since wonder-boy

appeared on the scene those vampires seemed to know every move that we make?”

“Well, erm...” I couldn’t believe what he was trying to suggest about Isidor.

Then coming so close as if to kiss me again, Potter said, “Don’t you think it’s just an incy-bitzy bit of a coincidence that he showed up just moments after Kayla was snatched by Phillips? He then completely wiped out all of those vampires, then confessed to knowing the person – your mate, Sparky – who then murdered all those half-breed children, killed the old woman, and took Doc Ravenwood.’

“But,” I started.

“Think about it, Colombo,” he said, “I don’t think Murphy trusts him, either.” Then gently kissing me on the mouth again, he turned, left the outhouse and disappeared into the darkness.

No, it’s you that Murphy doesn’t trust, I thought, reminding myself of the conversation I’d overheard between them. Then, making sure that I couldn’t be seen by Murphy and the giant, I made my way back to the signal box.

Chapter Thirteen

I arrived back at the signal box to find Luke awake. He was sitting with his back against the far wall. Isidor was still asleep on the floor, and Potter sat away from them, staring at me from within the darkness.

“Where did you get to?” Luke asked me as I closed the signal box door behind me.

Snatching a sideways glance at Potter then back at Luke, I lied and said, “I just needed a leg stretch.”

Then, holding out a hand towards me he said, “Are you okay? You look kinda...”

“I’m just tired,” I said, taking his hand and sitting beside him on the dusty floorboards. “I didn’t sleep too well.”

“Nightmares?” he asked, leaning forward and kissing me on the forehead. I could see his concern for me and I hated myself.

I nodded.

“Want to talk about it?”

“No, I’m okay,” I half-smiled. “Maybe later.”

Then the door to the signal box swung open and Murphy stepped inside with that lopsided walk of his. “Pack up, we’re leaving,” he almost seemed to bark at us. That same gritty determination I’d sensed in him since the death of his daughters, now almost seeping from him.

Dusting down his trousers, Potter stood and said, “Sarge, you’ve led us across pretty much all of England over the last few weeks and we’ve followed you without question – but where are you taking us? Aren’t we meant to be finding Kayla?”

Glancing around the room at us, Murphy said, “I know where Kayla is, our search for her is nearly over.”

Scrambling to my feet and going to him, I said, “Where is she?”

“Not far from here,” he told me.

Gripping his forearm, I stared at him and said, “Where, exactly?”

“I’ll show you,” he said, turning away and running one of his powerful hands through his silver hair.

Coming to stand next to me, Luke said, “But Sarge, how did you find her?”

“We haven’t been the only ones searching for her,” Murphy said, not looking back at us.

“Who else then?” Potter said, looking across at Luke and me with a puzzled look on his face.

“Somebody who owed me a favour – a debt – and it was time to collect.”

“Who?” Luke asked him.

“Don’t ask me that,” he said turning to face us. “You’re like family to me. I would never do anything to hurt you -”

“But...” Potter cut in.

“No buts,” Murphy said. “I can’t tell you who it is that has helped find Kayla...”

“Does this have something to do with that trust-thing again?” Potter said, his voice sounding bitter, almost resentful.

Staring at him hard with his sharp, blue eyes, Murphy said, “Wake the kid up, we’re leaving.” Then Murphy swung the door open and disappeared outside.

I looked at Luke and he shrugged.

The thought of seeing Kayla again was too much to resist, so turning, I headed straight for the door. As I did, I heard a deep groaning sound of pain. Looking to my left, I watched Potter pull his foot back and kick Isidor in the side, as he slept on the floor.

“Wake up, sleeping beauty,” he snapped. “We’re outta here.”

Leaving Isidor on the floor clutching his side looking confused and dazed, Potter popped a cigarette into the corner of his mouth and left the

signal box.

Within minutes, we had gathered outside. Murphy, as we had come to expect, was standing off to one side on his own, his pipe drooping from between his lips. Thick clouds of smoke tumbled from it and disappeared into the night sky. The moon hung high above, flat and round-looking, like a giant silver disc. Isidor stood with his rucksack and crossbow slung over his back and glared at Potter. Before another series of insults could be exchanged between them, Murphy was walking away.

“This way,” he said over his shoulder and was gone.

We followed him into the night, making our way across the deserted level crossing and into a nearby field. Potter trailed behind, silent and brooding. Luke walked beside me and I felt uncomfortable. It was the thought of what had taken place between Potter and me in the outhouse that made me feel like I had betrayed him.

But I pushed Potter away, I tried to tell myself. But who was I trying to kid? I knew deep inside where those secrets lay – the ones that you don’t like to get out and examine too closely – the ones where I’d enjoyed being kissed by Potter and I’d enjoyed kissing him back even more. There was so much about the guy that infuriated me – made me angry – but when he held me, kissed me, pulled me close against him, I felt nervous, scared, and excited all at the same time. He was what I guess you would call a ‘turn-

on.’ But I knew that wasn’t enough for me. I’d never really been attracted to guys like Potter – the wise-guy – I’d seen too many of my friends get hurt by men like him, and I wasn’t going to let that happen to me. Luke was the sorta guy I usually went for, dependable, loyal and honest.

But he’s just so boring, Potter said inside my head.

So taking Luke’s hand, I pushed Potter out of my mind. Looking down at me and gently squeezing my hand in his, Luke winked at me and we quickened our pace to catch up with Murphy and Isidor, who led the pack.

We walked the next two miles or so in silence. Then, reaching the brow of a hill, Murphy signaled for us to get down. On seeing his command, we instantly dropped into a crouching position and tucked ourselves behind the trunk of a large tree that stood alone on the moonlit hillside. Walking quietly over to us, he bent down.

“We’re here,” Murphy said, his voice barely a whisper, and his eyes twinkling in the dark.

“Where’s ‘here’?” Potter asked.

“The Sacred Heart Monastery,” Murphy whispered back.

“Monastery?” Isidor asked.

Then spotting Isidor's many rosary beads glinting back from beneath his coat, Potter said, "You should feel right at home."

Ignoring him, Isidor looked at Murphy and said, "Why have they brought Kayla to a monastery?"

Hunkering down beside us, Murphy said, "It's a monastery in name only. It's one of the strongholds designed to protect the Vampyrus from vampires," he said. "Just like Hallowed Manor was."

Glancing over his shoulder, looking down the hill I could see a large stone building set amongst the shadows of a nearby wood. The building looked very much like a medieval cathedral with a tall-looking bell tower that pointed up into the night sky.

"The local community still actually believes that it's a working monastery," Murphy continued in his hushed voice. "The Vampyrus who live here are believed to be monks – they are known to the locals as the 'Deserted Fathers'. See, it suits them to live here – they live like hermits, shying away from the rest of society. They led a peaceful and tranquil existence until -"

"Until what?" Luke cut in.

"Until the agents of that invisible man took the monastery over – flooding it with Vampyrus that believe in his twisted doctrine. It has

become a breeding ground for vampires and a place where they can experiment on the half-breeds like Kayla. It's the perfect cover, you see."

"So are you gonna tell us who led you to this place?" Potter asked, his eyes fixed on Murphy's.

"We've already had that discussion," Murphy hissed.

"But can we trust them?" Potter pushed.

"I'm not asking you to trust them," Murphy said. "I'm asking you to trust *me*."

Potter looked away, back down the hill, and I could see that he didn't look happy with Murphy's reply.

So, changing the subject and just wanting to get Kayla out of that monastery, I said, "So how do we get in?"

Looking at me through the darkness, Murphy said, "Like Hallowed Manor, there's a huge wall to get over – but that shouldn't be a problem."

I looked around the tree trunk and into the distance at the monastery. It looked unwelcoming and sinister set against the skyline. It didn't look like a place of worship, more like a sanctuary for the devil himself.

"So what's the plan?" Potter asked.

"Plan?" Murphy asked, one of his silver eyebrows cocked.

"Yeah, a plan," Potter sighed. "Like what happens when we get over the wall?"

“I don’t know,” Murphy said with a weak smile. “I’m making this up as I go along.”

Then he was gone, limping down the hill towards the monastery.

“It’s a shame we don’t have any explosives,” Isidor mumbled as if talking to himself.

“Explosives?” Luke asked.

Then, glancing at Luke, Isidor looked embarrassed and said, “I was just talking to myself. But you know it’s a shame we can’t just blast our way in through that wall.”

Standing, Potter looked down at Isidor and snapped, “Listen here, Houdini or whatever your name is, this is meant to be a break-in, not a break out. Explosives for crying-out-loud! This isn’t an episode of *The A-Team*. Jeez – you’ll be suggesting next that we build a bridge out of elastic bands and climb over the wall that way!”

“I was only saying...” Isidor started.

Ignoring him, Potter glared at Luke and me, and said, “I don’t know about you two, but I’m not standing here all night listening to this B.A. Baracus wannabe – I’m going to catch me some vampire.”

Then he was off, heading down the hill towards the monastery. I looked at Isidor and he looked hurt and dejected.

Squeezing his shoulder, I said, “Take no notice of him, Isidor. He doesn’t really mean it.”

Standing, Isidor looked at me and said, “Yeah, he does.”

But before I could offer him any more words of comfort, he too was heading down the hill as Luke and I followed.

Chapter Fourteen

Reaching the wall that surrounded the monastery, Murphy signaled for us to get down again.

Crouching, he looked at us and said, “On any other occasion I’d suggest we fly over, but we can’t risk being detected this close to finding Kayla.”

Looking up at the wall that towered over us, I could see that it was far too tall even for Murphy and the others to leap.

“What do you suggest?” Luke said, staring at Murphy.

Then flicking his wrists before us, he kind of grimaced as the tips of his fingers transformed into the animal-like claws I’d seen him brandish so many times before.

“Okay,” Luke replied, seeming to understand what it was that Murphy was suggesting. Then as one, Luke, Potter and Isidor’s hands were changing – growing as if twisting out of shape – until each of their hands had changed into long, bony claws, their fingertips capped with long, ivory-looking nails.

Looking at my hands, Potter smiled, and holding his claws before him, he said, “I was forgetting you don’t have claws, yet.”

“Yet!” I hissed. “I don’t ever *want* a set of those things!” The thought of watching my fingernails changing into those yellowy-looking claws made my flesh crawl.

Smirking at me, he turned to face the wall. I hated the way he looked at me like that, but before I’d had the chance to react, Luke had pulled me up onto his back and was carrying me towards the wall. Looking over my shoulder, I watched as Murphy and Isidor ran, and springing into the air, they began to climb. Their ascent was rapid and swift, and despite the sheer height of the wall, they were perched on the top of it within seconds.

Locking my arms tight about Luke’s shoulders, he splayed out his claw-like fingers, and digging them into the stone wall like a series of hooks and spikes, we raced up it. They cut into the brickwork as he began to hoist the pair of us up. He moved with the grace and fluidity of a spider as he scuttled up with me clinging to his back.

I looked over my shoulder and could see Potter staring up at me as I hung about Luke’s shoulders. It was then that I saw Potter bend his knees slightly and hurl himself up. He whooshed past us, grabbing the top of the

wall with his nails, as he disappeared over and into the grounds of the monastery.

We reached the top of the wall, where Luke swung us over and scurried back towards the ground, his fingers working quickly and smoothly as they bore into the wall. At the bottom, he eased me off his back and I was glad to have my feet firmly on the ground.

The others were crouched by the wall, hidden in the shadows that stretched out before us. On this side, I could see the monastery in the distance. It was a tall building, like that of a cathedral and was constructed from grey-coloured stone. The monastery looked ancient, as if it had stood on the Cumbria hills since the beginning of time. Ivy crawled up its walls around pointed-shaped windows and grabbed for the roof. The bell tower loomed over us, a crack running down the side of it, making me fear that it might just topple over at any moment and crush us.

“What now?” Potter asked Murphy as we crouched beside him.

Reaching into his coat pocket, he produced five small wooden boxes and handed one to each of us. Opening mine I peered inside, to find what looked like nothing more than a box of gunge, not too dissimilar to snot.

“What’s this?” Potter asked, staring into his box, a look of revulsion on his face.

“Queets,” Murphy said. “You know, the stuff we coated the walls of Hallowed Manor in – to keep the vampires away.”

“I don’t ever remember it looking like this,” he grimaced.

“This is queets in its purest form,” Murphy explained.

“So what are we meant to do with it?” Luke asked. “Rub it into our skin to protect us?”

“Shaking his head with a mischievous smile, Murphy said, “No, you’ve got to swallow it.”

“You’ve *got* to be kidding me,” Potter hissed, throwing the little wooden box aside. “There is no way I’m swallowing that!”

“It will protect you from any vampires that might be lurking in that monastery,” Murphy explained.

“How?” Isidor asked, turning his head away in disgust at the smell of the glooepy-looking queets.

“Once swallowed, it will be in your blood within seconds,” Murphy said. “Any vampire that takes a bite at you won’t be around for long. Just one drop of your blood with that stuff in it and the vampire will be ash before it knows what’s happened.”

“Where’d you get it?” I asked.

“An old friend,” he said, and I thought of the giant shadow handing something over to Murphy in the derelict farmhouse.

Then, as if to prove that it was safe for us to swallow, Murphy raised the little wooden box to his lips and tilted his head back. At once his face turned red, and his eyes started to water. Snapping his head forward, he began to cough and sputter. After several moments, he drew in a deep breath. Then, wiping the tears from his eyes, he looked at us and said, “Wow – that stuff has got a kick to it!”

Sighing deeply, Isidor said, “If it’s gonna help, then what the hell.” Then pinching the tip of his nose with his thumb and forefinger, he opened his mouth and poured in the contents of the box. Just like Murphy had moments before, Isidor started to cough, but not only did his eyes stream, so did his nose as thick, ropery lumps of snot rolled over his top lip.

“You weren’t joking about that stuff having a kick,” he gasped, looking at Murphy through a set of bloodshot eyes. Then cuffing the snot from his top lip, he looked at me and said, “What are you waiting for, Kiera?”

Taking a deep breath, I emptied the contents of the small wooden box into my mouth. It was cold and slid over my tongue and down my throat like jelly. Then I felt it hit, the sensation of burning acid, working its way down through my chest and into the pit of my empty stomach. Retching, I leant forward, fearing that I might be sick. With tears streaming down my cheeks, I covered my mouth with the back of my hand. Slowly,

the acid feeling started to subside and looking at Luke, I choked out, “Your turn.”

Closing his eyes, he chuckled back the queets, and like the rest of us, his face flushed red and his eyes watered.

Snatching the box from where Potter had thrown it, Murphy held it out towards Potter and said, “Take it.”

“No thanks,” he said, looking straight at Murphy. “I’ll take my chances with the vampires.”

Knowing that he wouldn’t win, Murphy put the box back into his coat pocket and shrugged, “Your choice.” Then looking at the rest of us he said, “The effect of this stuff doesn’t last long, so we need to get in and out of the monastery as quickly as possible.” Then he was up and weaving his way towards the building.

Bent low, we followed in single file. The grounds were deathly quiet and had an eerie feel to them. I guessed that a monastery should be quiet and still, after all, it was meant to be a place of reflection and prayer. But there was something more – the whole place seemed to be void of any movement or life. We approached the building from the back as it loomed-up over us, and dived behind several large trashcans.

“What a wonderful smell you’ve found for us,” Isidor said, covering his hyper-sensitive nose with his hands.

“Shhh!” Murphy ordered, and his whole body appeared to stiffen.

We sat hidden for what seemed like forever, not one of us daring to move. We listened for any sound of life, but all I could hear was the noise of my own shallow breathing and heart racing in my chest.

“Follow me,” Murphy suddenly said, leading us from behind the trash cans. We ran across a small cobbled courtyard and through a door which led us into a kitchen. It was long and narrow, with cookers along one wall and cupboards along another. Moonlight cut through the tall windows on either side in milky shafts. I watched as Murphy peered about the room then, spotting something, he made his way to the far wall. Here, Murphy took five brown habits that hung from a series of hooks.

“Put these on,” he whispered, handing them to us.

“You’ve got to be kidding me,” Potter groaned as he took hold of the monks robe. “I can’t pretend to be a monk!”

“You’re just going to have to try,” Murphy told him.

“Why do we have to keep sneaking around all the time?” he complained. “You know I’d much prefer just to get stuck straight in.”

“No!” Murphy said, pointing one of his fingers at Potter. “We try and get out of here without drawing attention to ourselves. Let’s just find the girl, that’s all we’ve come to do, Potter.”

“Whatever you say, you’re the Sarge, Sarge,” Potter said, throwing on the habit.

I pulled the robe over my head, and was immediately struck by its stale odor. I tightened it around my waist with a cord and pulled the hood up over my head. My friends did the same and as I spied at them from beneath my hood, I shivered. Although their faces were hidden in the darkness of their hoods, their eyes shone like pumpkins lit for Halloween.

Once we were all disguised, we followed Murphy across the kitchen to a door that I guessed would lead us into the heart of the monastery. Gripping hold of the handle, he slowly opened the door. It wailed on its hinges and my heart beat faster.

“Remember, in and out! We find Kayla, with as little fuss as possible – no heroics! We can’t afford to be discovered,” Murphy warned us, as we made our way into the awaiting darkness.

Chapter Fifteen

We made our way through a series of stone corridors, our robes whispering about us. The monastery seemed deserted and devoid of all life. Every so often, moonlight spilled in through the giant stained-glass windows set into the grey stone walls of the corridors we crept through.

Without knowing exactly where we were heading, it didn't take long to feel disorientated amongst the labyrinth passageways and spiraling stairwells.

From outside I could hear the wind blowing hard and rain lashing against the windows. Glancing up from beneath my hood, I glanced out and the night looked bleak – just like the monastery that we skulked through. Ahead, two monks appeared in the corridor and came towards us. With my heart thumping in my chest, I lowered my head and prayed that they wouldn't suspect us of being intruders. As they came closer, I just kept saying over and over in my head, "Please walk by! Please just walk by!"

As if my prayers had been answered, they shuffled past us in the narrow corridor, their robes brushing against mine. Fearing that it would only be a matter of time before one of the monks did suspect us, I

whispered, “Does anyone have the faintest idea which way we should be heading? We could be wandering around in circles for all we know.”

Then on our left we passed a door. It was wooden and a series of black iron hinges seemed to be holding the wooden planks together. The door was nondescript and gave me no idea as to what might be hidden on the other side of it.

“Let’s see what’s in here,” Potter said, taking hold of the door handle.

“No! Wait!” Murphy growled. But it was too late. Potter had pushed the door open and stepped inside. Within moments, he had reappeared in the passageway and was beckoning us forward.

“Come on,” he whispered and we followed him into a room.

Luke closed the door behind us and we removed our hoods.

The room was in semi-darkness, and was lit by several small candles. The air was pungent with the smell of burning wax. Just like any monastery, I guessed, there were statues of the Sacred Heart and the Virgin Mary placed randomly about the place. And although I had been into many churches in my life, I could clearly remember the sense of peace and tranquility that I had felt in them. But this place, despite its beautiful statues, made me feel uncomfortable and uneasy.

On the far side of the room there was a desk and a laptop, which seemed at odds in the ancient surroundings. Behind the desk there was a leather-backed chair. Crossing the room, I looked at the desk, the laptop, and anything else I could lay my eyes on.

Then from across the room, I heard Luke say, “What’s this?”

Looking up, I could see that Luke was standing in front of some weird-looking control panel. The others crossed the room to where he was and peered over his shoulder. The panel had been fixed to the wall and had a series of flashing lights and monitors. Set into it was a bank of screens, which displayed several different views of the outside and inside of the monastery.

“Looks like some kind of security system,” Murphy said, screwing-up his eyes in the near darkness to get a better look.

“They obviously monitor this place like a prison,” Luke said.

While the others continued to study the panel, I hit one of the keys on the laptop and the screen came on and revealed a partially written email. Lowering myself into the soft leather chair, I read what it said.

Doctor,

We have experienced some problems with the genetic copies. Hunt and Ravenwood’s gene analysis of the half-breed’s DNA appears not to be

complete. Without their cooperation, we will not be able to complete the DNA sequence for the female.

The boy, as far as we know at this time, seems to be doing fine – but it is still early days. We will know for definite once he has completed his task.

As for Kiera Hudson, we should have her soon. I hope that your assessment is correct and that we will be able to utilize her whether she is delivered to us dead or alive.

The treaty we have struck with

The email ended abruptly, and sat waiting to be finished by whoever had started it. Isidor was now standing beside me and reading the e-mail over my shoulder.

“What’s that all about?” he asked.

“It’s about us,” I said.

“I can’t see my name in it,” he said, scanning the email.

The chair creaked as I swiveled around, looking-up at him.

“You’re a half-breed, right?” I asked him.

“So I’ve been told,” he said back.

“What else were you told?” I asked, wanting for so long to have this conversation with him, and feeling disappointed that now the subject had

been breached between us, we wouldn't have time to finish it.

Isidor looked at me, went to open his mouth, then closed it again.

"What's wrong?" I asked, hoping that I hadn't upset him by raising the subject of being a half-breed. He came across as being okay with the idea. He seemed pretty confident in his abilities, the use of his wings and he could definitely hold his ground with someone as cocky as Potter. So I couldn't understand the look of confusion that had suddenly masked his young-looking face.

"I'm sorry, Kiera," he said softly, his voice just above a whisper. "Can we talk about this another time – just me and you?" Then glancing back over his shoulder at Potter, he added, "When there is no one else around."

Standing, I rested my hand on his arm, and said, "I know what you mean. Maybe this is a conversation that we should have in private."

"Thanks, Kiera," he smiled, and turned away.

"Anytime," I smiled and looked over at Potter who was still inspecting the security panel. I understood Isidor's reluctance to talk about something so personal to him. And I remembered the hurt in Kayla's face as she had told me how she had been bullied at school because she was different. Despite Isidor's confident manner, perhaps he'd had similar experiences and felt unable to talk about them for fear of Potter belittling

him. I was struggling to come to terms with the changes that I'd experienced within myself, the bleeding eye, the visions, the knowledge that I had those creepy black fingers curled around my ribcage, and how I'd panicked the other night when I had thrown that vampire down the tunnel.

I was twenty – an adult – and I was struggling to understand what was happening to me, so guessing how Kayla and Isidor must have felt going through such violent changes at a young age made me heart ache for them. So, I decided to wait until the time was right to talk to Isidor and in the meantime I would tell Potter to give the guy a break – to back-off.

Then turning my thoughts back to the email I'd read, I called for Luke and Murphy to come and take a look at it. I wondered if the girl and boy that the email referred to were the two teenagers that had been taken from the makeshift hospital at Hallowed Manor. The fact that the unfinished email spoke of me being delivered dead or alive did scare me, but not as much perhaps as it should, because what really scared me about that email was the mention of a *treaty*. Who had the Vampyrus struck a treaty with, and why?

“Have a look at this,” I said pointing to the screen.

Peering over my shoulder, Murphy and Luke read the email.

“What boy?” Luke whispered. “What task?”

Shrugging his shoulders, Murphy shook his head as if he had no idea. Then pointing at the screen, he said, “Treaty? What treaty?”

“That’s what I was wondering,” I told him.

“What else is on that computer?” Murphy asked, and I noted fear in his voice.

I clicked on to documents and a whole series of files flashed up on the screen. I scanned the files and looked for anything that might refer to DNA, treaties, Kayla, Isidor, or me. As I quickly scanned the list of files, I heard Potter say from across the room,

“What does this switch do?”

“No! Don’t touch anything!” Isidor shouted, grabbing for Potter’s wrist in an attempt to yank it away.

But it was too late. Potter had flipped one of the switches on the security panel. Instantly the monastery was filled with the ear-splitting sound of a siren.

“What have you done?” Murphy barked at him.

“It’s not my fault!” Potter insisted.

“Yeah it is!” Isidor shouted. “You touched that switch!”

“I didn’t know that was gonna happen, did I?” Potter yelled at him over the sound of the alarm.

“We’ve got to get away from here!” Murphy cried, pulling the hood over his head.

“Wait! I want to copy these files,” I shouted, as I rummaged through the desk drawers. Then finding a disc, I shoved it into the side of the laptop and began to upload the files.

“We don’t have time!” Luke shouted above the deafening wail of the sirens. “We’re going to have company any minute!”

“It won’t take but a second!” I insisted as Murphy went to the door, pulled it ajar and peered out.

I watched the screen, my heart slamming up and down like a sledgehammer in my temples as the files fluttered their way across the screen and onto the disc.

“They’re coming!” Murphy warned us, stepping away from the door and back into the room.

“Hurry up, Kiera!” Luke yelled at me.

“Just a couple more seconds!” I pleaded.

“Pull on your hoods!” Murphy ordered us.

“Files downloaded,” I almost screamed, as the door to the room crashed open.

Chapter Sixteen

Two hooded monks came rushing in and stood before us. Even though they were hidden beneath dark brown habits, I could see that whoever – or whatever – was beneath them, were huge. They towered in the open doorway, like two mountains.

“What are you doing in here?” one of them roared from beneath his hood, his face hidden in shadow.

“We came to investigate why the alarm had been activated,” Murphy said from under his disguise.

“What are your names?” the second monk demanded.

We all stood silently for a moment, none of us sure what to say, when Potter suddenly began to twitch, jerk and scream as if in agony. He started to thrash around so violently, that I jumped backwards behind the desk.

“Feed me!” he roared from beneath his hood.

The monks turned to look at him and I seized my chance. Removing the disc from the laptop, I hid it beneath my robes.

“As you can see,” Murphy said, as Luke and Isidor restrained Potter against the wall, “This Vampyrus hasn’t fed today and it’s left him feeling a bit – you know – hungry.”

“I need the red stuff!” Potter screamed again at the top of his voice for good effect. Then, as if to enhance his performance, he began to pinwheel his arms out on either side of him, as Luke and Isidor fought to hold onto him.

The monks glanced at each other again and the tension in the room was unbearable. Slowly, one of the monks turned towards Murphy and said, “Brother, take him to the crypt, there is plenty of human flesh for him there.”

“Delivered fresh just a few hours ago,” the other monk said. “It’s still warm.”

Hearing this made me want to gag, and fighting the urge, I couldn’t help but see my mother offering me a fistful of bloodied flesh. Just wanting to be out of that room in case either of those monks changed their minds, I wasted no time in crossing the room and filing out into the corridor behind the others. We tried to hurry away as fast as possible, without wanting to raise the monk’s suspicions. I knew that as soon as they had investigated the control panel, they would realise that it had been one of us who had messed with it. With my heart banging and my stomach screwing itself into knots, I

hoped we were as far away from them as possible before they figured out what Potter had done.

Isidor must have been reading my mind, as we had only gone a few steps when, he whispered, “You know, it isn’t going to take them long to figure out -”

He hadn’t even finished when from behind us the monks screamed, “Come back here!”

In a blur of shadows, Isidor had spun round, produced his crossbow from beneath his robes, and was sending wave after wave of wooden stakes flying back down the corridor towards the monks. They flew backwards and thudded into the floor. Kicking and screaming, they pulled at their robes as if in some way the coarse material was suffocating them. From beneath their robes, I got a quick glimpse of their limbs which were covered in thick, black bristling hair. Then they fell still.

Before we’d even had the chance to draw breath, a horde of monks dashed around the far corner of the corridor and raced towards us.

“Find Kayla!” Murphy roared at me. “Go! Go! Go!”

“I’ll help her,” Isidor said, firing off another volley of wooden stakes at the approaching monks, he then turned and raced away down the corridor.

Glancing at Murphy, who now stood with his back straight and arms rigid by his sides, I knew that he was readying himself for battle against the mass of approaching monks. Pulling back their hoods and stripping away their robes with razor-sharp claws, they scrambled along the walls and ceiling. And just like I had seen Luke in that room at Hallowed Manor, these Vampyrus were in their true form. Their bodies rippled with muscle which was covered in sleek, black hair. With ears pointed upwards, and noses looking similar to snouts, they sped forward, their dripping fangs shining in red, open mouths, and their wings unfolding behind them. In three short bursts, Potter had reduced his habit to rags, which fluttered to the ground.

Rolling back his hood, Luke looked at Potter and said, “So much for a quick in and out and no heroics.”

Potter grinned at him, then, turning to face the approaching Vampyrus, he said, “You know you wouldn’t want it any other way!”

Then throwing himself at the wall, he scurried up it towards one of the approaching Vampyrus. I stood and watched as Potter raced across the walls, swiping at the Vampyrus with one of his arms, shredding them into strips as he tore through them. Chunks of Vampyrus splattered the walls of the corridor and rained down on the stone floor. As he set about another one, he suddenly snapped his head around and looked down at me, and his

eyes looked black – gone was the sparkling green – now they just looked dead.

“Don’t you think you should be searching for Kayla,” he said more as a command than a question. Then almost grinning down at me, he added, “You really don’t want to see what I do next...I promise.”

“Yeah...erm...sure...” I mumbled as Potter turned and sliced through two more Vampyrus with one swift swipe of his claw-like hand. Then as if on cue, Murphy and Luke sprang into the air at lightning speed and joined their friend.

Wheeling around on my heels, I dashed away down the corridor in search of Kayla. As I went, my ears were filled with the sounds of tearing, ripping, and biting, along with screams of those Vampyrus that had been disguised as monks.

Catching up with Isidor, we reached a set of spiraling stairs and dashed up them, not knowing if we were heading in the right direction or not. Panic wanted to take control of me, but I sucked in deep lungfuls of air and tried to control my fear. Reaching the top of the staircase, we were greeted by two more of those hooded monks and they came screaming towards us. Within touching distance, Isidor released another round of stakes from his crossbow, harpooning them both in the face. Almost

seeming to cartwheel, they flew back through the air, thudding into the wall at the end of the corridor.

“Kayla!” I shouted at the top of my voice. “Kayla can you hear me!” But the situation seemed helpless. I could barely hear myself over the sound of the wailing alarm and the agonising screams coming from below.

“Kayla!” I hollered again, and this time Isidor joined in with me as we raced down the corridor. We crashed through any door that we came across, not caring or fearing what or who might be hiding on the other side. But each door only opened to reveal a derelict-looking room. Then I stopped so suddenly that Isidor crashed straight into me. “Isidor, the dream that you had – the dream that we both had,” I said.

“What?” he asked, looking confused and pushing his baseball cap to the back of his head.

“You had a dream just like I did about Kayla,” I shouted over the roar of the alarm. “Where were you in that dream?”

“In a corridor,” he said looking confused.

“What did it look like?”

“Well, it was painted kinda lime green and had wallpaper hanging off the walls,” he said. “and there was a door at the end of that corridor.”

“Don’t you see?” I said, staring into his bewildered face. Then, looking all around me, I yelled, “Look Isidor, this corridor is the one from

our dream. The lime green peeling wallpaper, it's exactly the same." Then pointing down the corridor, I whispered to myself, *There's the door.*

Without waiting for Isidor, I ran as fast and hard as I could towards the door. Throwing myself against it, I rushed inside. Just like my dream, the room was dreary, dull, and dark. But in the corner, there was a bed, and over the sound of the alarm I could hear the gentle sound of sobbing.

"Kayla!" I almost screamed with excitement mixed with dread.

"Kayla is that you?"

Without waiting for an answer, I rushed into the gloom and towards the bed and my heart almost stopped. Kayla looked back at me from out of the darkness, and at first I had trouble believing that it was her. She was almost unrecognisable.

"What have they done to you?" I cried, taking her in my arms. But she didn't say anything, she just wept against my chest. I looked down at her as she hid herself against me. Her once fiery hair had been cut off. All that was left were some thick random tufts sticking out of her head at irregular angles. Her body felt cold and brittle against mine, and her skin looked taut and waxy as if it had been stretched over her bones.

Taking her face in my hands, I brought her close and said, "You don't have to be scared anymore Kayla, we've come to save you."

Then jolting violently in my arms, she made a gasping sound in the back of her throat and slumped against me.

“Kayla?” I said, my mind screaming at me that something was very wrong. “Kayla!” I cried, shaking her in my arms like a rag doll. I could feel something warm and sticky flowing over my hands as I cradled her. Then leaning her away from me, Kayla’s head flopped backwards on her neck and it was then that I saw the wooden stake protruding from her chest.

Glancing back over my shoulder, I saw Isidor standing in the centre of the room, his crossbow aimed at Kayla. Feeling as if I’d just been hit by a truck, I stared at him and gasped, “Oh my god Isidor...what have you done!”

Then, reloading his crossbow, he aimed it at my heart and said, “I’m sorry, Kiera.”

Chapter Seventeen

Resting Kayla's lifeless body on the bed, I slowly turned and faced Isidor. He still had the crossbow aimed at me, and I could see that his hand was shaking. My heart was pounding in my chest, and I felt as if I was going to puke. I could feel rage surging through me, and every part of my body wanted to charge across the room and rip his heart from his chest.

As if sensing that I was planning to launch myself at him, Isidor waved the crossbow at me and said, "Stay where you are, Kiera."

"Why? So you can murder me like you've just murdered Kayla?" I spat, tears, spilling onto my cheeks.

"That wasn't Kayla," Isidor said, his crossbow still trained on me.

"What the fuck are you talking about!" I shouted with clenched fists by my side, trying to hold back the urge to scream.

"You read the email back in that office," he said, and I could see that he looked a little scared. "Whoever wrote it said that they were experiencing problems with the genetic copies – something about the DNA sequence of the female half-breed not being complete."

“But you don’t know that *isn’t* Kayla!” And this time I did scream at him. “You just killed her – without even -”

“How did you know all that stuff back at the farmhouse?” Isidor cut over me, his voice now simmering with anger.

“What are you going on about?” I said, now almost speechless that after just killing Kayla, he wanted to talk about what had happened a few nights ago back at the farm.

“How did you know that the farmer had a two year-old daughter, that his wife liked Beyonce, that they had cooked a chicken for dinner,” he said, “that they had two cars, they hadn’t travelled far and he would return in a very short matter of time, that he dyed his hair and their surname was Kenner?”

“Why are you asking me all this shit?” I asked in disbelief.

“How did you know all that stuff?” he said almost as a command. “You didn’t even go into the house, you were gone less than a minute but you came back with all that information about the people who lived on the farm.”

“It was easy!” I snapped at him.

“How?” he snapped back.

“There was smoke coming from the chimney,” I shouted at him.

“No one would go and leave a fire burning if they didn’t plan on coming

back real soon. Not only that, there was a shed, the door was open and inside there was lots of expensive tools. Again, no one would go away for a long period of time without securing their valuables. There were two cars, because there were two sets of tire tracks in the mud. The car that had been left had one of those 'Child On Board' warning stickers on the rear window, but I couldn't see any child safety seat in the back, which suggested that it had been transferred to the other car. There was an empty bottle on the back seat and it was decorated with pink flowers and butterflies. A girl's bottle, and the fact that she still drank from her bottle suggested that she was probably about two years, but no older than three."

"What about the Beyonce thing?" he asked, not letting-up on me.

"There was a CD case on the dashboard, just above the CD player," I told him.

"But it could have belonged to the husband?" he pushed again.

"No, the car belonged to the wife," I snapped. "There was make-up in the glove compartment that had been left partially open."

"How did you know the husband dyed his hair?" he asked, the crossbow still pointing at me.

"There was an empty box of 'Just For Men' hair dye in the trashcan," I said.

"The chicken dinner?" he barked.

“Giblets and plucked feathers...” I started.

“Their surname?”

“Written on the mailbox,” I hissed.

“You make it sound so easy,” he said, not for one moment taking his eyes off me. “But it’s not, is it Kiera?”

“Anyone would have seen that stuff,” I told him.

“Sure they would have seen it,” he said, “but you absorbed all of that information in seconds and connected it into a coherent train of thought – building it into a picture of the family who lived on that farm. That is some gift, Kiera.”

“No, not really,” I muttered. “It was easy.”

“And it’s easy for me to know that girl wasn’t Kayla,” he said.

“But how?” I asked, rage and confusion still simmering inside of me. “You didn’t even get a good look at her.”

“I didn’t have to,” Isidor said. “She *smelt* all wrong.”

“What do you mean?” I said, staring at him.

“You know I can smell things – that’s my gift – if you can call it that,” he half-smiled, “and she didn’t smell like us, Kiera.”

“What are you talking about?” I seethed, wondering if he wasn’t just trying to fill my head with a load of crap.

“The Vampyrus have a certain kind of smell,” he explained.

“Humans have a different kind of smell and half-breeds – *us* – have a very unique smell. A mixture of both of those species.”

“I can’t smell anything,” I snapped.

“And you wouldn’t,” he said. “Just like I can’t see things the way you do, you can’t smell things like I do. Just imagine that your sense of smell is the size of a postage stamp – well mine is the size of a football pitch. I smell everything and it can drive me kinda nuts sometimes – it’s almost like I’m suffocating under a wave of odors.”

“So what does Kayla smell like?” I said, glancing back over my shoulder at her spread across the bed.

“If that had been Kayla, she would’ve had the same scent as you and me. But *she*,” and he nodded in the direction of the body, “didn’t smell of anything. She had no smell, Kiera; it was like she wasn’t even there – like she didn’t exist.”

“But that’s impossible...” I started.

“Exactly,” Isidor said, “and that’s how I knew it wasn’t Kayla. Whatever that *thing* is, it isn’t Kayla. It’s been created, manufactured from DNA taken from Kayla.”

Then remembering how Doctor Ravenwood had told me how the Vampyrus wanted to breed an army of half-breeds because of our unique

abilities, part of me began to wonder if Isidor wasn't, in fact, telling me the truth.

“So why have you got that crossbow trained on me?” I asked.

“I could smell your fear and anger, Kiera,” he said, his face looking grim and forlorn. “I knew you wanted to kill me, so I had to hold you back until I'd had the chance to explain -”

“Kill you!” I said over him.

Then looking in my eyes, he said, “I saw what you did to that vampire in the tunnel. How you forced him back. I don't know if you realise, Kiera, as you did it so fast, but your hand went straight through that vampire.”

I thought back to how my hand had been covered in blood, and without even realising what I was doing, I started to wipe my hand against my thigh, as if wiping that vampire's blood away all over again.

“You might not want to accept it, Kiera,” Isidor said, slowly lowering his crossbow, “but you are changing and it won't be long before you are like Kayla and me.”

“But I don't want to change,” I told him.

“I didn't either,” he said, his voice softening. “It scared the shit outta me. But you don't have to go through it alone. I'll help you, Kiera.”

“But how do I know I can trust you?” I said, looking at him. “How do I know what you’ve just told me about Kayla is true?”

Then striding past me, he went to the bed. “Does this look like your friend?” he said, pointing at the girl.

I looked at her skeletal-like form, her bald head with the tufts of hair sticking out of it. With tears running silently down my cheeks again, I stroked her face. I thought of Kayla, how beautiful she was, her auburn hair cascading down her back and onto her shoulders. With my heart aching, I whispered, “No, she looks nothing like my friend Kayla. But did you have to kill her?”

“It was suffering, Kiera,” he said, coming to stand next to me, taking my hand. “It was in pain – scared.”

“Why do you keep calling her *it*?” I asked, trying to keep it together.

“Because that’s what *it* was,” he said. Although what he said sounded harsh, his voice was gentle. “It was created here, in some laboratory. It was a mutant – a freak.”

“Some would say the same about us,” I said, looking at him.

“Kiera, whatever we are, we were *born*,” he said. “We weren’t conjured up out of someone’s twisted experiment. We aren’t a product of someone’s sick desire to make a super race that will help them destroy the human race. We have a right to exist.”

“So you play God then?” I said. “You decide who lives and dies?”

Letting go of my hand and stepping away from me, he said, “Kiera, I’m not going to get into some theological debate with you. These things have been made for one reason and one reason only and that is to kill. I didn’t ask for these,” he moaned, lifting the monk’s disguise and showing me the wings that hung from beneath his arms. “Don’t you think I’d rather be at college like normal kids my age? Don’t you think I’d rather be making out with girls and playing football with my friends, instead of being hunted down like some wild animal, tearing around the place harpooning Christ-knows-what?”

Seeing the hurt in his face and hearing it in his voice, I said, “I’m sorry Isidor, I didn’t mean to judge you.”

Throwing his coat closed, he said, “Whatever you do Kiera, don’t take pity on these things, because they won’t show any to you.”

“So where is Kayla then?” I asked him.

“Shrugging his shoulders, he said, “I don’t know the answer to that, but one thing I do know is that she isn’t here – I would be able to smell her.”

“But Murphy was given information that Kayla was here,” I reminded him.

“Whoever told him that was wrong,” Isidor said.

Then, a shadow fell across the open doorway. Looking up, I saw Potter. Seeing him there, all I wanted to do was run to him, to be held by him, but I quickly buried those feelings deep inside.

“Well?” he said, looking at me and Isidor then glancing at the dead girl on the bed. I could see that he was covered in blood. There was so much of the stuff, I couldn’t tell if he was injured or whether the blood had come from the Vampyrus he had slaughtered.

“What’s that?” Potter said pointing at the girl.

“What’s what?” Isidor said.

“The dead girl, Sherlock,” Potter growled.

“It isn’t Kayla,” I said, looking at Isidor.

“But it looks like her...” Potter started.

Then looking at him, I said, “Whoever told Murphy that Kayla was here was mistaken...or -”

“Or, what?” Potter snapped at me.

“Or they lied,” I said, brushing past him and back out into the corridor.

Chapter Eighteen

We headed down the candlelit corridor and back the way we had come. There was a bend in the corridor ahead and as we neared it two monks came tearing around it, racing straight for us.

Pushing Isidor and me aside, Potter said, “Leave them to me, I have everything under control.”

Within moments they were upon us, leaping through the air, hoods falling back revealing their contorted bat-like faces. Their eyes burnt red like molten lava, fangs spraying drool up the walls in thick lumps. The first reached out and grabbed Potter by the throat and the second grabbed hold of my arm so tightly, I thought it was going to be ripped out of its socket. Pushing me back against the wall, it lunged at my face and its breath stank of rotten flesh. I clawed at its eyes with my fingernails. I raked them down its face, dragging its eyeballs down his bristly cheeks. The Vampyrus’ eyes felt hot and gloopey under my fingers and it screeched in agony. Releasing me, the Vampyrus threw its hands to his face, and staggered away. The sounds that came from its throat were like a cat in the middle of a fight.

Over the hideous screams, I could hear Potter begin to cough and sputter. The second Vampyrus had lifted him off his feet and had his claws buried in Potter's throat. He kicked and clawed at the Vampyrus, but with each passing second his efforts became weaker as the life was squeezed from him. He glanced over at me, then at Isidor who stood further down the corridor in the shadows. I could see that Potter's eyes were bloodshot and bulging from their sockets as the Vampyrus throttled him.

"Crossbow," he wheezed at Isidor.

"I thought you said you had everything under control," Isidor said calmly, loading his crossbow.

"Isidor, this isn't the -" I started.

"I just want him to be nice to me for once," he said, slowly raising the crossbow.

I glanced back at Potter and his lips had started to turn blue. He tried to say something, but whatever it was, it came out as two short breathless gasps.

"Isidor!" I screamed.

Then the Vampyrus was flying back down the corridor and away from Potter with two wooden stakes protruding from its chest. Potter slumped down the wall and onto the floor. Rushing over to him, I took his face in my hands. His eyes were closed and his lips were still.

“Potter!” I shouted, hating the panic in my voice. “Potter!”

Then opening one eye, he looked up at me and said something, but it was just a whisper.

“Potter!” I shouted again, shaking him in my arms.

He tried to say something.

Leaning in close, I put my ear next to his mouth and said, “What are you trying to say? Are you okay?”

Then seizing the moment, he gently kissed my earlobe. “Stop stressing, tiger – I’m fine.” Then I heard him begin to laugh softly in my ear.

“You’re such a jerk,” I snapped, dropping him back to the floor.

I watched him pull himself to his feet, rubbing his throat with both hands. The blind Vampyrus was still staggering around further up the corridor, hands thrown to its empty eye sockets, and screaming.

“That thing’s getting on my bloody nerves,” Potter said, and his voice sounded croaky and raw.

Without saying anything, Isidor shot the Vampyrus and it fell silent. “Better?” he asked, cocking his pierced eyebrow at Potter.

Still rubbing the purple-black bruises that were now shining on his neck, Potter glared at Isidor and said, “And what’s your problem? That thing could’ve killed me. What took you so long?”

“I just wanted you to realise that you need me,” Isidor said, slinging the crossbow over his back. “I want you to know that I’m not just some dumb kid.”

Dropping his hands from the bruises on his throat, Potter stared at Isidor, and smiling he said, “Isidor, I don’t think you’re some dumb kid.”

“No?” Isidor said, looking surprised.

“No, I think you’re an *arsehole*,” Potter grinned.

Without saying anything, Isidor turned around and walked away down the corridor.

Turning on Potter, I looked him straight in the face and said, “No, Potter, you’re the *arsehole*. What, are you jealous of him or something?”

“Jealous?” Potter scoffed.

“Yeah, jealous!” I shouted back. “I mean look at him, he’s fit, younger than you and he has that neat little crossbow-thing! Worried he might be stealing some of your limelight? Let’s be honest, you haven’t been able to take your eyes off me since I showed up that night at The Ragged Cove.”

“Take my eyes off you!” Potter said, sounding shocked. “You haven’t been able to take your eyes off *me*, tiger!”

“Oh yeah?” I said. Then, without giving him the chance to say anything back, I fled down the corridor and caught up with Isidor.

Isidor and I traced our steps back down the twisting staircase, which led us to the lower passageway. At the bottom, we turned to see Luke and Murphy charging towards us, a group of Vampyrus and vampires in hot pursuit.

“RUN!” Murphy roared, and turned and swiped his claws at the creatures behind him. But one of the vampires was too quick for him. It threw itself at Murphy and sunk its fangs into his shoulder. No sooner had its teeth drawn a speck of Murphy’s blood, the vampire exploded into a shower of grey dust.

“He wasn’t lying about those queets,” I said, watching the dust fly from Murphy’s shoulder like giant flakes of dandruff.

“How long that stuff will last, I don’t know – now follow me!” Luke shouted over the noise of the screeching vampires.

Potter appeared at the foot of the staircase and looking away from him, I followed Luke as he raced along the corridor and down a flight of stairs. Thrusting open a heavy wooden door, we piled in behind Luke into a large circular room that towered high above us. Looking up, I could see that we were in the bell tower. Four thick ropes hung out of the darkness above us and swung about in the middle of the room.

Murphy was the last to enter the room and he slammed the door shut behind him. Pressing his back against it, the Vampyrus and vampires tried to smash through. The door began to splinter inwards, and their long, yellowy fingernails raked at the air through the holes in the door.

“I can’t hold them off forever!” Murphy shouted at us.

Luke and Potter dashed into the middle of the stone chamber and glanced frantically about. There were no other exits from the room.

“Nice one! We’re trapped!” Isidor shouted.

“Any ideas?” Potter hissed back at him.

Taking hold of one of the ropes, Luke tugged on it. A bell high above us began to chime and we all covered our ears with our hands. It was deafening.

“Take hold of the ropes,” Luke ordered us.

Darting into the middle of the room, I took hold of one. Potter grabbed one, too, and Luke wrapped one around his waist. The door to the bell tower began to buckle under the crashing and banging from the creatures outside.

Coiling one of the bell ropes around his forearm, Isidor looked back at Murphy, who was still trying to hold the door shut “C’mon, Sarge, take hold!” Isidor shouted.

Murphy came running forward, and as he did, the door blew inwards and the vampires came crashing in. Murphy took hold of Luke, making sure the rope around his waist was fastened. Then, reaching out with one of his claws, Luke sliced through a thick cable nearby and roared:

“HOLD ON!”

The vampires grabbed at us. Then suddenly we were all propelled upwards into the darkness, as the bells above us came thundering down the bell tower. I looked down and saw one of the huge bells plummet into the creatures below, smashing into them and sending clouds of dust and guts back up the tower towards us.

We raced upwards, and as we reached the belfry, I grabbed at a set of wooden rails that circled a ledge that ran around the inside of the tower. Taking hold of them with all my strength, I hoisted myself to safety. Isidor swung towards me, but fell short of the wooden platform that I now stood on. Snapping my arm out, I grabbed hold of him and desperately tried to pull him to safety.

Sensing his fate, Isidor looked back at me through the gloom, and clawed at my hands. I took hold of him, but his grip began to loosen as he slowly slid down the length of rope and towards the vampires that were now crawling up the ropes and walls.

I could see that he was stuck, and I began to panic. With one hand holding the rope and the other slipping through mine, Isidor had no way of escape. He couldn't reach for his crossbow, because if he did, he would have fallen straight down the bell tower. And if the impact of a three hundred foot drop didn't kill him, then the vampires and Vampyrus at the bottom surely would have.

Teetering on the edge of the platform, I frantically tried to keep hold of Isidor, but his fingers were slipping through mine. He looked up at me, and I could see the fear in his eyes.

"Help me, Kiera!" he gasped.

I looked around for help, but Murphy and Luke were preoccupied with clawing and biting at the approaching vampires, which were scuttling back and forth around the rim of the belfry. My fingers began to lose their grip on Isidor. Knowing that I was unable to keep hold of him, he looked at me and said:

"Kiera, don't worry about me – just find Kayla!"

"I'm not letting go of you!" I panicked. "*I'm not letting go!*"

"Please, Kiera," he begged, his eyes wide and fearful. "Save Kayla – she's my sister."

"Your *sister*?" I cried.

The tips of our fingers brushed momentarily, then he was gone, falling backwards into the mass of waiting vampires below.

“Take my hand!” I screamed, but he was gone.

Dropping to my knees on the narrow walkway, I covered my face with my hands as tears splashed into them. My heart felt as heavy as lead in my chest. “I’m so sorry, Isidor,” I sobbed.

Then, over the sound of my own sobbing, I heard someone say, “That’s the problem with you girls, you’re always crying about something.”

Lowering my hands, I looked to see Potter staring back at me over the rim of the walkway. His claws dug firmly into the wooden boards so as not to fall back down the bell tower.

“Haven’t you got *any* feelings?” I cried.

“I don’t do regrets,” Potter said emotionlessly. “It doesn’t suit me.”

I couldn’t believe his insensitivity and screamed at him, “I know you’re a freaking vampire-bat, but for God’s sake....don’t you have any *feelings!*”

“I have a *feeling* that if we don’t get out of here right now, we’re all dead,” he grinned in that obnoxious way of his.

“How can you be so heartless -” I started to say as he hoisted himself over the lip of the bell shaft and onto the wooden platform. It was

then I noticed one of those Vampyrus monks clinging to his back. Edging away and pointing at him, I screamed, “Potter, there’s a Vampyrus on you!”

Hearing this, the monk ripped back its hood and said, “Kiera, it’s me!”

With my heart racing, I stumbled forwards and said, “Isidor? I thought I’d lost you!”

Potter scrambled to his feet and threw Isidor from his back. I leapt forward and threw my arms around my friend.

“I don’t believe it!” I exclaimed.

Isidor held me tight, then whispering in my ear he said, “Potter must really want you bad.”

“What makes you say that?” I whispered back.

“Apart from that stench of excitement that he gives off every time you go near him, that’s twice he’s saved my life this week.” Then easing us apart, he winked at me and said, “I don’t think he’s as bad as he makes out.”

“I know,” I whispered, and winked back.

“Without wishing to sound completely *heartless*,” Potter said, “I really think you should save the reunions until later.” And he looked at both of us curiously as if wanting to know what it was we were whispering about.

“I’m all done,” Isidor smiled at Potter, taking his arms from around my waist.

“Good!” Potter said. “Then perhaps we can get out of here!”

I let go of Isidor, and wiping the tears from my face, I said to Potter, “So, what’s the plan?”

Without speaking, he raised his claws. His hands were smeared with blood, and dried bits of vampire flesh hung from beneath his fingernails. Potter stared at me with those cold, black eyes I had seen in the passageway below, and once again I was sure I could see just the faintest of smiles tugging at the corners of his lips. Then my attention was broken. Spinning round, I could see Luke slamming one of the Vampyrus into the wall of the bell tower. Brick and dust flew into the air as the wall began to crumble and crack. Again, another vampire threw itself at him, but within a blink of an eye, Luke had snatched it from the air and was pounding it into the wall. He did it with such force, the whole tower began to tremor. Snatching hold of a vampire by its entangled black hair, Murphy launched it at the wall. He’d figured out what Luke was up to. A giant crack had now begun to appear down the side of the tower, and it split open. Rain and wind rushed through the hole as the tower began to rock from side to side.

Taking hold of the wooden rail, I raced around the inside of the wall, brick dust and stone falling all around me.

“Are you crazy?” I shouted over the sound of screeching vampires and falling masonry. “The whole place is gonna collapse!”

“That’s the idea!” Luke shouted back at me as he smashed another vampire into the wall.

The crack was so big now, that you could actually squeeze through it and out into the sky three-hundred feet up above the ground.

“Give me a hand with this, Potter!” Murphy shouted as he started to claw bricks from the wall, making the hole bigger.

Potter was beside him in a spray of shadows, tearing and ripping at the hole. With their backs turned away from the approaching vampires, Isidor covered them with his crossbow. The tower lurched violently to the right and losing my balance, I clattered into the wall.

“The whole place is gonna come down!” I screeched at them, holding onto the railing so tightly that my knuckles glowed white through the skin.

With their arms pinwheeling like pistons, Murphy, Luke, and Potter punched and clawed at the hole, sending forth clouds of rock and stone showering down on the vampires that still tried to work their way up the tower.

The tower listed to the left this time, and I watched as Isidor steadied himself, to take aim at the vampires. The tower made an

earsplitting creaking noise as it lent forward at an impossible angle. And just as I thought it was going to collapse, Murphy roared, “Let’s go!”

Racing around the wooden platform, I glanced through the gaping hole they’d made. Looking down at the ground below, I gasped at how far away it seemed.

“What now?” I asked breathlessly.

“Hold on!” Luke grinned as he grabbed hold of me and jumped.

With his wings spreading out on either side of him, we tore through the night sky. Rain spattered my face and the wind yanked at my hair. With his arms tight about me, I pressed my face against his chest. Treetops whizzed beneath us, and looking back, I could see Murphy and Potter racing after us as the tower toppled to the ground like a pile of children’s building blocks. But I couldn’t see Isidor, and my heart began to race. Then I saw him, his monk robes falling away in tatters as he spread his wings and soared through the night. This was the first time that I’d seen Isidor fly and it was breathtaking to watch – his wings rippling in the wind beneath his arms like that of a vampire-bat.

As I peered at him from the safety of Luke’s arms, I wondered how soon it would be before I had wings. Would they look like Isidor’s, or be pretty like Kayla’s?

We hit the ground with a thud and I rolled clear of Luke's arms. We were back on the other side of the monastery wall. Looking up, I watched the others swoop out of the sky and land beside us.

Within seconds, their wings had slithered back inside them, and Isidor was fastening his coat.

"That went well," Potter said, wrapping what was left of his tattered coat about him and lighting a cigarette.

"What about Kayla?" Murphy asked me.

"We found something," I said glancing at Isidor.

"What's that supposed to mean?" Luke said, coming towards me.

"Remember Doc Ravenwood said that they wanted the DNA from the half-breeds...to breed more?" I reminded him.

"Sure," he said, pulling the torn robe from over his head.

"Well, I think they've already started breeding them," I said, looking between him and Murphy.

"Why, what did you find?" Murphy asked, his silver eyebrows making a v-shape above his eyes as he stared at me.

"We found a girl – she looked like Kayla – but it wasn't her," I started to explain.

"How can you be so sure?" Murphy asked me.

"Believe me, it wasn't Kayla," Isidor said.

“What would you know?” Potter cut in.

“Look,” I said, turning on him. “I saw her, and although it looked like Kayla, it wasn’t her. Whoever told the Sarge that it was Kayla got their facts wrong.”

“That isn’t possible,” Murphy said. “They assured me Kayla was in that monastery.”

“So who did tell you?” Potter asked, eyeing Murphy and drawing on his cigarette.

“I don’t understand it,” Murphy said to himself, ignoring Potter’s question.

“Who told you Kayla was in that place?” Luke pushed, and I thought of that long, black shadow I’d seen with Murphy in the derelict farmhouse.

Then looking at all of us he said, “The Lycanthrope.”

As if he had just been punched in the face, Potter spat the half smoked cigarette from the corner of his mouth and said, “Did you just say *Lycanthrope*? Tell me I’m hearing things. You’ve got to be kidding us, right?”

Murphy looked at Potter and for the first time since meeting him, he had a look of shame splashed across his face.

“No, Sarge,” Luke said, his voice sounding breathless. “Tell me you didn’t -”

“I was desperate, okay!” Murphy barked at them, and that look of shame had disappeared and was replaced with anger.

“What was I supposed to do? They murdered my daughters!”

“But the Lycanthrope!” Potter snapped back. “I’ve got one word to say to you Sarge – *insane*! If you think they are going to help you – *us* – you must have lost your freaking mind!”

Then going to him, Luke placed a hand on Murphy’s shoulder and said, “Tell me that you didn’t really -”

Brushing his hand away, Murphy snapped, “It’s done now and I can’t take it back – so get over it, for Christ’s sake.”

“What’s the Lycanthrope?” I asked feeling bewildered and left out.

“Lycanthrope is Greek for wolf-man,” Isidor said, “You know – *werewolves*!” And even he was looking at Murphy as if he were mad.

Chapter Nineteen

The sound from the vampires trying to scramble over the wall could be heard through the darkness, like rats scurrying through a sewer. From our hiding place beneath the clump of trees, I could see Vampyrus swooping above the grounds of the monastery in search of us, their giant black wings casting shadows like sails on the ground.

“It isn’t going to take them long to work out where we are,” Murphy muttered. “We should keep moving.”

Before we had a chance to say anything, Murphy was bent over and crawling away into the night. I saw Potter and Luke pass a concerned look between each other. Then crouching low, they followed their sergeant. Without saying anything, Isidor and I followed.

With the muscles in my legs burning, I wondered how much longer I could crawl through the undergrowth following Murphy. My hands and face were covered in a crisscross of tiny scratches from the thorns and nettles that snagged at me. Glancing back over my shoulder, I could see the outline of the monastery in the distance. Behind it, I could see a faint glow

of an orange autumn sunrise. The sight of it filled me with hope as I knew that the vampires wouldn't be able to pursue us once the sun was up. As for the Vampyrus, I knew that some of them would be able to carry on their search. Murphy, Luke, and Potter would need to shelter though, since being banished from The Hollows for respite from the sun, their skin had become more and more intolerant to its ultraviolet rays. Facing front again, I continued on, my back aching and legs burning. Ahead, through the bushes and thickets, I could see a mountain and the first rays of sunlight glistened off its peak like snow.

Murphy headed towards it and I could now sense his desire to find shelter for the day. We all sped up, as we clambered from our crouching positions and raced across the wide open, barren landscape towards a narrow gorge set in the side of the mountain. Reaching it, we slipped between the black slices of granite rock to find ourselves in a deep-set overhang. It was covered on three sides and would prevent the sun from spilling in and burning my friends. Murphy dropped to his knees, crawled to the furthest part of the overhang, and slumped against the wall. He looked exhausted and I wondered how long it had been since he had slept. His eyes were tired and dull-looking.

Luke, Potter, and Murphy ignored one another and the tension between the three of them was unbearable. Potter stood away from them,

scowling and sucking on the end of a cigarette.

Without looking at anyone, Luke said, “I’m going to see if I can find some fresh water for us to drink.” I guessed he just wanted a few moments on his own. Although the ground was dry, protected by the rocks above us, it was cold and I couldn’t help but shiver. Wrapping my arms around me to keep warm, my stomach rumbled and I couldn’t remember how long it had been since I’d eaten anything. I was beginning to feel weak and tired. Isidor looked at my stomach as it rumbled again.

“I’ll be back in a minute or two,” he said. Then sniffing the air like a dog, he raced out from beneath the overhang.

Needing to rest my aching legs, I sat on the ground. I felt dirty and a total mess. Looking down at my hands, I could see the red goo from that Vampyrus’ eyes streaked down my fingers and under my nails. Putting my head in my hands, I closed my eyes and thought of my snug little flat back in Havensfield and I just wanted to be back there – in the warm, wearing my dressing gown, drinking a nice cup of sweet tea and reading ‘MIA’ by Sienna Rose, which I’d started but never had a chance to finish.

“Are you okay?” Luke asked, sitting beside me.

“Not really,” I sighed.

“Do you want to talk about it?”

“Look at me,” I said. “I’m a mess. I’m filthy-looking and I stink like a pig!”

“Oink! Oink!” Luke said with a smile.

“It’s not funny!” I snapped.

Then taking my hand, he gently pulled me to my feet and said, “Come with me.”

“Where?” I asked, just feeling tired and wanting to rest.

“I’ve found something that will put a smile back on that pretty face of yours.”

Pulling me by the hand, he led me to the furthest part of the overhang. Pointing out a small narrow gap in the rocks, he led me through it.

“Close your eyes,” he whispered, covering them with his hands. I could feel the ground sloping away as he led me downwards. At the bottom, the ground leveled out and became flat.

Luke removed his hands from over my eyes, and whispered in my ear, “Take a look, Kiera,” and as I did, I gasped in wonder. Before me lay one of the most beautiful sights I had ever seen, an underground lake which was lit from above by a series of stalagmites. They hung from the roof of the underground chamber like upside-down candles.

“It’s beautiful,” I said, drawing breath in wonder.

“It reminds me of home,” he sighed, “This is what parts of The Hollows look like.”

I looked at him and he had an almost kind of sad look on his face. “You miss home, don’t you?” I said.

“Sometimes,” he said, staring in awe at the stalagmites that glistened like diamonds above us, and the water that shone like a sheet of glass before us.

“I wish I could see it someday,” I whispered.

Looking at me, he said, “Maybe one day.” Then smiling at me he said, “Fancy a swim?”

But before I could answer, he was pulling off his clothes. Once naked he raced towards the water and dived in. He disappeared beneath the surface and I lost sight of him. Then his head appeared above the water. And with that wonderful boyish grin of his, he shouted, “Come on Kiera, the water feels wonderful!”

Desperate to rid myself of the dirt and grime that covered me, I pulled off my clothes and underwear and dived into the water. Although it was cold enough to snatch my breath away, it felt wonderful against my skin. It felt like it was cleansing me, washing away the horrors of the last few days. The last time I’d felt like this had been back on the road, in one of

those cheap motels. I laid back in the bath with my eyes closed and listened to Leona Lewis sing 'Run' to me via my iPod.

Splashing above the surface of the lake, I giggled at Luke and said, "The water is freezing!"

"But doesn't it feel good though!" he laughed, swimming towards me.

"It feels like heaven!" I screeched with joy.

"Come here," he said, snaking his arms around me, holding me close. Then leaning me back in the water, he cupped one of his hands with water and poured it over my hair.

"What are you doing?" I laughed.

"You said that you felt a mess, so I'm washing your hair," he smiled down at me.

So, closing my eyes, I relaxed in his arms as he gently poured water over my hair. I stayed in his arms for what seemed like forever, my fears and worries almost seeming to ebb away.

Then easing me slightly up, he poured water down my neck and back. With his strong hands, he made gentle circular motions with his fingers up and down my spine. Then working his hands around my middle, he traced his fingertips across my stomach and chest. Turning around in the water, I faced him. With the tips of our noses only millimeters apart, I leant

forward and kissed him on his lips. He kissed me back with such passion that it felt like my skin was on fire. Running his hands through my hair, he pulled me closer still, covering my whole face with kisses. He worked his mouth down my neck and over my shoulders to my chest. The passion I felt inside began to grow and I felt as if I was being smothered by it. My head began to feel dizzy as he wrapped me in his arms, the muscles in his chest firm against me.

“I love you, Kiera,” he whispered.

“I...” I started, but couldn’t finish.

“What’s wrong?” he hushed against my cheek.

“It’s nothing,” I said, and I hated myself for lying to him. I hated myself because I couldn’t tell him that I loved him back. I couldn’t say those words to him, because deep down inside of me, lost in those deep, overpowering feelings I had for Luke, I also felt something for Potter, too.

Luke must have sensed something, because he stopped kissing me and eased himself away.

“Is everything okay, Kiera?” he asked me, and I couldn’t help but notice the hurt in his eyes.

Maybe I should just tell him? I thought to myself. But what could I say? That every time he held me, I couldn’t help myself thinking about that jerk, Potter? I couldn’t explain how I felt to him, when I didn’t really

understand myself. I knew I had feelings for Luke, strong feelings, but if I were in love with him, would I be thinking about Potter? Maybe I did really love Luke, but perhaps there was a part of me holding back – not able to give myself totally to him. Perhaps it had something to do with trust? It seemed that everyone I'd gotten close to recently had let me down, tricked or lied to me in some way. Perhaps that was the reason?

So leaning forward, I gently kissed Luke and said, "It's not you, Luke, it's me. I just need some time to get my head together. So much has happened in my life over the last six months or so. My whole life feels like it's been tipped upside-down."

Holding my face in his hands, he kissed me on the tip of my nose and said, "I understand, Kiera. But I just want you to know that I'm here for you."

"I know you are," I whispered, resting my head against his chest.

Then, from above, someone shouted, "Who wants some food?"

Looking up, Luke and I parted, and I sunk beneath the water, so just my head was peeking out.

"Whoa, sorry guys," Isidor said, looking down at us, his face flushed red with embarrassment. "I didn't know...erm...sorry." Then turning away on the path that Luke had led me down, he shouted over his

shoulder, “I’ve cooked some wild rabbit if you want some,” Then he was gone, disappearing through the gap in the rocks.

I looked at Luke and he laughed. “Want something to eat?” he smiled.

“Are you kidding?” I grinned at him. “I’m starving.”

We swam back to the rocks, and shivering, we pulled on our clothes. Throwing on my bra, I tried to fasten the clasp at the back.

“Here, let me help you,” Luke said coming forward.

Stepping back, I said, “No, I’ve got it.”

“If you’re sure,” he said, pulling on his shirt and walking away back up the rock path.

It wasn’t that I didn’t want him to help me, I just didn’t want him to see the bony lumps I’d just discovered sticking out between my shoulder blades, and I wondered how he hadn’t noticed them as he’d washed me in the water. I twisted my arm up my back and brushed my fingers over the lumps. They felt hard and I’m sure that as I pressed them with my fingertips they moved. Snatching my hand away, I felt sickened by what I had discovered.

Chapter Twenty

Trying to shove the thoughts of those lumps on my back from my mind, I followed Luke into the overhang. However much I tried not to think about them, I knew what they were and the thought of them made me sick. How long would it be until I had those bony black fingers wriggling about? Would they hurt? God, I hoped that they didn't hurt. I wished Kayla were with me so that I could show them to her, confide in her. But I did have Isidor, and I decided that I would find a moment together so that I could show him – see if it really was the start of me changing. I know that Potter didn't like or trust him, but I was glad that Isidor was with us.

I could see that Potter had lit a small fire, which he was prodding with a stick. Someone had made a makeshift spit and attached to it were three skinned rabbits. Isidor was slowly turning them over the fire. It was nice to see Potter and Isidor working together and not arguing for a change.

Murphy was still sitting by himself away from the others and his face looked haggard and old, way older than the forty-five years that he was. Luke walked passed him without saying anything, and went and sat by

the fire. I wondered what was so bad about these Lycanthrope – werewolves – that had upset Luke and Potter so much. It was as if Murphy had betrayed them in some way.

I sat next to Luke by the fire and began to untangle my wet hair with my fingers. Potter took one of the rabbits from over the fire, and using his fingernails like a set of knives he separated the meat from the bones. Passing it amongst us, Luke and Isidor wasted no time in wolfing it down. Juice from the meat ran from their chins and between their fingers as they devoured the meat. I looked at the pink-coloured meat that Potter had handed to me and despite my hunger, I felt sick. It wasn't the food, it smelt delicious, it was the thought again of those lumps sticking out of my back that put me off.

“Get it down your neck,” Potter said, staring at me through the flames of the fire. “You’ll need all the energy you can get if I can guess what the sarge has got planned for us next.”

Hearing this, Murphy spoke up from the other side of the overhang. “I don’t have a plan.”

“Well, that’s reassuring to know,” Potter whispered, so as not to let Murphy hear him.

“What did you say?” Murphy growled.

“Nothing,” Potter said, shredding the second rabbit with his fingernails.

I picked at the first handful of food I’d been given, and watched Murphy come and sit with us by the fire.

“I’m sorry for what I’ve done,” he said, his head cast down, as if unable to look at any of us.

Potter waved some of the rabbit in front of him, and said, “Have some of this.”

I looked at Murphy, his back was arched over and he looked down at the food in his hands. “I didn’t know what else to do,” he said, his voice sounding choked.

It scared me to hear him like this. Murphy always seemed so strong, he was our leader and I trusted in him. And I guess that I had in some way come to think of him as being a bit like a father to me. I didn’t want to see him hurting.

“It’s okay,” I told him.

“No, it’s not,” Potter said.

“But why?” I asked. “I’m sure that the sarge thought he was doing his best.”

“He couldn’t have done any worse,” Potter said. Then turning to look at Murphy, Potter said, “Why them? Why the Lycanthrope, Sarge?”

“They owed me a favour,” Murphy said. “I was angry – hurt at how Phillips and the others murdered my precious girls, Nessa and Meren. They were my daughters and I have nothing now. The last of my family has gone.”

I wanted to tell him that wasn’t true, that we were his family, but now wasn’t the right time and I didn’t know if there ever would be one. None of us would ever be able to replace his daughters.

“But Sarge,” Luke said, as Isidor sat quietly and ate. “The Lycanthrope...”

“What’s so bad about them?” I asked.

“What’s right about them is more to the point,” Potter cut in. “They’re not like you see in the movies. They don’t stroll about bare-chested with cheesy smiles and tattoos. And they definitely don’t dodge silver bullets and howl at the moon. These werewolves are not here to play games!”

“What are they like, then?” I asked, forcing down a small piece of meat.

Sitting forward and fixing his eyes on mine through the fire, Potter started to explain the true history of the Lycanthrope.

“They’ve been around for centuries. They are what we would nowadays call serial killers – because that’s what they were. Although they

were human back then, they had the power of putting you into a trance with just one stare. That's how they overcome their victims before ripping them to pieces – leaving them butchered and half-eaten. But worse than that, they stole children.”

“Children?” I asked. “Why?”

“They believed that the purity of a child's heart would give them unnaturally long lives, and some even believed immortality. But the spell wouldn't work unless the children were offered to them by the mothers to take. But what mother would just hand over her child?” Potter said, still not taking his eyes from mine. “So they would creep into their homes in the dead of night, and waking the mothers and placing them into a trance with their stare, they would trick them into handing over their children. It wasn't until one night that one of these killers was stumbled upon by chance as he fled the home of a distraught mother. She had come out of her trance too early and raised the alarm. The Lycanthrope were hunted down by the men folk of the village and murdered.

“But myth and legend has it that they were turned away in death by God because of the horrendous crimes they had committed and he cursed them with a divine punishment. He sent them back to Earth, each of them with a raging thirst as he was so angry with them, he wouldn't give them not even one drop of water. He told them that to quench their thirsts they

had to drink the rainwater from the first animal footprint that they came across. It was a wolf's footprint swollen with rainwater that they drank from. Like they had tricked all those mothers before, they too had been deceived. For what they hadn't been told, was that whatever animal's footprint they drank from, they would spend the rest of eternity walking the Earth half-human and half that animal – and in their case – *wolves*,” Potter said.

The fire crackled before me, sending up tiny orange sparks into the overhang. Potter continued to stare at me and I didn't know what to say. His story was unbelievable and terrifying and just six months ago I would have laughed in his face. I was so used to just believing in fact, what I could touch, smell, and see. But I was now living in a world – *living a life* – where monsters roamed free right under the very noses of humans. I was one of those monsters, living a life in old outhouses, derelict buildings and caves, eating wild animals cooked over a fire, and bathing in underground lakes; it was then I realised how quickly I had slipped away from a normal existence. Living on my wits and nerves and like any other animal, I was now being hunted and this had become commonplace for me – this was now my life and I doubted I could ever go back to the one I'd had before.

“I know you say you were desperate, Sarge, but serial killers, child murderers?” Luke said, and the sound of his voice snapped me from my

thoughts. I looked at him, his face looked so handsome in the glow from the fire, lighting it in shades of orange, amber and gold. It was hard to believe that he was a monster. It was hard to believe that any of us were.

“They don’t live like that anymore, they haven’t murdered for hundreds of years,” Murphy said.

“Men and women that have done that kinda shit don’t change, Sarge,” Potter said. “We should know that better than anyone. We hunted down and locked up enough of the Lycanthrope to know that they are still killers.”

“Not this pack of wolves,” Murphy tried to convince him.

“But they still feed off human blood,” Luke reminded him.

“Not these wolves,” Murphy insisted.

“So how do they survive?” Luke asked.

“They dig-up freshly buried corpses and eat them,” Murphy explained.

“Aww, bless em! I suppose that makes all the difference! And there I was thinking that perhaps they had redeemed themselves,” Potter scoffed, chucking the remains of the rabbit into the fire.

I could tell that Murphy was growing tired of Potter’s sarcasm and he shouted over the fire, “Do you really think I would enlist the help of child killers? Do you? Just after finding my own daughters murdered!”

Potter looked away from Murphy and stared into the fire.

“This pack of wolves are trying to live good lives,” Murphy continued, “They are trying to lift the curse that has been placed upon them.”

“So what’s the deal?” Isidor said as he loaded two bolts into his crossbow.

“Sorry?” Murphy almost seemed to growl at him.

“You said that you struck up a deal with one of these wolves, so what was it?” he asked, throwing his loaded crossbow over his shoulder. I guessed he believed he might need it.

Murphy paused for a moment and looked at Luke and Potter. It was if he had some bad news to tell them. “I struck a deal with Jack Seth...”

“Oh, you’ve got to be kidding me!” Potter yelled and stood up.

“Jack Seth!” Luke breathed in wonder...or was it in fear? I couldn’t tell.

“Didn’t we lock that asshole up for twelve counts of murder?” Potter shouted over the fire at Murphy.

“That’s right, we did!” Luke said, now standing.

“The evidence was very circumstantial, if I remember rightly,” Murphy said, now he too was standing.

“Circumstantial!” Potter almost seemed to screech. “He was still eating one of the victims when we came crashing through the fucking door!”

“So how come he’s out roaming the English countryside?” Luke asked Murphy. “Didn’t the elders pass down twelve life sentences? One life sentence for each victim?”

“He says he was set up,” Murphy said.

“Set up! God give me strength!” Potter roared. Then, pointing at me, he added, “There was so much evidence that even Dana Scully over there wouldn’t have wasted her time investigating the case, it was so cut-and-dried!”

Then coming around the fire, Luke came close to Murphy and looking him straight in the eyes, he said, “Don’t tell me the deal was his early release in return for him tracking down Kayla?”

Murphy didn’t say anything, he just looked away and that was answer enough.

“Oh, Christ! This just keeps getting better and better!” Potter shouted, kicking the ground with his boot. “The guy is a freaking maniac!”

“He says he was innocent – that he was set up!” Murphy insisted.

“Yeah, and Santa Claus is gonna get me a date with Jennifer Lopez for Christmas!” Potter shouted as he lit himself a cigarette.

Standing, I looked at Murphy and then at the others and said, “You know, maybe we should listen to the sarge, he hasn’t led us wrong before.”

Blowing smoke from the corner of his mouth, Potter looked at me and said, “Do us all a favour, sweet-cheeks, and keep your nose outta this – you have no idea who we’re dealing with.”

“Maybe we should give this Jack Seth a chance if the sarge -”

But before I’d a chance to finish, Potter had lept over the fire and was standing before me. “Jack Seth is an animal – nothing but vermin,” he said. “This isn’t some kinda fairytale – the guy dates a woman with bristles under her tongue for crying-out-loud!”

“All the female Lycanthrope have hair under their tongues!”

Murphy shouted. “That’s just the way they are!”

“Look,” Potter said turning on him, “I can just about forgive a girl for not shaving her armpits – but a hairy tongue! That just takes the piss!”

“Stop it!” I shouted. “Standing here arguing about hairy tongues isn’t going to solve anything. We’re meant to be searching for Kayla.”

“Yeah, and look where that got us,” Potter snapped at me.

“According to you and Indiana Jones over there, that thing wasn’t even Kayla.” Then turning on Murphy, Potter spat, “It looks like your mate Jack Seth lied to you!”

Fixing on Potter with his steely-blue eyes, Murphy said, “There’s only one way of finding out.”

“What’s that supposed to mean?” Luke asked, stepping close to me.

“We go and ask him,” Murphy said with a grim look on his face.

“And I promise you, if he did lead us into a trap back there at the monastery, those twelve life sentences will seem more like a vacation by the time I’ve finished with him!”

“You know he can’t be trusted, don’t you?” Potter said, the anger now gone from his voice as he tried to reason with Murphy.

Ignoring him, Murphy turned his back on us and disappeared into the shadows at the rear of the overhang. “Get some sleep, we get going at dusk.”

Chapter Twenty-One

Opening my eyes, I looked up. There was a face just inches from mine, as if they were peering over me. Trying to move, I realised that I was lying down. I felt weak – too weak to move. My throat was raw and my tongue felt swollen in my mouth.

The room was dimly lit with a single light bulb that hung from the centre of the stone ceiling.

Where am I? I wanted to say, but my swollen tongue couldn't form the words inside my mouth.

I looked up at the face again, my eyelids feeling like weights hanging over my eyes. I hadn't felt this rough since getting drunk and making a fool of myself at my passing-out parade at police training school. But I had been hung-over back then – this was different. I felt as if I'd been drugged. I could only see half of the face peering down at me – the top half. His eyes stared over a blue surgical mask and down at me.

“How are you feeling, Kiera?” he asked, his voice sounding muffled from behind his mask. “Are you okay?”

What was going on here? Had I been injured? With my heart beginning to weigh heavy in my chest, I looked into those eyes and shook my head and it felt like a dead weight. I tried to speak again, but couldn't, so I slowly shook my head from left to right to let them know that I was far from alright.

Whoever it was that hid behind the mask must have seen the utter fear in my eyes, because they squeezed my shoulder and said, "You'll be okay, Kiera, you've just come back from surgery."

Surgery! I screamed inside. What kind of surgery?

The surgeon, if that's what he was, squeezed my shoulder again and a bolt of pain twisted its way up the length of my back, like a red-hot poker being dragged across my flesh. Despite my dry and swollen tongue, I screamed in pain, arching my back off the bed.

"Calm yourself, Kiera," the surgeon tried to soothe. "I'll give you something to ease the pain."

He turned away and moved to a small silver trolley that was beside the bed. And as he did, I could see a shape hiding in the far corner of the room. Whoever it was, he was masked in shadows. I stared through the gloom at him and he must have sensed – known – that I could see through the darkness – because he turned away from me so that I couldn't see his

face. Apart from my bed and the bare light bulb hanging from the ceiling, the room was barren. The walls were featureless and made from grey stone.

Where am I? I wanted to scream out again but I couldn't.

Turning, the surgeon stepped away from the trolley and came towards me. In his hand, he held a needle.

Instantly my mind began to scream, NO! NO! NO! What was he going to inject me with? I didn't want to be unconscious again. However bad the pain in my back was, I wanted to stay awake, I wanted to know – see – what they were doing to me. Slowly, he came towards me and I noticed his forearms for the first time, they were muscular and covered in hair – bristling black hair. Holding the needle above my face, I could see that the syringe was full of a pale blue liquid – it looked like detergent.

Shaking my head from side to side, I tried to inch my way back up the bed and away from him. But as I did, pain exploded inside me like a bomb going off in my spine. The force of it making my back feel like it had been ripped apart, my ribs and spine dismantled. I locked-up with pain and the surgeon seized my arm.

“Hush now, Kiera,” he said again, bringing the needle close. I tried to pull back, get away but the pain was too intense and raw. Even though every one of my survival instincts was screaming for me to get away from

the surgeon, and whoever it was that lurked in the corner, I just couldn't move.

With my eyes bulging in their sockets, the surgeon raised my left arm, and inspected it closely.

"How am I meant to find a vein in these conditions?" he asked, and I wondered if he were talking to the shadow in the corner.

"Just get on with it," the shape in the corner barked. The voice was deep and emotionless.

"I need more light," the surgeon said, his eyes screwing-up as he inspected the crook of my elbow.

"Just do it!" the shadow barked.

Then, looking into my eyes, his almost seemed to smile as the surgeon said, "You'll be okay, Kiera, I promise."

I felt a scratchy feeling in my forearm and a warm feeling seemed to flood through my body. As my eyes began to feel heavy, I realised that I recognised the eyes which peered back at me over the top of that surgical mask...I had seen them in a picture...a photo...above the fire...at...

Chapter Twenty-Two

...I sat bolt upright and grabbed the crook of my elbow. I scratched at it with my fingernails, as if trying to claw away whatever it was the surgeon had injected me with. I didn't want to be unconscious again, I had to get out of the room, away from the surgeon and the man in the shadows. Scrambling to my feet, I got up, almost tripping over Luke who lay curled next to me. Even seeing him wasn't enough to convince me that I was awake and the surgeon had just been someone in my nightmare.

"Kiera," someone whispered from the other side of the overhang.

Spinning around, my mind showing me a series of shattered images reflecting needles, surgical masks, shadows and...

"Kiera," the voice came again.

"Keep away from me!" I groaned. "I don't want to go under again!"

"It's me, Isidor," the voice said, and looking through the darkness, I could see that he was propped against the wall of the overhang. His knees were drawn up to his chest and he was reading a book. Even though my eyes could see that it was him, my nightmare still hung about my head like

fog and my brain told me it was the surgeon trying to trick me into going to him.

“Leave me alone!” I hissed.

“Kiera?” he said getting up and coming close. “Are you okay?”

“Please,” I said, shying away from him, not wanting another injection.

Then his hand was gently touching my shoulder and he was pulling me towards him. “Kiera, you’ve had a nightmare, that’s all.”

I looked into his eyes and they twinkled back at me, blue and clear. The tips of the black flames he had tattooed up his neck were now lost amongst a spattering of stubble that covered the lower half of his face and neck. “It’s me, Kiera,” he smiled.

Slowly, the last fragments of my nightmare melted away, as I realised that I was no longer in that barren room with the surgeon and whoever it had been lurking in the corner.

“There was a surgeon...” I whispered as he guided me back to the spot where he had been sitting. Looking back over my shoulder, I could see a shaft of pink sunlight cutting through the gap where we had earlier entered the overhang. The sun was setting outside and I knew that it wouldn’t be long before the others were awake.

“Sit here,” Isidor whispered as he slouched back against the wall. He held the book open across his knees and gave me a sideways glance. “Wanna talk about it?” he asked.

I didn’t, so I changed the subject, “What are you reading?”

“ ‘Ryder’ by Greta Maloney,” he said, closing the book and placing it back into his rucksack.

“Any good?” I asked, wanting to find another subject to talk about other than my nightmare.

“It’s creepy,” he smiled at me.

“I thought you would’ve had enough of creepy,” I half-smiled at him, “Especially after everything we’ve been through recently.”

“You can’t ever have enough ‘creepy’,” he smiled back.

“I guess,” I said, looking away from him. Silence fell between us and I knew that if I were ever going to ask him about being a half-breed this was my chance. So turning to face him, I said, “You said Kayla was your sister. How can that be?”

Staring ahead, Isidor laced his fingers together over his drawn-up knees and said, “I’m almost two years older than Kayla, but she doesn’t know that I exist. I didn’t know anything about her either until recently,” he started to explain. “My mother and father are Lady and Lord Hunt just like Kayla’s. As far as I’ve been told, my mother had a terrible time carrying me

as an unborn child. She was sick constantly and spent most of her time in bed at Hallowed Manor. Doc Ravenwood cared for her, but he suspected that something wasn't quite right. He expressed his fears to my father, telling him that my mother's life could be in danger because she was carrying a half-breed. My father was thrown into a panic as he had never revealed his secret to my mother about being a Vampyrus. So one day, when my mother was screaming in pain, they gave her a sedative to calm her, and Doc Ravenwood used that x-ray-thingy to take a peek at me inside of her."

"A bit like an ultrasound?" I cut-in.

"I guess," he said, still not looking at me. "Anyway, what they saw terrified my father, for even as a fetus I had my wings. Nothing like this had ever been seen before. Most half-breeds didn't start their change until adolescence and as we know, that change killed them. But there I was, inside my mother's womb, already looking like a Vampyrus. Apparently, my father went into a blind panic and for days he was thrown into a fit of despair. What was he to do? He couldn't tell my mother – what would he have told her? That for years he had been masquerading above ground as a human when really he was nothing more than a vampire bat? No, he loved my mother deeply and feared that she would have left him

"So, Doc Ravenwood and my father made a decision which would change all of our lives forever. When my mother went into labor they kept

her heavily sedated, and when I was born, my father snuck me away down into The Hollows, where he gave me to his sister to raise as her own,” he said, his voice dropping to a whisper.

“But what about Lady Hunt...your mum?” I gasped. “What did they tell her?”

Turning to look at me, his eyes shot with what looked like tears, he said, “They told her that I had died soon after birth. They kept my mother sedated for days, passing in and out of delirium, so she was not to know any better. Days later, when she did finally wake, they told her their lies, saying that they had buried me in that graveyard beneath the weeping willows at Hallowed Manor.

“This threw my mother into a deep, dark depression and as far as I know, my father bitterly regretted telling her those lies. But he couldn’t go back – he knew what he had done was unforgivable. But in her despair, my mother begged him for another child and within a year or two Kayla, my sister was born,” he said, cuffing away the tears that stood in the corner of his eyes.

“Lord Hunt took a dangerous risk,” I breathed, haunted by what Isidor had just told me. “Kayla could’ve been born just like you.”

“My father fretted the whole time while my mother carried Kayla,” he explained. “Every week, Doc Ravenwood would check on my mother

with that x-ray machine and to his and my father's relief, Kayla showed no outward signs of being a half-breed. And that's that," Isidor said trying to sound quite matter-of-fact about the whole thing, but I could tell that he was hurting. "You know the rest. Kayla grew up believing that she was just like any other little girl, and our mother believed it, too. Until she got to sixteen, that is," he said.

"But what about you?" I said, my heart aching for him.

"What about me?"

"What was it like for you as a kid?" I asked him. "It must have been tough."

"No, not really," he shrugged, but I didn't believe him. "I grew up believing that my aunt was my mother. I had no reason to think any different. I grew up in The Hollows along with all the other Vampyrus. But..." he trailed off.

"But what?" I pushed.

"I knew that I was different from the other Vampyrus," he said.

"Sure, I looked like them, but my wings were different from theirs, mine grew beneath my arms and wouldn't fold away, which made it very difficult for me when my friends wanted to investigate above ground. Like most Vampyrus, they wanted to know what it was like up here, so as young teenagers, we would sneak away above ground and check out the humans.

My friends could blend really well, but it was harder for me. Some even got permission from their parents to attend school and college above ground, join the football team, date girls, but not me.

“When I asked my mother...aunt...why I looked different, she would change the subject and tell me that in her eyes I was perfect. But it wasn’t only my wings; it was my sense of smell. I mean it was almost suffocating at times. But I soon realised that I could use it to track things – you know like animals and stuff and my friends just for fun. So, I built the crossbow and while my friends practiced football and dated human girls, I would practice my hunting and my aim. But this only set me apart from them even more, and in a way, I guess I secretly liked that – I mean I wanted to be different. So I got the tattoos and piercing and stuff to really set me apart.

“Anyway, one day I’m standing on the touchline, watching my Vampyrus mates playing football with their human buddies, and this geeky-looking guy strolls up alongside me. He’s wearing these cheap plastic glasses and his face is all covered in spots,” Isidor said.

“Sparky?” I cut in.

“Yeah, your mate Sparky,” Isidor grimaced. “He says to me, ‘It’s a shame, really’

‘What is?’ I ask him.

‘That you don’t fit in with the humans as well as your Vampyrus buddies.’

“I was shocked, Kiera, by what he said, and I just stared at him wide-eyed and opened-mouthed. I mean, I couldn’t figure out how he knew about us.

‘I don’t know what you’re talking about,’ I said to him.

‘You’re more like a human than you realise,’ he smiled.

‘Get out of here,’ I snapped at him.

‘Ask your mother – or should I say aunty?’ and this Sparky dude grinned at me.

‘Aunty?’ I said, but somewhere deep inside of me something clicked into place.

“So, Leaving Sparky smiling to himself on the touchline, I raced home back to The Hollows and confronted who I believed to be my mother. At first she denied it, telling me that she was my mother and that my father had died when I was just a baby. But I said I didn’t believe her and that if she didn’t tell me, I’d leave The Hollows and her forever, to go in search of the truth. But still she wouldn’t tell me. So, taking my crossbow and a few personal belongings, I left The Hollows.

“But my mother...aunt...followed me, begging me to stay with her – telling me that sometimes the truth wasn’t always the best. Ignoring her, I

went back above ground and she followed. Within moments of leaving The Hollows, she was captured by Sparky and I realised I'd walked straight into a trap. Then, with great delight, Sparky told me everything. With my heart feeling as if it had been ripped from my chest, I asked my aunt if what he had said was true, and without looking at me, she slowly nodded her head.

“Even though I felt betrayed by her – by all of them – I still loved her as if she were my mother. So when Sparky told me that he would kill her if I didn't bring my sister Kayla to him, I didn't know what else to do. Even though I'd never met my sister, I didn't want to betray her, either – but I had to do something. So agreeing to go in search of Kayla, I set out for Hallowed Manor, but all the while I had no intention of handing over Kayla and every intention of saving the woman who I'd believed to be my mother. I hoped that together, Kayla and I would be able to work something out, a plan of some kind.

“On reaching the manor, I scoped it out for a few days, coming out at night and watching the manor from the moors. One night, I was nearly caught by Potter as he masqueraded around as the grounds man, Marshal. But there was someone else watching the manor – this guy with scars all over his face,” Isidor said.

“Phillips is his name,” I told him.

“Anyway,” Isidor continued, “I could tell that he was up to something. But one night, as I watched the manor from the safety of the moors, I heard this thunderclap and looking up I saw a Vampyrus soaring out of the sky and it was this Phillips dude. Curious as to what a Vampyrus would be doing at Hallowed Manor, I followed him through the undergrowth as he made his way around the outskirts of the giant wall. It was then I realised that my sister, Kayla was in great danger,” Isidor explained.

“Why? What did you see?” I asked him.

“Vampires!” Isidor said, his eyes wide. “Hundreds of them, and he was leading them into the grounds of the manor by a tunnel that went under the moat. From a distance, I followed them and watched as Phillips led them into that summerhouse. But what I couldn’t figure out was how so many of those vampires could fit into that place. I mean that summerhouse was only small. So, hiding in the trees, I waited for Phillips to go, and then I scoped out the summerhouse. It was then I discovered the trapdoor in the floor. Realising that Phillips was building an army of vampires, I fled the grounds of the manor and went back to the wall and the tunnel beneath it,” Isidor explained.

“You ran, didn’t you?” I asked him, thinking of those footprints in the earth I’d seen leading from the summerhouse, through the wooded area

and back to the tunnel.

“Yeah, how do you know?” he asked.

“It doesn’t matter,” I half-smiled.

“Not really knowing anything about vampires – only the stuff I’d read in books and seen in movies, the following day, I crossed the moors to this little Catholic Church tucked away in some remote village. Putting as much loose change that I had on me into the church charity box, I took as many rosary beads that I could find in the gift shop. I then spent the rest of the day cutting down branches and sharpening them into stakes. I rested beneath some rocks for the rest of the day and planned to go and save my sister that night,” Isidor said. Then, looking at me he added, “The rest you know. I arrived too late and discovered you and Potter in that summerhouse.”

“You know we will find her,” I said. “I promise.”

“I hope so,” he said back. “But I think Potter is probably right about one thing.”

“What’s that?”

“My mother...I mean aunt...is probably already dead.”

“You don’t know that for sure,” I tried to comfort him.

“We’ll see,” he said.

“Do you resent her?” I asked him.

“Who, my aunt?”

“Yes.”

“No, why should I resent her?” he asked thoughtfully. “It was my father who abandoned me.”

We sat in silence for a moment, then, turning my back on him and unbuttoning my shirt, I said, “I think my wings are starting to come through.” I rolled my shirt just far enough off my shoulders so he could see the bony lumps I had discovered earlier.

Gently, he pressed them with the tips of his fingers and said, “Does that hurt?”

“No,” I told him, shaking my head. “What do you think?”

“I think you’re right,” he whispered and I pulled my shirt over them again.

“What’s it like?” I asked him, my heart beginning to thump as I feared the prospect of changing.

“What, having wings, you mean?”

“Not just that,” I said, “the whole claws and fangs thing?” I asked.

“I’ve never known any different,” he said. “But when the fangs come out and the claws – you know – when you need them, it doesn’t hurt. I guess it’s a bit like flexing your muscles, so don’t worry.”

“But I *do* worry,” I told him. “I’m scared. I don’t want to be...what I’m trying to say is, I just want to go back to being Kiera...not some freaky-monster.”

Then looking at me, Isidor said, “But Kiera, you’ve always been a *freaky-monster*...you just haven’t realised it!”

Chapter Twenty-Three

The others woke and there was an uncomfortable silence in the overhang. No one spoke to each other or even looked at each other for that matter; most seemed lost to their own thoughts. Murphy sucked on the end of his pipe as he readied himself to lead us to this Jack Seth and the Lycanthrope. Luke stayed close to my side and I got the feeling that he just wanted to look after me - as if he understood the danger that we were being led into. Isidor stood by the craggy entrance to the overhang and watched the moon rise up over the mountains that stretched away into the distance like giants stooping over. Potter kicked dust over the remaining embers of the fire, and with one quick look at us all, Murphy said, "Ready?"

Silently, we followed him into the night. We hadn't gone far when the sound of beating wings rippled above. Pulling me close, Luke whispered in my ear, "The Vampyrus can guess that we didn't get far yesterday. They'll know we are probably still close, so keep low and watch your back."

Looking back at him, I nodded my head to confirm that I understood. Then, glancing into the distance, I could see a flock of Vampyrus circling around and around in the sky like vultures waiting for the starving to die.

Keeping low, Murphy led us in single file across several boggy fields, then down into a deep forest set between two mountains that stretched up on either side of us like blackened cliff-faces. Like the countryside surrounding Hallowed Manor, this part of Cumbria was just as barren and desolate, a crisscrossing patchwork of featureless fields and moors, only broken by the jagged rocks that jutted through the earth like ancient tombstones. The Vampyrus continued to zigzag across the night sky, but they were behind us now, and as we entered the forest, I lost sight of them altogether.

Touching Luke's arm, I gave a faint smile and said, "At least they won't be able to see us beneath all these trees."

Before Luke had a chance to say anything back, Potter had brushed past us and as he went, he said, "Don't forget about the vampires."

Glaring at his back as he strode away deeper into the forest, Luke shrugged his shoulders at me and said, "Take no notice, Kiera. He's just pissed off with Murphy, that's all. He'll get over it."

"And what about you?" I asked as we followed behind the others.

“What about me?”

“Are you still pissed off at Murphy?”

“I guess,” he sighed, and stroked the scars on his face, which had gradually started to fade. “I just hope the sarge knows what he’s doing.”

We continued to make our way through the forest, the sweet smell of fallen pine needles almost intoxicating. There were so many of them on the ground that they covered the earth and the mud like a lavish green carpet. I don’t know how long we had walked, but time almost seemed to stop inside the forest. It was dark and felt claustrophobic amongst the trees that grew so close to one another. Although it was cold, the atmosphere inside the forest felt warm and clammy. Reaching a small hill, I looked back at the way we had come, and the darkness between the gaps of the trees seemed to move like a black mist, as if almost taking on shapes - *forms*.

Screwing-up my eyes, I peered into the darkness, but on closer inspection there didn’t seem to be anything lurking there at all.

“This way,” Murphy said behind me, and I turned to see him heading down the other side of the hill and disappearing between the trees. Potter stared after his retreating sergeant, and his face looked drawn and grave and it scared me - upset me - as I’d never seen him like that before. I didn’t ever think I would admit this to myself, but I was actually missing his annoying ways. To see him propped somewhere, with a cigarette

dangling from the corner of his mouth while making wisecracks, was comforting - that was the Potter that I knew and...that was the Potter that I liked. But this new Potter I wasn't so sure about. He had always been so cock sure - arrogant - nothing seemed to scare him. But now I wasn't so sure.

“Are you okay?” Luke asked me, yanking me away from my worries for Potter.

“Sure,” I said, setting off after the others.

We worked our way down the hill, weaving amongst the trees, until Murphy brought us out into an unexpected clearing. In the dark, the view he had revealed to us was breathtaking. We stood on the sandy shore of a beautiful lake. It lay before us like a sheet of glass, reflecting back the moon that shone high above us, blood-red and perfectly round. Pine trees and spruces stretched up into the sky on all sides of the lake, completely surrounding it, as if keeping this place secret from the rest of the world. The gentle sound of the water lapping against the shore was hypnotizing and the whole place had a dreamy, fairytale enchantment to it. The lake looked as if it was a mile wide and disappeared for as far as the eye could see in both directions.

“Wow,” I breathed, my eyes absorbing the astonishing beauty of how the light from the crimson moon danced on the surface of the lake like

droplets of blood, covering the highest tips of the trees.

Swiveling his baseball cap on his head, Isidor whistled through his teeth in awe. "I've never seen anything like this before," he sighed. "And I thought The Hollows had some beautiful lakes."

Luke and Potter glanced at each other and I could see their bodies stiffen. The sight of this amazing place had done nothing to relax their nerves, but had only heightened them.

"Does anybody else know about this place?" I asked Murphy.

"Others have stumbled across it from time to time," he said, "but they don't live long enough to tell anyone about it."

"It's beautiful," I whispered.

"You haven't seen nothin' yet," Murphy said, leading us away down the moonlit shore.

We followed him a short distance, and I could just see something which looked as if it were sticking out into the lake like a broken finger. But as we grew closer, I could see that it was a jetty and moored against it was a small boat. Murphy led us towards it and I could see that the jetty was ancient and tired-looking. It had been made of wood and most of it had long since sunk into the lake. Some of the planks that formed the walkway were missing and much of the wooden handrail had gone.

“Mind your step,” Murphy warned us as he hurried towards the boat.

Placing one foot in front of the other, I followed him as carefully and as light-footed as I could. Ahead, Murphy sprang onto the boat and began to unwind the rope attached to its mooring. I stepped onto the deck and the others followed. It was a small fishing boat, with a cabin at the far end. In the corner, I could see a mass of entangled fishing nets, but they looked tatty and frayed and I could see that they hadn’t been used to catch anything in a very long time.

Casting off the rope, Murphy pushed us away from the jetty with his foot. He then ran across the small deck to the cabin. Within moments the boat was farting out oily clouds of black smoke as its engine rumbled and spluttered into life. I stood and watched the ripples it made wash back to shore, as the boat chugged its way across the lake.

Luke was standing in the doorway to the cabin as he helped Murphy guide the boat. Isidor stood on his own at the front, crossbow in hand, and seeming to sniff at the air.

Potter stood alone, leaning against the side of the boat. Going to him, I said, “Whose boat is this?” I didn’t really care whose boat it was, I just wanted to talk to him.

“Dunno,” he said, lighting another cigarette.

“Why do you smoke so much?” I asked him.

Then fixing me with his stare, he said, “Kiera, you don’t give a crap how many smokes I have a day - so what do you really want?”

“I just want to know that you are okay, that’s all,” I half-smiled. For some reason I felt nervous, like there was a tension between us. It was as if we had once been lovers that had quarreled and bit by bit we were trying to break the ice, make up, and become lovers again. I stared at him and he stared back at me, and his look was so intense that I had to look away.

“What’s going on here?” he asked me, his voice no more than a whisper.

“Murphy’s leading us to our certain deaths, isn’t he?” I smiled.

“I didn’t mean that, Kiera, and you know it,” Potter said, and even though I was still looking away from him, I knew that he was staring at me just as intently as before.

“I’m not sure...” I started.

“Quit screwing around,” he said. “I’m talking about us.”

Raising my face, I looked at him. His eyes bore into mine and the moonlight glinted in them, making his eyes look as if they were on fire. A fold of black hair hung over his brow, and his square-looking jaw line was covered in stubble. Looking at him brought back all those memories of stolen kisses we had shared, and those feelings that I had experienced came

washing over me like a tidal wave. My heart began to race out of control and I feared that he would hear it. My heart was telling me that I did want him but my mind was screaming at me that I couldn't hurt Luke.

So breaking Potter's stare, I whispered, "I don't know what you're talking about, there is no *us*."

Then from the opposite side of the boat, Isidor shouted, "Hey Kiera, come and take a look at this!"

Grateful that Isidor had called to me, I walked away, and as I did, Potter grabbed my arm and pulled me back, "Are you sure about that, sweet-cheeks?" he smiled, but his eyes didn't look so happy.

"I'm sure," I said, pulling my arm free and heading across the deck to join Isidor. But I *wasn't* sure, and I wondered if Potter sensed that.

Joining Isidor, he pointed ahead and said, "Look at that!"

Staring in the direction he was pointing, I saw in the distance what looked like a raging waterfall. But it wasn't like any other waterfall I'd ever seen. I had to blink twice to make sure that I wasn't mistaken, but when I looked again, I was sure that the waterfall was running upwards - as if pouring from the surface of the lake and up over the rocks which towered above it. But it wasn't just the gravity-defying way in which the water ran, it was the fountains colour. The water was crimson - a brilliant dark red just like the colour of the moon which hung high above us.

“Am I really seeing what I think I’m seeing?” I breathed.

Then from behind me, Luke said, “It’s strangely beautiful, don’t you think?”

“But it’s flowing upwards,” Isidor said, unable to take his eyes off the spectacle ahead of us.

“And the water,” I whispered in awe, “its red!”

“The Vampyrus believe that it is God taking back the blood shed by the Lycanthrope. Absorbing the pain of the Lycanthrope’s victims,” Luke said, and now he couldn’t take his eyes off it. “I’d heard rumours about the *Fountain of Souls*, but I didn’t really believe it existed.”

“It’s beautiful,” I said, as Murphy steered the boat towards it. As we drew closer, I watched the water race up the side of the cliff face in brilliant, red glistening streams. And as I stared in numb wonder, I wrapped my arms about myself as the temperature suddenly dropped and my skin crawled with gooseflesh. At first, I thought I was becoming jittery at the realisation that we were drawing close to where the Lycanthrope lived - hung-out? But then I noticed that a fine mist had crawled from between the pine trees that circled the lake on all sides. The mist swirled across the surface of the lake like smoke, almost seeming to deliberately make its way towards us, where it lingered about the bow of the boat.

“It’s getting chilly,” I said, rubbing the tops of my arms.

“We’re getting close to the Lycanthrope,” Luke started to explain, but before he’d had a chance to finish, Potter was hollering from the opposite side of the boat.

“I think we’ve got company!” he shouted, staring out across the lake.

Racing across the deck, we joined him, and glaring into the mist, I could see a series of red lights hovering just inches above the surface of the water.

“Are those the lights of another boat?” Isidor asked.

“I don’t think so,” Potter snapped, the lights getting ever nearer.

“What are they then?” I asked, my stomach tying itself into knots.

“I’ve got a bad feeling about this,” Luke whispered. Then, glancing back at Murphy who was still playing captain in the cabin, Luke shouted, “Sarge! Does this boat go any faster?”

“Faster?” Murphy asked, peering back over his shoulder at Luke. Then seeing the red lights coming towards us, his eyes bulged beneath his silver eyebrows and he shouted, “You’ve got to be kidding me!” At once, the boat’s engine began to make a grinding noise as Murphy forced it forward.

“What are those lights?” Isidor asked no one in particular as he slid his crossbow over his shoulder and held it out before him.

“I hate to disappoint you boy-wonder, but they ain’t lights,” Potter said, “They’re eyes!”

“Eyes?” I gasped. “Whose eyes?”

“Their eyes!” Luke shouted, pointing at the vampires that were swimming through the water towards us.

Turning, I shrunk back in horror at the gaunt-looking faces that were submerged half-in and half-out of the water. Their hair lay in black streaks which clung wetly to the sides of their heads and their eyes glowed like hot coals from within sunken sockets. As they sped closer, the vampires’ faces looked wrinkled and shrunken like skin that had been left too long under the water. They raced towards the boat on all sides, leaving behind huge wakes which rippled back towards the shore.

“Can’t this piece of junk go any faster?” Potter hollered over his shoulder at Murphy who frantically pumped more gas into the engines as he loosened the throttle.

“She’s going as fast as she can!” Murphy roared back. Then there was a rumbling sound, followed by a large hiss as thick black smoke belched from the engine.

“Talk to me Sarge!” Potter yelled. “What’s going on up there?”

“The engine’s gone!” Murphy shouted back. We turned to look at him. “It’s not my fault!” he spat.

Turning back to face the lake, I looked into the water to see the vampires sink beneath it. The boat slowed to a standstill and the silence was deafening.

“Where have they gone?” Isidor whispered as he trained his crossbow at the surface of the water.

“They’re beneath the boat,” Luke whispered back, as he peered over the wooden rail that ran the length of the boat. Leaning over the side, I stared into the dark water, but all I could see was my own rippling reflection. I stared down into the water until the surface calmed and was still once again. It was quiet, and I dared not to breathe just in case I missed some noise that would indicate the location of the vampires hiding beneath the water. The only sound I could hear was the water lapping against the bow of the boat.

Then breaking the silence, Isidor whispered, “They can’t hold their breath for that long. It’s impossible - they’d drown.”

“They’re already dead, you Muppet,” Potter snapped, “They can’t drown.”

“Shhh,” Murphy hissed at them, and as he did the boat began to slowly rock from side to side.

“They’re trying to roll the boat over!” Luke snapped. “Hold on to something!”

Gripping the rail as hard as I could, I lurched forward then back again as the vampires rocked the boat from beneath us. Potter must have seen the fear in my eyes, as he grinned at me and said, “Take it easy, tiger, they’ll never tip this thing over.”

I was just about to scream at him that I wouldn’t count on it, when the boat did what Potter said could never happen, and it rolled so far over onto its side, that I was flung clear of the boat and into the lake. The water hit me like an ice-cold slap in the face, and I instantly sucked in air, but in doing so and in my blind panic, I took in some water. Flailing my arms in the air and desperate to keep my head above water, I felt myself being dragged under. With my head disappearing beneath the lake, everything seemed to go quiet as if the sound had just been turned off. Looking down to see what it was that had snagged me, I screamed in horror at the sight of one of the vampires yanking on my ankle. But my scream beneath the water made no sound, all that came out was a series of bubbles as my much-needed oxygen escaped from my lungs.

In a blind panic, I kicked out at the vampire and my legs felt heavy and sluggish. I kicked again, and I felt my boot connect with something, and then the hands that had held me were gone, and I was frantically clawing at the surface of the water again. My head bobbed momentarily above the water and in that quick flash, I saw Luke and Potter dive into the

water and race towards me. Within a blink, I felt arms slip around me and I was dragged clear of the water. Before I could even take a breath, I was looking down at the lake as I soared above it.

Then I was falling again, but in a controlled way as whoever had hold of me, was racing us back towards the ground. Glancing upwards, I caught a quick glimpse of Potter's face, but we were travelling so fast that it was just a blur. Before my eyes had had time to focus, I was lying on the sandy bank of the lake and Potter was gone again, skimming just above the surface of the water, racing back towards the others.

The boat listed to one side as it took on water and the vampires scurried across it like giant black crabs. Kneeling, I coughed water up from my lungs, and it swung from the corner of my mouth in ropey lumps. Knocking it away with my sleeve, I shivered as I pulled my wet clothes about me. I desperately scanned the dark water for any sign of my friends. Then, like a rocket being fired from a submarine, I saw Isidor propel himself from the water. As he launched up into the night, he sliced through his coat with his claws and it fell away in thin ribbons. Spreading his wings, Isidor looked like some dark angel. Turning in the air and racing back towards the water, he stopped abruptly and just hovered, crossbow in hand.

Then, Luke was flying up from beneath the lake, spraying water behind him. Several vampires had managed to attach themselves to him,

and he slashed at them with his claws, desperate to be free of them. But they were all over him. Luke tumbled through the air, pieces of vampire falling away into the night as he lunged at them with his fangs and cut at them with his claws. Seeing the desperate situation Luke was in, I screamed at Isidor.

“Over there! Look over there, Isidor!”

Corkscrewing through the air, Isidor turned, and seeing Luke plummeting back towards the water with the vampires attached to him, he shot forward at lightning speed, releasing wooden stakes from his crossbow in quick succession. The vampires screeched in agony as the wooden missiles ripped into their bodies, causing them to explode. Their powdery remains showered Luke. Shaking it from him and now free of the vampires, Luke tore his coat aside and his wings sprang from his back. Within inches of crashing into the water again, Luke spread his wings open and soared above the sinking boat.

I saw the vampire first. Before I’d had the chance to open my mouth to scream, it had sprung from the shadows of the boat and dragged Luke crashing downwards. They smashed into the deck of the boat, shards of wood shooting away from the impact. The boat rocked and tipped completely onto its side, sending forth a huge wave that rushed towards the sandy shore.

“Luke!” I screamed, as I watched the vampire sink its teeth into Luke’s neck. Racing towards the water’s edge, I kicked off my boots and dived into the water. Pin wheeling my arms over and over, I cut through the water towards the boat and Luke. Every few strokes, I looked up only to see that Luke was now being dragged off the deck and into the lake by a vampire clawing at his legs.

With my lungs burning and my legs feeling like rods of iron, I pushed myself forward towards him. But the water was so cold, I could barely feel my arms, and I began to slow.

Faster! I told myself. *Faster!*

With the boat only inches away, I held my head above the surface of the water and watched as Luke kicked and clawed at the vampires who were dragging him down into the water. Luke dug his claws into the side of the boat, and they made a screeching sound as they dragged across the surface of the deck as he was pulled beneath the water.

“Luke!” I screamed. Then suddenly, I was being pulled under again. Water sloshed into my mouth, nose, and ears, and I paddled my arms and legs in a panic. Through the murky water, I could see that Luke had been consumed by a group of vampires, and they savaged him like a shoal of piranhas. The water around Luke began to turn crimson and I thought of the red-coloured water running backwards up the fountain.

With every bit of strength I had in me, I tried to get to him, to help him, but I was yanked down again, as if I had lead weights tied to my feet. Glancing down and desperate for air, I could see that I had two vampires, one hugging each leg, grinning up at me and clawing at my jeans. Their plan was to hold me beneath the water until I drowned.

Throwing my head back, a last desperate hope that I might be able to force my nose and mouth above the surface and take in some air, I saw the fleeting shadow of a winged creature soar overhead. But beneath the murky surface, I couldn't tell which one of my friends it was, and I wasn't even sure if they even knew I was slowly drowning beneath them.

The last of the air burst from my lungs in a flurry of bubbles and God did I feel sleepy. I just wanted to close my eyes – so I did and I could feel myself being pulled slowly downwards. But I felt strangely calm now, somehow at peace. Then, as if being launched like the NASA Space Shuttle, I was suddenly being propelled at what seemed like lightning speed up through the water and into the night sky. Air rushed past me, causing my clothes to ripple and dragging the flesh back across my face under the force of being propelled upwards.

Sucking in lungfuls of air, I looked down and could see the lake below me. I was so high that the capsized boat looked like a toy that a sullen child had kicked over. Guessing that one of my friends had saved me,

I looked up, but to my surprise, no one had hold of me – I was soaring up into the night on my own. Looking left, then right, I screamed as I saw two raven black wings protruding from either side of me.

Chapter Twenty-Four

Seeing the wings fluttering on either side of me, I panicked, and they curled away. The sensation made me shiver as I felt them almost shrink back inside of me. It felt like ice-cold fingernails were being raked across my back. It felt as if something similar to a snake was wrapping itself around my spine and squeezing through the gaps between my ribs. It didn't hurt exactly; it felt as if I was shrinking in on myself – being turned inside out.

Suddenly, I was plummeting like a stone back towards the lake. Without my wings, I was freefalling down and I didn't know how to get them back. Did I have to will them out – think about them? No, I didn't want to do that, whatever was going to happen to me – I didn't want to think about those wings that were inside of me. Spinning over and over, the rush of the air crushed my chest and numbed my face. Looking down as I spiraled out of control, I saw the surface of the lake shining back at me like a colossal mirror. And with every second it grew bigger – like a hole in the earth. With the spray of the lake splattering my skin, I was snatched away

and sped back towards the shore where the giant pine trees stretched up into the night like skyscrapers. But this time it wasn't my wings that gave me flight, it was Isidor, plucking me from the surface of the lake and whisking me to safety.

Landing on the shore, Isidor looked at me and asked, "What happened?"

Then, staring out across the lake, I could see fleeting glimpse of Murphy and Potter as they rocketed back and forth across the sky, beheading vampires as they went. But I couldn't see Luke. With my heart climbing up into my throat, I looked wide-eyed at Isidor and said, "Luke! Where's Luke?"

"Erm...I'm not..." Isidor started as he glanced back over his shoulder.

Gripping him by his broad shoulders, I said, "I saw him get dragged under...the vampires had him..."

"Where?" Isidor pressed, seeing the fear in my eyes.

"They dragged him to the bottom of the lake," I yelled, frantically looking over his shoulder for any sign of Luke.

Without saying another word, Isidor sprang into the air. Then, pinning his arms to his sides, he dived into the water and disappeared from view.

“Potter!” I hollered, waving my arms in the air to try and draw his attention. “Potter!”

But he was too busy slaying any vampire that dared to get close to him. I looked for Murphy, and he was spinning through the air, ripping at the throat of a vampire he was struggling with.

Realising that they wouldn’t be of any help, I raced to the water’s edge and stared into the water. But even with my new-found sight, I couldn’t see to the bottom of its murky depths.

“Luke!” I screamed again, as panic began to take a firm grip of me. “Please!”

Isidor flew from the water, and spreading his arms and wings so as to hover, he looked at me and yelled, “Kiera, I can’t see him!”

“Please, Isidor,” I almost begged. “Please look again!”

Taking a deep breath, Isidor span around as if to get momentum, then shot beneath the water again. Running up and down the water’s edge, I called out to Murphy and Potter again, but they appeared deaf to my cries as they fought with the vampires.

As I watched the ripples fade from where Isidor had disappeared in search of Luke, I thought I heard the sound of thunder come from deep within the forest. Spinning around, I stared into the slices of darkness that separated the trees. The rumbling sound came again, and this time the

ground began to tremor beneath my feet. I looked over at where I'd left my boots and they were sliding across the sand beneath the vibrations of the thunder, so I put them on. Looking back over my shoulder, I saw Potter and Murphy pause mid-flight as the approaching sound caught their attention.

"What's that noise?" I yelled, covering my hands with my ears as the booming sound became almost deafening.

Looking past me into the forest, then at each other, Murphy and Potter tossed aside the vampires they had been busily tearing to shreds and came swooping towards the shore. Although the sound was terrifying, it seemed to work in our favour, as hearing it, the last of the vampires dived back into the lake and disappeared beneath its black surface as if they knew that some terror was coming.

Swooping down on either side of me, Murphy and Potter appeared to brace themselves as they stared ahead into the darkness of the forest. Then from behind me, there was a splash as Isidor sprang from beneath the water again. Circling around in the air above us, he shouted, "I'm sorry Kiera, but I can't find Luke -"

"Luke!" Murphy barked at me. "Where's Luke?"

But before I'd had the chance to explain anything, that deafening sound of thunder was upon us as four giant wolves bounded from the forest. Shrinking back in fear, I looked at the wolves that now stood before us on

the shore. Unlike any other wolves I had seen, these were as large as bears. They turned their massive heads and their long snouts towards us. One of them lept forward and roared with such force that even from several feet away I could feel its hot breath against my face and my hair bellowed out behind me.

Potter sprang forward, his wings arched upward in a display of anger. He stood defiantly before the wolf and stared into its blazing, yellow eyes. The other three monstrous wolves howled as they bounded towards Potter, but he didn't shrink back or flinch with fear. In a stream of black shadows, Murphy was at his side, as was Isidor. Both of them, like Potter, had their wings fully splayed along with their claws and fangs.

The dominant wolf roared, sending stringy waves of saliva from its jaws. Its sleek, black fur glistened in the moonlight, and its claws kicked up a shower of sand as if to ward off my Vampyrus friends. The other wolves circled us, a deep, angry rumble coming from within their throats. Turning on the spot, I followed them with my eyes. They almost seemed to tower over us, their flanks flexing in and out with muscle. Their yellow eyes fixed on us, as if waiting for the command to charge. They sniffed the air, and their long fleshy tongues hung from the corners of their dripping jaws. Unlike the black-coated wolf, the other's coats were brown, grey, and white. But each of them had the same yellow, piercing stare and I looked

away from them, as I remembered Potter telling me how the Lycanthrope could place you in a trance with just one look.

Even though I feared these enormous wolves, my greatest fear was what had happened to Luke. Had those vampires savaged him at the bottom of the lake or had he managed to escape, clawed his way up the shore and now lay injured and bleeding in the forest?

As if reading my mind, Murphy said to the wolf with the black bristling hair, “Jack Seth, we don’t have time for this macho shit-head display of aggression – I’ve lost one of my men and I need to find him.”

Rolling back its fleshy lips, the wolf growled at Murphy.

“I’m sorry,” Potter said, “What was that you said? I don’t speak dog!”

Within an instant, the giant wolf was standing on its back legs and looming over Potter, his jaws wide open and brandishing a set of teeth that glistened like a set of knives.

Smirking and looking over at Murphy, Potter said, “Aww, I think the little poodle wants me to stroke its tummy!”

With one earsplitting roar, the werewolf had swiped at Potter with one of its giant paws and sent him spinning back through the air and into the lake. Hitting the water, Potter sprang into the air and then came racing back towards the shore. Seeing him, the werewolf launched himself

forward, and in a blur, and twisting out of shape, the wolf took the form of a man. Landing on his feet, he towered over Potter. Not outside of a freak show had I seen such a tall man. Jack Seth must have stood seven feet tall at least. The way his shadow was cast across the sand, I knew that he was the man that Murphy had secretly met in the derelict farmhouse. Seth stared down at Potter, who took to the air again, so they met eye to eye.

Seeing this, the other three werewolves bounded forward in a series of giant leaps and were yapping and barking at Potter.

“Enough already!” Murphy roared. “These pathetic schoolboy antics aren’t going to help us save Luke!”

With neither one of them wanting to back down, I took a deep breath and raced towards Potter. As I darted between the wolves, they snapped at me with their mighty jaws, but Isidor was already hovering above them, and taking aim with his crossbow.

“Up here!” he hollered down at them. “Now why don’t you be good doggies and play nice!”

Seeing him, they leapt and bounded into the air, swiping at him with their massive paws. But each time they came within touching distance of him, Isidor would swoop away with a grin on his lips.

Knowing that we had very little time left, if any to rescue Luke, I stared up at Potter and cried, “Don’t you realise that your friend could be

lying at the bottom of that lake and all you're worried about is trying to prove a point with this...this..."

"Be careful what you say," Jack Seth growled through a set of clenched teeth. I looked into his eyes and the stare he gave me was dangerous – like that of a mad man. His face was a crisscross-patchwork of white scars and his jaw line was covered in untidy-looking whiskers. His jet-black eyebrows met at the bridge of his long, crooked nose. But what freaked me out the most were his ears. It was like they were set too low on each side of his face, tucked just behind his jaw. He was unnaturally thin, almost emaciated, and his cheekbones jutted from his face, which only gave his serial killer stare more depth. His fingers were long and bony and each of them was capped with curved fingernails. He wore a blue denim shirt that was open and he had a red bandanna knotted about his throat. His stilt-like legs were covered in a pair of black jeans and they were held around his waist by a knotted length of rope. His feet were bare, and just like his fingers, each of his toes had a talon-like toenail protruding from it.

Needing to break his intoxicating stare, I snapped my head away and glanced up at Potter who hovered just above me.

"Please!" I almost begged. "We need to find Luke."

Without looking at me, Potter swooped back towards the ground and stood alongside Murphy.

Following his ascent with his burning stare, Seth looked at Murphy and snarled, “I should rip your fucking throat out for coming here – this wasn’t part of the deal.”

“Nor was sending us on a wild goose-chase into that godforsaken monastery,” Murphy said, and the contempt in his voice matched that of Seth’s.

“The girl was there,” Seth hissed. “Don’t blame me for screwing up. Just take a good look at yourselves – you’re pathetic –“

“Please.” I said, pulling at Murphy’s arm. “We need to find Luke!”

“Luke Bishop,” Seth sneered. “Don’t tell me you’re still wiping his arse for him?”

Then before I knew what had happened, Potter was in the air behind Seth, digging his claws into the killer’s throat. Instantly, the other werewolves were springing through the air and gnashing their ferocious-looking jaws at Potter.

Digging his nails deeper into Seth’s scrawny throat, blood began to trickle on to his bandanna. Potter said, “Tame your dogs or I’ll rip *your* fucking throat out. And believe me,” Potter whispered in his ear, “nothing would give me greater pleasure than to slice-up a child-killer – I don’t know why I didn’t do it long ago.”

With his eyes spinning wildly in their sunken sockets, Seth raised one of his painfully thin hands and said to the baying werewolves, “It’s okay my friends. This is just a misunderstanding that I’m sure we can all figure out.”

Hearing this, the werewolves dropped back onto all fours, and skulked away. Not once did they stop looking at Potter. Seeing the werewolves retreating, Potter slowly loosened his grip on Seth.

“We need to find our friend,” Potter said, and I could detect the anger simmering in his voice.

“Impossible,” Seth said, giving a sly, rasping chuckle. “If he is out in that lake somewhere, we’ll never find him.”

“Why not?” I said, not wanting to believe or trust him.

Then looking at me as if he were undressing me, he smiled and said, “Because your Sergeant sunk my boat, and believe it or not, I don’t have another one.”

“There must be another way,” Murphy said, coming forward, his limp more pronounced somehow as if he were dragging his right foot in the sand.

“There might be,” Seth said with a shrug of his shoulders.

“Listen here, Lassie,” Potter hissed, tightening his grip on Seth’s throat, “I’m not here to be jerked-off by you and the cast of *One-Hundred-*

And-One-Dalmatians. So stop pissing me off and tell me how we can find Luke.”

“The sun will be up soon,” Seth said, his voice sounding strained as Potter continued to bury his nails into his throat, “and I’m guessing by the state of you that you haven’t been back to The Hollows in a while, so the sun will soon be scorching your skin. I will get my wolves to search the perimeter of the lake for you.”

“Not good enough!” Potter hissed and tightened his grip.

“Okay! Okay!” Seth wheezed. “I’ll get them to search the forest and the surrounding area, just in case he came ashore someplace.”

But as I glanced back over my shoulder at the mist that crawled across the icy-cold lake, I knew that Luke hadn’t come ashore. Those vampires had been all over him. He would’ve never made it out. Knowing this, my heart sunk in my chest as if being dragged out of me by invisible hands, and my bottom lip began to tremble. I didn’t want to cry, especially not in front of this killer, but the tears leaked from my eyes, ran down my cheeks and off my chin.

I felt an arm slide around my shoulders and Isidor pulled me close against him.

“We have to stay and search for him,” I whispered against his chest. “We can’t just leave Luke at the bottom of that lake.”

“There must be something we can do?” Isidor spoke up.

“If it were down to me,” Seth grinned, “nothing would make me happier than to watch you lot fry beneath the sun as you search for him, but you know I’m trying to make amends for past sins – so I’m offering you sanctuary for the day in our caves. And while you rest, I’ll put my very best wolves on the case. See, I’m a good guy now – just like you.”

Releasing Seth, Potter settled back on the shore and said, “You are nothing like us, killer.”

Rubbing his throat with one of his skeletal hands, Seth smiled, but the fury in his eyes betrayed his true feelings as he said, “Take it or leave it. But thanks to you, Murphy, you’ve lead the Vampyrus and their vampires to our sanctuary and it won’t be long before they return in greater numbers. Stay and search for your friend, but you will all certainly die in the process. Or come with me and let us finally make a truce. We may well need each other more than you think.”

“We don’t need help from your kind,” Potter spat.

“No?” Seth grinned and he truly did look crazy. “Then why did your sergeant come to me for help in the first place?”

From the folds of Isidor’s arms, I saw Potter glance sideways at Murphy, who just looked away.

“Come with us or stay here and burn,” Seth said, “it makes no difference to me.”

Gasping in shock, I watched in grim horror as Seth clawed away the flesh that covered his own face, and as it fell away in thin, fleshy strips, the head of a giant wolf appeared from beneath it. Throwing his head back, he howled and raked his claws down his chest. As the skin sliced open, thick black hair burst out and it glistened in the light of the rising sun. I watched as his flesh fell away, until all that was left was the giant wolf I had first seen bounding from the forest. Rearing-up on its back legs, Jack Seth howled so deeply that the branches of the nearby pine trees shook, releasing their fine green needles onto the ground. Dropping onto all fours, he looked one last time at us with his burning yellow eyes. Woofing at the other werewolves, he turned and sauntered along the shore towards the fountain.

We watched the other wolves bound after him, spraying up plumes of sand from beneath their mighty paws. Without saying a word, or even looking at us, Murphy started off after them. Seeing this, I broke away from Isidor and raced after him. Snatching hold of his arm, I spun him around.

“We’ve got to stay and look for Luke,” I pleaded with him.

Pulling his arm free, Murphy turned and started back up the shore.

With tears of sadness falling from my eyes, I said, “Please Murphy – you can’t give-up on Luke. I can’t believe that you would leave him

behind.”

Then fixing me with a hard stare, Murphy shouted, “You think you are the only one that loves him, do you? That boy is like a son to me. I don’t want to leave him behind any more than you do. But however much it pains me to say it, Seth is right – if we stay here we are all dead.”

“But -” I started.

“If the sun doesn’t get us, those that hunt us will!” he barked.

“But I don’t want to lose him,” I sobbed.

“Don’t talk to me about loss,” Murphy snapped. “I’ve lost enough loved ones to last me two lifetimes. If we stay here we’re dead and I’m not prepared to lose any more people that I care about.”

Raising my head, I looked at him and was startled to see tears running silently down the side of his face.

“Believe me, Kiera,” he said, his voice softening, “I’m not going to risk the lives of you all for Luke, however much that boy means to me. And Luke wouldn’t want me to put any of you in danger for him, he would want us to push on – to hunt down this invisible man who has caused us all so much pain.”

Knowing that he was right didn’t take away the pain that I felt inside. It felt as if part of me was dying and there was nothing I could do to

stop it. Unable to hold back my heartache any longer, I began to sob uncontrollably. Taking me in his arms, Murphy held me tight.

“I’m so sorry, Kiera,” he hushed.

“Sorry for what?” I sobbed.

“For getting you into this,” he whispered. “That night you walked into the police station in The Ragged Cove I should have told you to get out of there – to run as fast as you could away from the Cove.”

“You didn’t exactly make me feel welcome,” I sniveled.

“I should’ve tried harder,” he said.

“Why didn’t you then?”

“Because I was being selfish.”

“I don’t understand,” I said, my face still snug against his chest.

“Because I knew what you were all along – I knew you were a half-breed,” he said, “and I knew that you were in danger, but I was just thinking about discovering the identity of who is behind this nightmare and I was hoping that you would draw him out.”

“Like bait, you mean?”

“Yes,” he whispered.

“And do you really think you could have driven me out of the Cove?” I asked him.

“Perhaps,” he said. “I nearly got shot of you – but Luke brought you back.”

“And if he hadn’t, I would have died,” I told him, as I remembered those vampires chasing me through the snow. “That’s why I can’t leave him behind now.”

“If you stay and look for him,” Murphy said, easing me back so he could look into my eyes, “then he would have saved you for nothing. He might as well have left you to the vampires that night in the snow – he would have risked his life for nothing.”

Then taking me by the hand, he started to lead me up the beach in the direction that the werewolves had gone. Silently, I went with him. As I did, I looked back over my shoulder to see Isidor following behind us and Potter standing alone, staring out across the lake as if looking for his friend.

Chapter Twenty-Five

We followed the Lycanthrope along the shoreline, the lake lapping around our feet. Turning away had been hard, and with each step I took, I struggled with the temptation to turn around and go back in search of Luke. But search where? And how? With the sun rising and the Vampyrus heading towards the secret lake, the situation was desperate.

However much I knew I had to struggle onwards, I couldn't help but steal quick glances back over my shoulder and scan the horizon in the desperate hope that I might see Luke dragging himself out of the water. But the only other people I could see were Isidor and Potter following behind. They walked apart, Isidor with his crossbow in hand and Potter with his head and shoulders slumped forward. I could see that he was struggling - just like I was with the loss of our friend. I thought of going to him and offering him some comfort, but I feared that if I started back in that direction, I might never want to come back. So facing front, I continued to follow the giant paw prints that the werewolves had left behind them.

It was only as we drew closer to the fountain that I really appreciated its sheer size and wonder. Water raced in thick, red waves up

the front of the mountain, as if being sucked-up by an invisible straw. To watch it was mesmerizing - almost hypnotic. The sound of the water cascading backwards was deafening and it almost seemed to roar like the werewolves themselves.

Reaching the fountain where the water formed a haze of watery-mist, the wolves stopped and turned to face us. Opening his colossal jaws, Jack Seth licked his snout with a fleshy-pink tongue and said, "Do you want to change your mind?"

"About what?" Murphy asked him. The wolf was so big that even on four legs, they stood eye to eye.

"About taking refuge in our sanctuary," Seth woofed.

I watched Murphy as he looked back in the direction that we had come, and at the sun, which was spinning its golden rays between the tips of two ragged mountains in the distance.

"What choice do we have?" Murphy said grimly.

Without saying another word, Seth and the other three wolves left from the shoreline and into the fountain.

Joining us by the fountain, Isidor looked up in awe as it towered high above, making us look tiny and insignificant. Potter looked at Murphy.

"What?" Murphy said.

“Why did you have to go and enlist Seth’s help?” Potter said, and his voice didn’t sound angry, just confused. “You’ve just made a very bad situation a whole lot worse.”

“I had no choice,” Murphy started. “I was desperate. After what happened at Hallowed Manor, I knew we were dealing with a ruthless killer, and as my father used to say - sometimes you have to fight fire with fire. Our number is too small, Potter, just us against a legion of Vampyrus and the vampires they make. They are picking us off one by one. So I struck a deal with the Lycanthrope. For the release of Jack Seth, they would help hunt for Kayla.”

“But why would they want to help us?” Potter cut in. “They hate the Vampyrus.”

“Exactly!” Murphy said. “They don’t want the Earth overrun by Vampyrus any more than we do. The Lycanthrope have made lives for themselves amongst these mountains - hidden from prying human eyes. But that would all change if this invisible man took the Earth as his own.”

“You should have gone to our elders,” Potter insisted, “told them what we know - they would have helped us - they don’t want our race taking over the Earth any more than we do.”

“They banished us from The Hollows, remember?” Murphy reminded him. “We’re just a pain in their arse - a fly in the ointment. They

don't want any trouble - any political turmoil."

"We'll they're gonna have a whole load of shit dropping on them from a great height," Potter snapped. "Because by the time they do wake up to what is really going on up here - it will be too late. They will have no power - they will be finished."

"And that is why I came to the Lycanthrope," Murphy said. "It wasn't a decision I took lightly. I agonised over it. I admit they don't make worthy allies - I don't want to be associated with that scum any more than you do. But if we are going to survive this - we'll have to work with them."

"Don't go kidding yourself that they are doing this to help us or the humans," Potter said, "They are purely in this for themselves - to protect their own little world inside these mountains."

Then staring hard at Potter, Murphy said, "And that is why we need them, because the Lycanthrope will slaughter anyone or thing that puts their race at risk of being discovered. These serial killers will show no mercy in protecting their own."

Then, turning and bowing his head, Murphy stepped into the fountain and disappeared from view. I looked at Potter and his eyes were dark, and his jaw firmly set. Turning to face us, he said, "Whatever you do, don't trust the Lycanthrope. They seem to have fooled the Sarge, but don't

let them fool you. Your lives will depend on it - I promise.” Looking up at the raging crimson fountain, Potter lept forward and disappeared inside it.

“Ready?” I asked Isidor, with an anxious look in his direction.

Holding out his arm, in the direction of the rushing water, he half-smiled and said, “Ladies first.”

“Yeah, thanks,” I grumbled and took a step towards the fountain. As I was about to step into it, Isidor stopped me and said, “Are you injured, Kiera?”

Glancing back at him, I answered, “No. Why?”

“It’s just that you have two large tears down the back of your coat,” he said, his eyes full of concern.

Placing a finger to my lips, I said, “Shhh, Isidor. They were made by my wings.” Then turning front, I stepped into the waterfall and Isidor followed.

Chapter Twenty-Six

We stood at the entrance of an enormous tunnel, which had been carved into the side of the mountain. Ahead was darkness, but as I peered into it, I could see the outline of the Lycanthrope just ahead, waiting for us. The tunnel was rough-looking and made of earth and stone. Moss grew over it and the whole place stank of damp mildew. The others stood beside me, and we dripped water from our hair and clothes onto the uneven ground.

“What’s this mountain called?” I asked to no one particular, but just out of sheer wonder at its huge size. It was like I had stepped into another world - dimension - that lived just on the other side of the world that I thought I had known.

“It’s called *home*,” Jack Seth growled, his voice echoing back down the tunnel towards us. In the darkness ahead, I could see Seth turn away and his companions followed.

“Ready?” Murphy said, taking a deep breath.

“I guess,” Potter breathed, starting off behind the wolves. Silently we followed him.

The path through the tunnel rose steadily upwards, and even though the gradient wasn't steep, before long, my legs had grown tired and had started to ache. As the sound of the rushing waterfall faded away behind us, so did the last pinprick of daylight shining through on the other side of it. But as we continued to climb, the craggy walls of the tunnel were lit with a series of gas lanterns that shed an orange glow into the gloom.

Onwards we went and I began to wonder how deep and high this mountain could be, and just when I thought I could walk no more, we reached a stone plateau that looked out across a spectacle so amazing that I lost my breath. Isidor stood beside me and I heard him whistle through his teeth in awe. I tried to absorb every detail, every shard of light that glinted from those lanterns, making the world that was now spread beneath glow like hot embers in a fire.

"I can't believe what I'm seeing," I whispered.

"My home is beautiful, don't you think?" Jack Seth asked as he suddenly appeared beside me. He was no longer a wolf, but back in human form - if you could call it that.

Straining my neck to look up at him as he towered over me, I said, "It's incredible," then I looked back at the jagged scenery below.

"It's as beautiful as The Hollows," Isidor said, sounding almost out of breath.

“Nothing is as beautiful as The Hollows,” Potter remarked, and he looked unimpressed at the scene spread out below us. “Some regions are so beautiful, people have been known to be so mesmerized by them, that they have stood there for days, transfixed to the spot, unable to tear their eyes away from the view.”

“It sounds incredible,” I whispered, hardly able to imagine a world more wondrous than the one I was now looking at.

“It is,” Potter said, his voice sounding miles away, as if lost in his own memories. “When I was a child, my mother and father used to take me to the Talles Varineris.”

“What’s that?” I asked surprised, as this was the first time that I’d ever heard Potter say anything about his past life.

“The largest canyon in the world. It makes your Grand Canyon look like a crack in a paving stone,” he said, looking at me. And then, as if he realised he had in some way said too much, he looked away.

“Can we rest for a moment?” I asked, my feet aching.

“Why not?” Seth smiled with that crazy grin of his. “Sit, relax and enjoy the view for a moment or two. I am in no rush.”

Dropping to the ground, I watched as Seth sauntered away, his long arms swinging loosely by his sides. Isidor sat beside me, but Murphy and Potter remained standing, never taking their eyes off the three other

werewolves that stayed close to Seth. I looked down at the sea of giant red rocks that spread away into the distance as far as the eyes could see.

But they were more than just rocks. I could see that they were homes - houses - where the Lycanthrope lived and slept. This is where they shared their secret lives with one another. The rocks had roughly-shaped holes gouged into them to form doors and windows. And in between the rows of these odd-looking houses were pathways. Lanterns hung from wooden poles that had been fixed into the hard red rock, and from where I sat, they twinkled back at me like the lights of any great city at night. I could see rock pools and streams, and far away in the distance I could see what looked like two rugged snow-capped mountains. Mountains within a mountain - that would be impossible right?

“What are those mountains called?” I asked, pointing to them.

“They’re glaciers!” Seth said.

“Glaciers!” I sighed catching my breath. “They’re incredible.”

“We call them the Twins, and unlike yours above, ours aren’t melting,” Seth added almost spitefully. Then hunkering down beside me, he looked into my eyes. At first he felt too close and it made me feel uncomfortable, like some stranger pressing themselves too close to you in a overcrowded Tube train. I cringed and wanted to jump away from him, but he looked into my eyes with his, and I no longer felt repulsed by him. If he

had reached out for me, I wouldn't have stopped him, I would have let him wrap his long bony arms about me and hold me tight. As I stared back into his eyes, I felt a sudden and painful longing for him – a lustfulness like I had never felt before. I wanted him to touch me - to take me. And even though somewhere in my mind a voice was screaming, '*Run Kiera! Run!*', I put my hand out as if to grab for him and pull him close. Then my mind was throwing up images of what he truly wanted to do to me. Despite these visions, and in them I could see him hurting me - torturing me, I still wanted him. Reaching out to pull him closer, I was suddenly yanked to my feet and snatched away. At once the spell-like trance that Jack Seth had placed me under was broken, I was no longer looking into his mad stare but into Potter's eyes.

"I think we're done with the sightseeing tour, don't you?" he said, shaking me gently as if to wake me from a deep sleep. Then realising what Seth had almost done to me - I understood his true evilness. But more importantly, I now understood what Potter had meant, when he had explained how Jack Seth the serial killer had tricked his victims into going with him. Once he had them under his spell - stare - they were his playthings and he could do to them whatever it was his depraved heart desired. Looking back at him, he grinned at me and ran the tip of his tongue

over his cracked lips. I then knew that I should be scared of him - very scared.

Keeping me close by his side, Potter led me away from the edge of the plateau as we set off again behind Seth and the wolves. But this time, we worked our way downwards - towards that beautiful but strange city made out of red rock and dust.

Chapter Twenty-Seven

As we followed Jack Seth down into the depths of the huge cavern, I would look ahead, and for as far as my eyes could see it was awash with vast swathes of red rock. These were interspersed with huge craters and vast canyons that stretched way off into the distance.

The path that we walked had been carved into the side of the rock. It wound itself around the inside of the mountain. We followed it down, following the lights that glowed dimly ahead of us. The smell of the air inside the mountain reminded me of the summer barbeques I had shared with my parents as a child - for as we grew closer to the city below, I could smell the scent of meat being cooked over hot coals. The smells were mouth-watering, and I suddenly realised that the last thing I'd eaten had been the rabbit served-up by Potter beneath the overhang.

We continued to spiral downwards and as my eyes adjusted to the dimness, I was sure that I could see packs of the Lycanthrope roaming about below as they went about their business in their city. It was only as we drew nearer to those lights, that I realised how many of the Lycanthrope

there were - I could see hundreds - no thousands - of the creatures. Some bounded around the narrow streets as wolves and others in their human form. But however they chose to live - as wolf or man, each of them was unnaturally big.

As we neared the bottom of the winding path, Seth and his companions quickened their pace. Something didn't seem quite right, but I couldn't understand what it was that had raised my suspicions. I glanced at Isidor and he had sensed something too as I caught him sniffing at the air.

Glancing up into the highest reaches of the mountain, I screwed-up my eyes and stared into the darkness. It almost seemed to hang above us like a black cloud. Unlike shadows and dimly lit corners and crevices, the darkness almost seemed to be alive as if it were breathing.

Potter sensed it too, for as we stepped from the path and stood before the vast stone city that stretched before us, he grabbed my arm and pulled me close.

"Something's wrong..." he began, but before he'd finished, a deep booming sound came from above.

I glanced up anxiously to see hundreds of Vampyrus swooping out of the darkness. Their black leather-looking wings pounded the air, and it was those that made the booming sound. They hovered above us in their true Vampyrus form, black-haired, turned-up snouts, pointed ears and

mouths blood-red and full of razor-sharp fangs. We were surrounded and I glanced at Murphy as some of the Vampyrus soared above us.

“Well, well, well!” came a voice from the shadows. “Who do we have here?” Phillips grinned, as he swooped out of the shadows and landed before us.

Isidor tore his crossbow from his back in a flash of shadows and pointed it at Phillips. Seeing this, Phillips looked at Isidor with a pretend look of pain on his face. Then looking at us all, he smiled and said, “My dear friends, why is it that every time we meet, one of you wants to try and kill me? It’s not very nice, you know!” he grinned.

Remaining silent and unflinching, we stared at Phillips as Isidor continued to aim his crossbow at him.

“You can’t win,” Phillips gloated, and unlike Luke’s scars, his hadn’t started to heal. The burns that ravaged his face still looked raw and painful. “Look around you. You’re surrounded!” Then almost skipping like a delirious child, he began to count the Vampyrus that hovered above our heads.

“One! Two! Three...Oh what’s the point...there’s hundreds of them!” he roared. And I couldn’t help but notice that he seemed even more insane than I’d remembered him to be.

Before I knew what was happening, Isidor had sped across the clearing and had his crossbow pressed firmly against Phillips' right temple. Without showing the slightest flicker of fear, Phillips began to chuckle insanely and his scarred lips twisted upwards. Looking around, I could see why he wasn't the slightest bit concerned by Isidor's heroics. Not only were we surrounded by the Vampyrus from above, the Lycanthrope had appeared in the hundreds and stood growling at us from deep within the back of their throats. Their yellow eyes lit up the cavern, and their howling made the very ground vibrate beneath us. On seeing them, I took a step closer to Potter.

Realising the situation was desperate, Isidor looked over at Murphy, hoping, I guess, for some sign of leadership - a sign as what to do next. But Murphy looked beat. Seeing this, Isidor lowered his weapon. One of the Lycanthrope strode forward on his long spindle like legs, bent down, and snatched the crossbow from Isidor's hands.

Stepping towards Murphy, Phillips looked at him with fake concern in his eyes and said, "What has happened to you? You look terrible, old man."

Ignoring him, Murphy looked cautiously at us. Our eyes met, and I knew by the look in them that he had given up. I couldn't bear to see him like that, so I turned away.

“Restrain him,” Phillips said to one of the Lycanthrope that stood close by. They came forward in three long strides, and just like Seth, their hands and feet looked more like giant paws. He had long hair that hung down his back like dreadlocks. Taking some chains from a loop on his torn jeans, he bound Murphy’s wrists together. The chains were heavy and made of thick metal.

Jack Seth, who had stood quietly to one side, stepped towards Murphy and said, “I’m sorry, old friend, they arrived just before you did and offered me a better deal.”

“Oh yeah, and what was that?” Potter seethed.

“In return for handing you all over to them, they leave me and my race in peace when they storm the Earth.”

“Why you double-crossing...” Isidor started to shout.

“I had no choice,” Seth suddenly shouted. “He promised that if I gave you up, the Vampyrus would leave us alone!”

“And you believed him?” Potter cried.

Pretending to be hurt, Phillips said, “What do you mean? What are you trying to say? That I’m not to be trusted?”

Ignoring him, Potter continued to shout at Seth. “Do you really believe that once we’re all dead, he’s going to stick to his word? How many of the Lycanthrope are left? A thousand - two at the most? Well there are

millions of us – there are millions of Vampyrus living in The Hollows and nearly as many now living above ground. They’ve managed to worm themselves into positions within human society – positions that will help them launch their attack against humans, and once they’ve finished with them, they’ll come looking for you. And with half of the human race turned into vampires, what chance do you think you will stand, Jack Seth?”

For a moment, Seth’s eyes narrowed as he studied Potter, as if giving what he had been told some serious thought. Then, shrugging, he said, “I have my own people to think of. My own city to protect.”

“Good luck,” Potter said, “‘cos you’re gonna need it.”

Seth looked at Potter with his yellow eyes and growled, “My people will be safe here now.”

“Thanks, Seth,” Murphy suddenly said dryly. “Thanks for everything!”

“What are you saying to me?” Seth spat.

“You’re a real hero,” and now Murphy chuckled.

“What is it?” Seth barked.

“See that beautiful girl over there,” Murphy nodded in my direction. “Of course you’ve seen her - men like you always see women like her. By bringing her to Phillips, you’ve just signed your own death warrant.” And

he chuckled again, but it wasn't a happy laugh, it was full of resentment and hatred for Jack Seth.

"Tell me what you mean?" Seth said, and I could tell that he didn't like to be made a fool of.

"I was stupid to have trusted in you," Murphy said, the chains around his wrists jangling. "I should have listened to my friends. But that girl over there is special - she doesn't know herself how special she is. But there is someone that does - the man that is behind all of this - he knows what her true power will be. But it's worse than that for you, Seth, and I pity you."

"What the fuck are you talking about, old man?" Seth hissed. I could feel the frustration building within him.

"See Kiera over there - well she is going to be powerful enough - but she is just one part of a three-piece jigsaw. Bring those three pieces together and you create a force so strong that whoever wields their power will be invincible. Create more of them and you become...God!"

I heard the sound before I realised what had happened. But it was a hideous sound and one that will stay with me forever. Phillips sprang forward and drove his fist into Murphy's chest. In one quick and fluid movement, Phillips had yanked his fist out again and was holding Murphy's heart between his fingers. It was so sudden and so quick, that Murphy

glanced down at the gaping hole in his chest, then in shock he stared at his heart which still pumped even though Phillips clenched it in his fist.

“No!” Potter roared, lunging forward.

But he was too late. With one last turn of his head, Murphy looked at me, and giving me a knowing smile, he made a rattling sound in the back of his throat, then dropped to his knees and toppled face first into the dirt.

Chapter Twenty-Eight

Potter shot forward in a spray of black shadows and knelt beside Murphy's lifeless body. Then, hoisting him up into his arms, he cradled his friend.

"What have you done!" Potter roared at Phillips with such venom that spittle flew from his lips. "You've killed Murphy, you piece of shit!"

"What did you think, this was some kind of game?" Phillips screamed back with just as much anger. "You're all gonna die!"

I looked at Potter and I'd never seen such a look of sheer desperation. It bordered on anger, pain, and confusion. It was like he couldn't comprehend what had just happened. None of us could. I glanced at Isidor and he just stood with his mouth open and eyes wide as if he had just been punched in the stomach. I looked down at Murphy's body lying in Potter's arms, and my legs began to buckle beneath me. Holding my hands to my face, I tried to stop the tears in my eyes from falling onto my cheeks.

How could he be dead? my mind screamed. He was our sergeant and friend. What were we going to do without him? It was Murphy who held us all together. Then, before I'd even realised what I was doing, I was

running towards Phillips, my hands out before me. I just wanted to rip his eyes out – tear his cruel heart from his body. The desire to kill him, to make him hurt for what he had just done, was overwhelming. I'd never felt such hatred before and it consumed me like a wave. But before I could reach him, Jack Seth had stepped in front of him and knocked me away as if I were some insignificant insect. I flew back through the air and landed on my arse, the air from my lungs being forced from me. Seth hadn't seen Isidor dart through the air, and before the giant knew what was happening, Isidor was on his back like a child being carried by their father. Isidor screamed as if he were in pain – but it wasn't that which made him cry, it was the anguish at seeing Murphy die. Bucking like a bull, Seth tried to throw Isidor clear, but Isidor had his claws buried into his back and he wasn't going to let go. Blood and hair oozed from the cuts that Isidor was opening down the length of Seth's back.

“Get him off me!” Seth roared, his yellow eyes spinning wildly in their sockets.

On his command, one of the wolves bounded forward and with one swipe of its massive paws, it knocked Isidor clear off Seth's back. He howled with fury at the sight of the slashes that Isidor had made, but instead of releasing his anger on him, Seth turned on Phillips.

“What in the name of fuck is going on here!” he screeched so loudly that I thought his eyes were going to pop from his emaciated face. “You said no one was gonna die!”

Phillips looked at him, unnerved by Seth’s display of fury and shrugged his shoulders.

“You said that you just wanted Kiera and Isidor!” he seethed. “You said that Murphy and Potter would be left here, beneath the mountain with me.”

“So I lied,” Phillips said. “Sue me!”

“I ought to rip your fucking head clean off, you double-crossing scum!” Seth roared striding towards Phillips.

Phillips stood and looked up at Seth, a defiant stare in his eyes. “You’re not going to kill me,” Phillips said.

Seth loomed over him and staring just as hard back, he said in voice that was so calm that it was almost chilling, “I might not kill you, Phillips, but if you ever double-cross me again, I promise you on everything that I hold sacred, I will hunt down anyone or anything that remotely means something to you. And when I lay my hands on them, you can’t even begin to imagine what I will do to them. After I’ve finished with them and they’re on the brink of death, I’ll cut their fucking hands and feet off and watch

them come crawling to you, begging to be put out of their misery. Do I make myself clear, you filthy-scum?”

Totally unmoved by Seth’s horrific threats, Phillips took another step closer to him. Looking up into his crazy, yellow eyes, Phillips said, “And you, Jack Seth, better pray that I don’t change the terms of our agreement any more. The death of Murphy was nothing. Why are you getting so upset?” Then looking down at Potter as he cradled Murphy, he lashed out with his boot, striking Potter in the chest and sending him sprawling to the floor. Completely unlike Potter, he didn’t spring from the floor, biting, tearing, and clawing like I’d seen him do so many times before when under attack, he just sat there numbly and stared at the body of his friend.

Seeing the trauma that he was in, and barely able to function myself, I crawled over to him and pulled him close, holding his head against my chest. Phillips saw me comforting Potter and with a look of revulsion on his face, he said, “Christ, I’m gonna puke in a minute. Somebody please just get them out of my sight.”

Before I realised what was happening, my hands were bound together with thick chains by one of the Vampyrus. Once Potter and Isidor had been restrained, we were dragged to our feet and pushed roughly towards a narrow tunnel that led from the main chamber. As we reached the

entrance to the tunnel, I glanced back over my shoulder to see Phillips reach down, pick up Murphy's corpse and throw it to the yapping wolves that waited hungrily nearby.

We were thrown into a cell and the door was slammed shut behind us. The room was narrow and made of rock. There were no windows and the only light came from a burning torch in one corner, which made the walls flicker with orange shadows.

I looked at Isidor, who crouched by the door and sniffed at it. Turning, I looked at Potter, who was slumped against the far wall. His head was bent forward with his chin resting on his chest. He looked lost and beaten. To see him like this only darkened the dire situation that we now found ourselves in. If my hands hadn't been manacled together, I would have leapt forward and hugged him. Dropping to the floor, I noticed that my whole body was shaking. I didn't feel cold and I had gone past being scared – I was in shock.

My brain felt scrambled and I could barely comprehend everything that had happened in the last few hours. Luke was gone and my heart told me that he was dead, although my mind refused to think about that possibility. Murphy had been murdered right in front of me and I'd lost the closest thing I'd had to a father since my own had died. It felt as if my world

was unraveling around me – coming away at the seams like a threadbare carpet – and I didn't know what I had to do to put it back together again.

I looked at Isidor and he was on his hands and knees sniffing around the edges of the door like a bloodhound.

“What are you doing?” I asked him.

“There's two of those Vampyrus out there,” he said, without taking his nose from the ground.

“So?” I sighed.

“You're not giving up, are you?” he said, and now he did look back at me.

“We're not ever getting out of here, Isidor,” I said, my voice bordering on hysteria.

“This isn't the time to panic,” he said, pressing the side of his head to the door.

“This is the perfect time to panic!” I snapped at him.

“We can't give up,” he insisted. “There's got to be a way out of here.”

“Go for it, Houdini. Knock yourself out,” a voice whispered from the corner of the room. Turning, I could see that it was Potter who had spoken and he now sat with his head in his hands as if waiting for his executioner. It scared me more than anything to see him like that. It should

have been Potter trying to figure a way out of our cell, not Isidor – but it was as if he didn't care anymore.

Moving away from the door, Isidor crossed the cell and stood before him, the chains around his wrists clanking. "What did you call me?" he asked.

"Go away," Potter mumbled, "I'm not in the mood for your theatrics."

"What did you call me?" Isidor asked again, his voice taking on an angry tone.

Closing his eyes, Potter rolled onto his side and said, "Go away."

Swinging his foot back, Isidor kicked Potter in the ribs. Potter grunted, but stayed still. Isidor kicked him again and shouted, "How many times do I have to tell you that my name ain't Kid, Wonder-Boy, Houdini, Van Helsing, or Face-man!"

Putting a hand to his ribs to control the pain, Potter whispered, "I never called you Face-man – he had some class."

Hearing this, Isidor repeatedly kicked and punched Potter, and as he did so, tears streamed down his cheeks. "I hate you! I hate you!" Then as Isidor took one giant swing at Potter with his foot, Potter snatched it with his manacled hands and threw Isidor back across the room. Pouncing to his feet, Potter was on him in an instant. Looping his thickset arms over

Isidor's head, he pulled the chains that hung between his wrists tight about his neck.

"You need to lighten-up, kid," Potter whispered in his ear, and I could see that his eyes had taken on that fiery look that I had seen so many times before.

Getting to my feet to stop Potter from strangling Isidor, I stumbled towards them. But as I drew closer, Isidor winked at me and smiled.

"I didn't think I'd ever hear myself say this," Isidor croaked as Potter drew the chains tight across his neck, "but it's good to have the old Potter back."

"What's that supposed to mean?" Potter hissed into his ear.

"The whole I'm-having-a-nervous-breakdown routine doesn't suit you," Isidor said. "What were you going to do next, Britney? Shave your head?"

Realising that Isidor had deliberately provoked him, he lifted the chains from over his head and shoved him away with his shoulder.

"Very cute," Potter said.

"Murphy wouldn't have wanted you to give up," Isidor said, and his voice was soft – encouraging. "He'd want you to find a way out of here."

"What do you know about Murphy? Huh kid?" Potter barked. "You knew him five minutes – that was all. I've known him for years – he was

like a father to me.”

“I knew him well enough to know that he wouldn’t have wanted you to wallow in self-pity,” Isidor said. “He would have wanted you to get the sonofabitch who killed him. And how are you ever going to do that if you give up. If you give up now, Potter, not only do you give up on Murphy – you give-up on all of us.”

“You don’t know what you’re talking about,” Potter said, looking away.

“Yes he does,” I cut in, “You’re not the only one who cared for Murphy. He was our friend too – he was like a father to all of us.”

Tilting his head to look at me, the torchlight spilt across his face; and although his eyes had come alive, they were full of pain. “I have no one now,” he said.

I wanted to go to him so much it hurt. I wanted to hold him, and as I took a step forward, the door to the cell was swung open and Sparky sauntered in. Taking one look at his flushed and spotty face, I sprung forward.

“You!” I screamed, clawing at him.

But Isidor had hold of me, and was dragging me backwards.

“No, Kiera,” he said. “You’re better than him.”

“But *I’m* not!” Potter hollered and was on Sparky so quickly it was as if he’d disappeared before us only to reappear a fraction of a second later on the other side of the cell. Before Sparky had any time to react, Potter had removed half of his face with his chained claws.

Screaming, Sparky threw his hands up. But it wasn’t blood that oozed from between his fingers. I recoiled in horror at the sight of the thick grey fur that glistened in the torchlight. Pulling his hands away, he threw his head back and howled as the flesh fell away from his face in thick strips to reveal a long, grey snout that was covered in white whiskers. With long, hooked fingernails, he clawed at his neck, and dragged away the skin that covered his bony chest, to reveal the body of a wolf. Pushing Isidor away, I stumbled backwards against the wall of the cell and watched as Sparky dropped onto his four giant paws. Shaking all over like a dog that has just clambered from the sea, the wolf looked at me and woofed.

“I don’t believe it,” I stammered as I thought of all the hours we had spent together in my flat back in Havensfield, all the take-out pizza we had shared, the movies, the coffees at Starbucks – and all the time he had been a Lycanthrope.

“Believe it,” he howled at me. Then seeing Potter edging forward again, Sparky snarled and showed his pointed teeth. “Get back, Potter,” he barked.

“Why?” I asked, and I know it sounded dumb, but it’s all I could think of saying. “We were friends – but you deceived me. You killed Murphy’s daughters and poor Mrs. Lovelace – what did she ever do to anyone?”

“Kiera, why do you have such little vision?” the wolf asked. “You have such potential – you just don’t realise.”

“Why did you befriend me if all you wanted to do was kill me?” I breathed, still not believing what I was seeing.

“Kill you? I was guarding you.” Sparky said shaking his giant head. “No, we don’t want to kill you.”

“Who’s ‘we’?” I asked, pressing myself as flat as I could against the wall as he sauntered towards me.

With his head so close to mine that I could feel his whiskers brushing my face, he said, “The one who believes it’s time that the Vampyrus and Lycanthrope come out of hiding and become the dominant species on Earth. And you, Isidor over there, and the beautiful young Kayla are going to help us.”

“But I thought the Vampyrus and the Lycanthrope hated one another,” Isidor said from the other side of the cell. “How come you were working with them?”

Licking his massive snout with his tongue, the werewolf turned to look at Isidor. “Murphy’s plan to ask the Lycanthrope for help – to make a pact – was anticipated. The Vampyrus came to us first and we have become allies – unlikely ones I know – but allies all the same.”

Coming forward, Potter looked at Sparky and said, “I should tear you a new asshole for what you’ve done.”

Turning as if chasing his own tail, the wolf whirled round and came face to face with Potter. “Brave to the last, Potter. But it will do you no good. You’ve finally been caught up with and it won’t be long now before you join your friend Murphy.”

Standing firm, Potter stared into Sparky’s brilliant yellow eyes and said, “If you’re gonna kill me, why don’t you just get it over and done with. I can’t bear all this hanging around.”

“What?” Sparky howled. “Kill you now? No, I don’t think so.”

“Because you don’t have the guts to do it yourself,” Potter pushed him.

“No, Potter,” the wolf said, “We can’t get rid of you just yet or what would we have left to bargain with?”

“Bargain for what?” I asked, my heart sinking.

“Do you want Potter to die?” he asked, his voice a deep rumble.

“Of course not!” I spat.

“Then you and the boy over there will do exactly as we ask or Potter ends up the same way as Murphy – as dog food,” and even though Sparky had a long white snout, I knew that he was smiling.

Then, turning and sauntering back to the cell door, he barked, “Isidor, you’re first.”

“First for what?” Isidor asked, swallowing hard.

“Now if I told you, I’d spoil the surprise,” Sparky woofed, “and where would the fun be in that?”

Reaching for him, I grabbed Isidor’s arm. “Don’t go with him,” I pleaded and pulled him towards me.

Prying my fingers free, Isidor looked into my eyes and smiling, he said, “I’ve gotta go, Kiera – don’t wait-up, I’ve got a feeling that I might be gone some time.” Then turning, he headed towards the open cell door.

I glanced at Potter, who was watching Isidor as he made his way from the cell. Suddenly, he raced forward and threw his arms across the open doorway, barring Isidor’s exit.

“I can’t let you do this,” Potter said. “You know they’re gonna kill me anyway.”

“We don’t know that for sure,” he said, looking straight at Potter as he gently moved his arms out of the way so he could pass by. Then looking back, he said, “Say it just once for me.”

“Isidor,” Potter said.

“Thank you,” Isidor smiled and turned away.

The cell door was slammed closed and I started to cry.

Chapter Twenty-Nine

Potter came towards me, but with his hands bound in front of him, it was difficult for him to hold me. So instead, he gently knocked the fringe from my eyes and said, “Don’t cry, Kiera, I’m sure he will be okay.”

“He won’t be okay, and you know it,” I said, looking at him.

“What I mean,” Potter said, “is that they need him alive if they’re gonna workout how to...”

“You’re not making me feel any better,” I told him.

“No, I guess I’m not,” he said, turning away.

Watching him go, I said, “I’m sorry, I know you’re just trying to make me feel better.” Then sliding down the wall of the cell, I sat down and pulled my knees up beneath my chin. Potter turned and sat next to me.

Resting my head against his shoulder, I said, “It’s over, isn’t it?”

“What is?” he asked, stroking my hair with his fingers.

“Us trying to save the world,” I scoffed.

“We gave it our best shot, don’t you think?”

“I guess,” I whispered, not wanting to think about the situation that we were in. It seemed hopeless and I didn’t want to spend whatever time I had left in a state of despair. So desperate to block out the realisation that Luke and Murphy had gone and that Potter would probably soon be dead too, I said, “Tell me about your home.”

“The Hollows?” Potter asked, and I could feel his breath warm on my cheek as we lent against one another.

“Tell me about that canyon,” I told him. “What did you call it? The Talles...”

“Talles Varineris,” Potter cut in. “What do you want to know?”

“What does it look like? I want to be able to picture it,” I told him, closing my eyes wishing that I was miles away from the cell that we sat imprisoned in.

Potter took a deep breath, as if recalling his memories hurt him in some way. “The canyon runs for miles,” he said, “like a crack in the centre of the Earth. Vampyrus have undertaken expeditions to try and find its start and its end, but none have ever returned. Some say that they fell in or went mad and got lost in the millions of gorges and tunnels that twist and turn through the Talles Varineris.”

“Why would they have gone mad?” I whispered, trying to picture the canyon in my mind’s eye.

“It’s the light,” he whispered.

“Light?”

“If you stand right out on the very edge and look into the canyon, it’s like staring into the deepest abyss,” he explained. “But if stared hard enough and long enough you see a light – a bright orange glow. Some say that it shifts and moves – takes on shapes of the most incredible beauty. For those who have seen it say it’s like looking into the Earth’s soul.”

“Did you ever see this light,” I asked him, “when you went with your mother and father?”

“No,” he said. “I didn’t want to look.”

“Why not?”

“The soul of any living thing is a private place,” he said. “a sacred thing, not to be inspected or understood.”

To hear him speak like this shocked me. I’d always thought of Potter as being pretty one-dimensional – a wise guy with a smart mouth and nothing more. But now I wasn’t so sure and the secret fascination that I’d had for him was only made more curious.

“Tell me more,” I told him, the rise and fall of his chest next to me, making me feel calmer.

“I don’t know what else there is to say,” he said. “I’m not very good with words – you know, describing things.”

“But you have made it sound beautiful,” I said.

Then resting his cheek against mine, he said, “I’ll take you there one day,” he said.

“To The Hollows?” I asked.

“And to the Talles Varineris canyon.”

Pulling my head back, so that I could see him, I said with surprise, “You promise?”

“I promise,” he said, looking into my eyes.

Then leaning forward, he kissed me gently on the mouth. His kisses weren’t hungry and passionate as before, but soft – caring – which was unlike him. He kissed my face and neck and stroked my hair with his manacled hands.

Those feelings of guilt that I’d felt before didn’t rise to the surface. Instead, I just wanted to be held close, be loved, and be made safe. Now wasn’t the time to search my conscience or to reflect on what had been; all I could think of was *now* and how long it would be before they came for us. I was scared that I would never see Potter again.

So, closing my eyes, I kissed him back, and my kisses were frenzied and passionate. Looping my bound wrists over his head, I placed them at the back of his neck and pulled him towards me, smothering his face, neck and chest in kisses. He kissed me back, and using his shoulder, he gently

pushed me down onto the floor. With butterflies swooping around inside my stomach, he fumbled with my clothes and loosened them. As I lay on my back, he pulled open my coat and the shirt beneath and kissed my flesh. His lips were warm against the flat of my tummy as he tugged at the button on my jeans. He pulled them off, then holding him close, I pulled Potter down on top of me.

With a passion so deep and raw, we made love in the shadows, the light from the torch on the other side of the cell, bathing our bodies in its warm glow. Was it right what we had done? I didn't know and didn't care. All I knew and understood in that time we shared together was how special it felt to be cared and loved for.

Breathless and covered in a fine sheen of sweat, we lay and held each other and I had an overwhelming urge to cry. It wasn't sadness, though, but happiness. However, I knew that at any time now we would be separated and that sense of joy would be gone forever. So pressing myself up close next to him, I tried to cling onto those feelings for as long as possible.

"Sophie," Potter said suddenly.

"Sorry?"

"You asked me who it was that had hurt me," he whispered.

Propping myself up, I looked down at him as he lay on the ground.

“Who was Sophie?” I asked him. “A friend?”

“She was more than that,” he said, without looking at me.

“What happened?” I asked, wanting to know more about Potter and his life before we had met. I wanted to know what made him tick – what lay beneath that cocky and arrogant mask that he wore.

“Not much, really,” he half-smiled, “that was the problem.”

“Did you love this Sophie?” I asked him.

“Yes,” he said and looked at me.

“And did...did she love you?” I said, not knowing if I should have asked that.

“I thought she did,” Potter started to explain. “I first met Sophie at college. She was studying music and I was studying...well I was messing about more than anything. College for me was just one long party, staggering from one drunken night to the next. But then I met Sophie and everything changed. She wasn’t like any of my other friends. She was gentle, kind, and a smile that would...” then looking at me he said, “I’m sorry, you don’t want to hear all this.”

Shaking my head, I said, “No, go on – I want to know. Was Sophie a Vampyrus?”

“No, she was human,” he said, “and that was the problem.”

“Why?”

“Sophie didn’t know about me – what I truly was,” Potter said. “I thought I could keep it a secret. I knew that I was different, I’d always known that. As a kid, I had it drummed into me by my parents. When I told them that I wanted to go above ground, live amongst the humans, they tried to talk me out of it. They said that if humans ever discovered that I was different from them that they would want to experiment on me – keep me like an animal in a cage while they studied me. But I’d made up my mind to go. Most of my friends had left The Hollows and I wanted to find out what it was like above ground for myself. So I left my home and family behind. But I couldn’t cope with everything that humans had. I mean, they had everything! There was so much to see and do, to taste, hear, smell – I went into overdrive. Then I met Sophie and everything changed. I changed. Vampyrus women are beautiful – but human women are something else and she was. But it was more than that – for the first time in my life I saw past her beauty and fell in love with *her*. Call me stupid or naive, but I was all loved-up I guess, but I didn’t feel as if I could truly be myself with her. It was like I was holding something back – keeping a secret from her, and I was. So one winter’s night, as we lay next to one another on her bed, I revealed my true self to her,” he said.

“What did she say?” I asked him.

“Piss off, I think?”

“No, she never?” I gasped, not knowing if he were joking or not. I remembered how I’d felt when Luke had revealed himself to me back in my room at the Crescent Moon Inn.

“No she didn’t say ‘piss off’,” he half-smiled, “but it amounted to the same thing. I remember the look Sophie gave me as I turned to face her with my wings and fangs out. It wasn’t like in the books and the movies.”

“What do you mean?” I asked.

“She didn’t exactly throw herself at my feet, treat me like some kinda demigod, hang on my every word, and tell me that she couldn’t live without me. No, Sophie screamed so loud I thought she was gonna burst my eardrums. I could see the bewilderment and confusion in her eyes as she screamed, ‘Oh my god! I’ve been dating a freak!’ I mean that hurt, Kiera. It hurt like nothing ever had before. Sophie looked repulsed by me – sickened – but more than that, she looked scared of me. She told me to get as far away from her as possible and to never come back, and said that if I didn’t, she would tell her parents,” he explained.

“Why didn’t she go straight to her parents?” I asked him.

“Because she knew that they wouldn’t have believed her,” Potter said. “I mean, who would? Besides, she had really controlling parents – you

know the sort – and they would have had her tested for smoking crack or sent her straight to see the shrink.”

“It must have been terrible for you,” I said, my voice soft as I stroked the fine v-shaped line of hair that ran from his chest and down the front of his rock-hard stomach.

“It was at the time,” Potter said. “I couldn’t risk staying in town just in case she told friends who might have believed her. So with my parents’ warning ringing in my ears, I left town and hitched my way across country. Each town I came across, I’d stay long enough to find a job some place and once I’d saved a little cash, I would move on again. I felt like Bruce-what’s-his-face from the Incredible Hulk.”

“His surname was Banner,” I smiled.

“Whatever,” he shrugged. “I couldn’t go back to The Hollows, I was too proud and I knew that my folks would only say ‘we told you so.’ Then one night, it had been snowing hard and blowing a gale, so I broke into this old warehouse, you know to keep warm. I was starving hungry and freezing cold. Anyway, I must have tripped some kind of alarm or something, because they sent this cop out to investigate. Desperate not to be arrested, I ripped off my coat, and releasing my wings, I flew away. But to my surprise he took off after me and it wasn’t long before the cop had hold of me and was dragging me back out of the sky and to the ground. And that’s how I

met Sergeant Jim Murphy. Murphy, right from the start, treated me like a son, and got me enlisted into the police force. I nearly didn't make it through initial training," he said.

"How come?" I asked him.

"I'd always been a smart mouth, even before the Sophie thing, but now I was hurting bad and I became almost wild – uncontrollable - and the instructors at training school didn't know how to manage me. Hearing that I was close to being thrown out and having my badge taken, Murphy said that he would finish my training and he took me with him to The Ragged Cove. I think training school was glad to see the back of me." Then looking at me, he said, "So now you know, sweet-cheeks."

"What about Sophie?" I asked him.

"I wrote a couple of times," he said, "but I never got a reply. Anyway that was about five years ago now – I'm over it."

"So why did you give Isidor such a hard time?" I said.

Looking at me, Potter said, "Because I could see me in him – that younger me – full of hope and expectation. I didn't want to be reminded of that."

"So this Sophie," I said, avoiding eye contact with him. "Do you still have feelings for her?"

"Would it bother you if I did?" he asked straight back.

Ignoring his question and feeling his eyes boring into me, I said, “You said that she was beautiful. You said that Vampyrus women were beautiful, too.”

“So?” he said, sounding confused.

“Well, I’m neither,” I reminded him, still unable to meet his stare. “I’m a half-breed. So what does that make me?”

Kneeling-up, then taking my face in his hands, he looked at me and said, “The best of both.”

Before I could say anything back, there was the sound of footsteps outside our cell. Thrusting one of his chained hands into his trouser pockets, he fumbled about, pulling something out. As the door to our cell began to swing open, Potter thrust something into my hands and said, “Look after this for me.”

Looking down, I could see that I was now holding Murphy’s tiny silver crucifix. I looked back at Potter and he winked at me.

“I took it from around his neck as I held him back there,” Potter whispered. “Keep it safe for him...and me.”

I refastened my clothes and placed the crucifix into my coat pocket along with my iPod and the CD I’d downloaded back at the monastery. Standing next to one another, we looked defiantly at Jack Seth as he strode into our cell.

Chapter Thirty

Jack Seth stared at us with his bright yellow eyes, the black slits in them narrow and menacing. Potter positioned himself slightly in front of me. Over his shoulder, I could see a wolf standing just outside the cell door and it was looking back up the passageway, as if on guard.

Hooking his thumbs through the belt loops on his jeans, Seth said, “Are you two just going to stand there looking at me, or do you both wanna break out of here?”

For a moment, I thought perhaps I had misheard him. But then Potter had darted across the cell and was looking up at him.

“Look, I’m not in the mood for your fun and games, so why don’t you just take me and get this over and done with?” Potter barked.

Again, Seth just looked down at him and said, “Do you want to get out of here or not? We don’t have much time,” and I detected just a trace of urgency in his voice.

“You’re a traitor!” I yelled at him. “Why should we trust you?”

Grinning, Seth said, “What other options do you have?”

“I wouldn’t trust you if my life depended on it!” Potter spat.

“But your life does depend on it, Potter,” Seth said, and the smile had gone.

“How do we know this isn’t another trap?” I said, crossing the cell to stand shoulder to shoulder with Potter.

As if in a show of trust, Seth yanked the chains apart that bound us. Then, he produced Isidor’s crossbow from behind his back and handed it to me. “You don’t know that this isn’t another trap,” he said. “But if you want to leave the mountains alive, then you’re just going to have to trust me!”

Potter snatched the crossbow, and with his arm fully extended he aimed it up at Seth’s head. “Give me one good reason why I shouldn’t just kill you right now?”

Ignoring Potter’s question, Seth said, “Are you coming with me or not? We don’t have much time. We may even be too late to save them!”

“Save who?” Potter said, eyeing Seth with suspicion.

“Isidor and Kayla, of course,” he smiled again, his broken teeth shining in the torchlight.

“Kayla’s here!” I cried.

“She’s been here all along,” Potter hissed. “The monastery was just a trap.”

Hearing this, I snatched the crossbow back from Potter, and aiming it at Seth's head, I said, "Where is she?"

"Follow me," Seth grinned, leaving the cell.

Outside the cell stood the giant wolf I'd noticed before, and it looked at us with its brilliant eyes. It made a purring noise in the back of its throat. Seeing the wolf standing there on all fours in the gloom of the passage, it looked so big that it could have easily been mistaken for a lion.

"What's the company for?" Potter asked Seth, as he eyed the wolf.

"It's coming with us," Seth said.

"What do you mean, when you say 'us'?" I asked.

"We're coming with you," the wolf said, and its voice was soft – female.

Shocked, I stumbled backwards as the wolf stretched out of shape like a piece of putty and took the form of a woman. She wasn't as tall as Seth, but stood over six feet tall. Her hair was white-blond and hung down over her shoulders. She was thin, but not emaciated looking like Seth. Although she was dressed in a sweatshirt and jeans, I could tell that she had a good figure. But it was her face – it was almost breathtakingly beautiful and I could see why people would be mesmerized by her. Like Seth, her eyes were bright yellow, with two black slits for pupils, but it was her

mouth. Her lips were full and blood red and I could guess that most men would long to be kissed by them.

Glancing at Potter, I could see him staring at her, his mouth ajar. Elbowing him gently in the ribs, I whispered, “Remember the hairy tongue!”

Snapping himself out of his trance-like state, he looked-up at Seth and said, “Who’s this?”

“Does it matter?” he asked.

“It does, if we’re to trust you,” Potter said.

“This is Eloisa – my lover,” he smiled, reaching out and stroking her face with his hooked fingernails.

“I have gone to great lengths to try and right the Lycanthropes’ mistake,” Eloisa said, her voice sounding soft.

“Mistake!” Potter yelled. “I’d call your treachery more than just a mistake!”

“Look,” Seth said, leaning down over us, “I have my race to think of. We’re nearly at the door of extinction thanks to the humans. So when the Vampyrus showed up and told me of their plans to take over the Earth, why shouldn’t I have gone along with it? Phillips promised that if we helped him, that once the Vampyrus had control of the ground above, we would be free to roam it as the Vampyrus’ equals. But -”

“But what?” Potter cut in.

“Phillips said that there was a small group that could thwart the Vampyrus’ plans,” Seth said. “Then he told me it was you, Murphy and the others. Phillips said that if we helped to trap you all, then the Lycanthrope’s future would be a peaceful one. Murphy had already had me released from prison to help search for this girl, so I did struggle with the idea of betraying him.”

“Not for long, I bet,” Potter spat.

“That is where you are wrong about me, Potter,” Seth sneered. “I struck a bargain with Phillips that insured your safety. He told me that he only wanted Kiera, Kayla, and Isidor, so we agreed that he would hand Murphy, Luke, and you over to me as long as I helped him capture the half-breeds. He agreed on the condition that I never let you leave these caves beneath the mountains.”

“Sounds like a great deal!” Potter snapped back at him.

“It was better than death!” Seth shouted.

“Yeah? Try telling that to Murphy!” Potter fought back.

“Look, I never intended for him to die,” Seth said, and his anger had eased a little. “That wasn’t part of the deal. Phillips tricked me just like he tricked you. I can’t trust him now not to go back on the rest of our

agreement. Once the Vampyrus have occupied the ground above – I fear that the Lycanthrope will also be driven to extinction.”

“So why take us with you?” I asked him.

“I know you’ll find this difficult to believe, but I’m trying to make amends,” he said. “I regret what happened to Murphy and to your friends.”

“And I regret the day that Murphy ever came to you for help,” Potter said, staring up at him.

“Despite how you feel about Seth,” Eloisa said quietly, “you need him to get you and your friends out of here and away from Phillips. You either trust him or you don’t.”

“I don’t trust him and never will,” Potter said. “And as soon as we’re out from beneath this mountain, we go our separate ways, and If I ever lay eyes on you again, Jack Seth, you’ll be able to tell Murphy how sorry you are in person!”

“Is that a threat?” Seth asked.

“No, It’s a promise!” Potter said. “Now, how do we get out of here?”

We followed Seth and Eloisa through a maze of narrow tunnels. The two Lycanthrope moved so fast at times, they would disappear in the

darkness altogether, making it difficult for Potter and me to follow. There was a bend ahead, and we joined Seth and Eloisa at a small junction.

“From here, I don’t know where your friends are being held,” Seth explained, his eyes glowing in the dark like cat’s eyes.

“I thought you said you knew where they were?” Potter snapped and I could hear the suspicion in his voice.

“I said that they were being held somewhere beneath the mountain,” he hissed in the darkness. “These tunnels stretch for miles. Even I don’t know where half of them go!”

“Why don’t we split-up?” Eloisa suggested. “We can cover more ground that way. It won’t take Phillips long to realise that you two are missing – then the Vampyrus will come looking.”

“We’re not splitting-up!” Potter snapped.

Placing a hand on his arm, I looked at him and said, “She’s right, Potter. If we’re going to save our friends, we should split-up.”

“No!” Potter shouted. “It’s not safe.”

Then pulling him close so that we were almost toe to toe, I said, “Kayla and Isidor are the only friends that we’ve got left. We can’t afford to lose them like we have Luke and Murphy.”

Potter looked at me as if he was about to say something, but then changed his mind.

“What’s it to be?” Seth said. “Are we saving your friends or not?”

Handing me Isidor’s Crossbow, Potter said, “There’s only one stake in the chamber.”

“Well, let’s just hope that I don’t bump into more than one vampire then,” I half smiled at him.

“It’s not for killing vampires,” he said, his voice full of dread. “It’s for you – just in case you...”

I knew what he meant, but before I could say anything, he had gone running up the tunnel away from me.

“Meet us back here in five minutes,” Seth told me. “We don’t have longer than that.”

“But five minutes isn’t -” I started to protest.

“Five minutes...or Eloisa and I go without you!” Then they split, Seth taking one tunnel and Eloisa another.

I watched them disappear into the darkness, then turning, I raced away in search of Kayla and Isidor. As I navigated the maze of tunnels, I realised that Jack Seth had been telling the truth about one thing, the tunnels were a vast network of interweaving and connecting roads. As I raced deeper and deeper into the darkness, my ability to *see* helped to guide my way. I was just about to give up and head back to the crossroads, when I heard a voice calling in the distance.

Just like my dream, the voice was echoing back down the passageway, as whoever it was called out “*Help me! Help me!*” Knowing that I didn’t have long before I started to head back, I ran as fast and as hard as I could down the tunnel. Through the darkness, I could see a doorway set into the wall at the end of it. The door had a small square hatch, and pulling it open, I stared into the room. There was a figure in the corner, crouched down by the wall. Their face was hidden by their hands and they rocked back and forth as if going mad.

“Help me! Help me!” this person kept saying over and over again.

Pressing my face close to the hole, I said, “Kayla, is that you?”

Almost at once, the figure stopped rocking forwards and peered up at me. With my heart racing with joy and a hard lump filling the back of my throat, I gasped, “Kayla, is that really you?”

Then racing towards the hatch in the door, Kayla screamed, “Kiera! Kiera!”

Kayla shoved one hand through the hatch and grabbed for me. Taking hold of it, I pressed it against my cheek, and unlike the girl in the bedroom at the monastery, Kayla’s skin felt warm, as if life flowed through it. But was that enough? Was this really Kayla or one of those things? I needed to know, but how?

Then as I looked into her desperate eyes, I said, “What’s your favorite song?”

“What?” she mumbled. “What do you mean? Just find a way of getting me out of here, Kiera.”

“What’s your favorite song?” I asked her again, as I searched her eyes with mine, looking for any sign that might give her away.

“*Rocket Man!*” she screamed! “Rocket Man, by Elton John! What’s wrong with you Kiera! Just let me out of here!”

That was all the proof I needed, and my heart lept in my chest. I’d found her! Then, as sudden as being struck by lightning, those flash-bulbs exploded inside my head. White, blinding light searing into my brain. And in that light, I was in my dream – *vision* – again. I was back in that corridor again, with the doorway at the end of it. It was then that I realised that it was this corridor that I’d seen in my nightmare, not the one in the monastery. I knew that it was this one – the one that I now stood in beneath the mountains, because in my dream I’d seen something huge and covered in bristling black hair. Even though I had my eyes closed and my mind’s eye was being blinded by light, I knew that if I opened them and turned around, I would see...

...a dribbling Vampyrus came towards me.

“Do something, Kiera!” Kayla shouted from beyond the locked doorway. Raising the crossbow, I aimed it at the Vampyrus’ head. It lumbered towards me out of the dark, its red mouth opening and fangs spraying drool up the walls of the tunnel. Squeezing down on the trigger, the wooden bolt whisked from the end of the crossbow and buried itself into the fleshy lump of skin between its eyes. The Vampyrus shot backwards up the tunnel and collided into something. Screwing-up my eyes, I looked through the darkness to see several more Vampyrus racing towards me.

“Kiera!” Kayla screamed from behind me.

But I had nowhere to go. The door to Kayla’s cell was locked and there were no other passageways leading off this section of the tunnel. I turned and faced her. Kayla’s eyes were brimming with fear as she looked at what approached out of the darkness behind me. Taking hold of her hand, I said, “I’m sorry, Kayla.”

Then suddenly, I was being dragged from behind, back up the tunnel and away from her. I could feel the Vampyrus’ claws digging into me as I was carried away. With my heart thumping in my chest, I watched Kayla’s pale face staring back at me through the hatch.

“Kiera!” she cried, waving her hand through the hole in the door as if trying to reach for me.

Within moments, I had lost sight of her and all I could hear over the sound of the snarling Vampyrus was her calling for me. They carried me back to the crossroads where I had last seen Potter, Seth, and Eloisa. And as we reached it, I glanced round to see the three of them racing down the tunnel towards me. Seeing them, my heart lept into my throat.

“Potter!” I screamed.

He raced towards me, but several of the Vampyrus broke free and went to meet him. Knowing that this was my last chance of escape, I kicked, screamed, and punched at the creatures that held me. But there were too many and they were too strong. Through the mass of arms and black wings that enveloped me, I saw Potter slashing away at the Vampyrus as he fought desperately to make his way up the tunnel towards me. I couldn’t see Isidor amongst them, and I knew that like I’d been unable to rescue Kayla, they had been unable to rescue Isidor.

“Potter!” I screamed again, but one of the Vampyrus that had hold of me clamped its huge claw over my mouth. Over the tops of its fingers, I watched Seth and Eloisa come forward and pull Potter back down the corridor. They knew that Potter would never reach me, for every one of the Vampyrus that he slaughtered with his hands, several more appeared in their place.

Looking back one last time, our eyes met and he roared, “Kiera, I’ll come back for you!”

Then he was gone, racing away from me down the tunnel with Seth and Eloisa beside him. I closed my eyes and prayed that he got away.

Chapter Thirty-One

The Vampyrus dragged me back to my cell, and as they clawed and prodded me through the doorway, their thick black hair felt rough against my skin. They slammed the door closed, the sound of it crashing in its frame rattling along the tunnel.

“Let me out of here!” I demanded, thumping my fists against the iron door. I stood and hammered away, until my arms ached and I was exhausted. All I could think about was Potter getting away from here.

With my hands hurting, I crossed the cell and slumped against the wall. The burning torch in the corner cast long shadows, and as I looked into them, I noticed I was not alone. There was someone else – and they were hiding.

“Who’s there?” I asked, pulling myself up, staring into the darkness. As I tried to see through the shadows, the figure moved and I caught a glimpse of who it was looking back at me.

“Mum?” I whispered in disbelief. “Is it really you?”

My mother stepped from the corner of the room and smiled. But I could see that her smile wasn't warm – but cold and cruel. Nevertheless, I couldn't help myself and I rushed forward and threw my arms about her.

“Mum!” I cried. “What’s going on?”

But she didn't hug me back, her arms stayed behind her. There was no warmth, kindness, or love. It felt as if I were hugging a statue.

Loosening my arms from about her, I kissed her gently on the cheek, but she turned her head away from me, and that hurt more than anything. My mum and I had been so close once – inseparable - and her sudden disappearance three years ago had broken my heart.

Pulling away, I looked into her eyes and they were no longer hazel like mine but black and dead-looking. It was like she hadn't a soul. I could see nothing in her.

“Mum?” I whispered, tears starting to spill onto my cheeks.

“Don't call me that,” she said, and her voice was flat and uncaring.

“But you are my mum, aren't you?” After everything I'd seen and heard recently, I needed to know.

She looked away momentarily, and then turned back to face me, her features hard as if chipped from marble. It was a look that I had never seen upon her before. “I stopped being your mother the day I was baptised in the crypt beneath St. Mary's church in The Ragged Cove.”

Her words hurt me so much, I felt like crying out in pain. “Mum, what are you talking about?”

Although her face was as white as paper, to me she was still the most beautiful woman I’d ever seen. She looked at me and said, “When I arrived in The Ragged Cove, I had every intention of investigating the murders that had taken place there. Let’s be honest, Murphy and his sidekick Potter weren’t the sharpest tools in the box. Luke showed some investigative qualities so I crewed myself with him. I hadn’t been in the Cove long when we were called to our first crime scene. Straightaway I knew it was the work of Vampyrus that had turned – let me see? Bad? That’s what I’d always been led to believe. The Vampyrus that drank human blood were *bad*! The victim was a young girl,” my mother said, and gave me that cruel smile again.

“But as I searched the crime scene, Luke wandered off in search of some tracks that had been left behind, leaving me alone. It was then that it happened,” she said.

“What happened?” I asked her.

“I was snatched by Phillips and Taylor,” she said. “At first I resisted, believe me Kiera I fought them. They took me to the crypt beneath St. Mary’s church and they introduced me to Roland and Rom. For months

they held me prisoner, and I grew weaker and weaker until I was near death.”

“But why keep you prisoner?” I asked her.

“Believe it or not Kiera, they were helping me,” my mum said.

“Helping you?” I gasped. “Helping you with what?”

“Helping me to understand how I was to fulfill my true potential as a Vampyrus. The longer I was kept prisoner in the dark beneath the church, the more I realised that was how I’d been spending most of my life – how the Vampyrus race had been spending their lives. We were all trapped away below ground, living beneath the feet of humans, while they trampled all over us. Was there any difference to what Phillips and Taylor were doing to me?” She asked, looking me in the eyes.

“Of course it’s different,” I said. “The Vampyrus can come above ground and live amongst the humans...”

“You just don’t get it, do you?” She snarled and the sudden look of anger on her face made me flinch away from her. “Sneaking from below ground and trying to eek out a life amongst the humans isn’t living – it’s a lie! Why should we live in secret? Don’t we have as much right to live on Earth as they do?”

“So why don’t the Vampyrus just reveal themselves to the humans -” I started, but before I’d a chance to finish she had started to laugh.

“Oh Kiera, don’t be so naive,” she mocked. “Do you really think that the human race would welcome us with open arms? Do you really believe that humans would let us live amongst them as equals? How could they ever accept us when they hate themselves?”

“So invading their homes, towns, cities and annihilating them is the answer?” I snapped back at her.

“Don’t you think they would do exactly the same to us if they knew of our existence?” she said.

“They couldn’t do any worse than what Phillips and Co have been getting up to,” I said. “They’ve been turning humans into vampires! And what about dad – he was human – you were married to one of them!”

“That was before I took the blood,” she said.

“Blood?” I asked, but in my heart I knew what she was talking about.

“Human blood,” she smiled as if admitting to a dirty secret. “The first was a parishioner from St. Mary’s Church. Father Taylor brought her down into the crypt to hear her confession – she’d been fooling around behind her husband’s back – so I didn’t feel so bad about her. But once I’d taken one, I needed another and another. For nearly three years, I fed off the residents from The Ragged Cove, and then you showed-up and discovered the boy, Henry Blake. He was much sweeter than he looked!”

I thought of her hairs in his tiny dead hand, as he lay mutilated beneath the trees on the edge of Farmer Moore's field back in The Ragged Cove.

"It was you who killed that child!" I screeched at her, and before I knew what was happening, I was upon her, my hands tight about her throat. But when I looked at my hands squeezing at her neck I was shocked to see that they were no longer my manicured fingernails but ivory-looking claws. Slowly, I removed them from about her throat.

She smiled at me with her lifeless black eyes and said, "Well, well, well! Maybe I was wrong about you! Perhaps you're got more Vampyrus in you than I first thought!"

"What's that supposed to mean?" I hissed at her.

"Let's say that you are a late developer," she said. "Unlike Kayla and Isidor, you have been somewhat slow in changing – but I can see now that you are. And that is good!"

"So you can use the three of us to develop more half-breeds like us?" I said.

"Yes," she smiled. "It's been difficult – but now we have the three of you, we should be able to correct the mistakes we've made."

"By mistakes, I guess you're talking about that poor girl back at the monastery?" I said.

“Yes, that was rather unfortunate,” my mum said without any true compassion in her voice. “But still there is one last thing that we need before we can go ahead.”

“And what’s that?” I asked, dreading her answer.

“The three of you will need to drink human blood,” she told me.

“I won’t do it!” I screamed.

“Oh Kiera,” she almost seemed to sigh. “It’s not as bad as you think.”

“Luke told me that even one drop makes you an addict to the stuff,” I shouted. “The need for it drives you insane. Once tasted you have to have more and more. He told me that the cravings for human blood will never go away!”

“Do you see me crawling around on the floor, Kiera?” she asked me. “Do I look like an addict?”

“But don’t you see the flaw in your plan?” I said. “You kill all the humans, how will you feed your addiction?”

“Don’t concern yourself, Kiera,” she smiled. “Have you never heard of the humans using factory farms to produce their food? We will keep enough alive to breed and give us an endless supply of blood.”

The thought of row upon row of people, caged like farm animals, just kept alive to feed the Vampyrus was disturbing and created haunting

images inside my mind. Then, staring into her soulless eyes, I said, “You were right, you’re not my mother anymore – she died the moment you gave in beneath the crypt and drank Henry Blake’s blood. You called it a baptism, but that means the start of a new life – for you it was the beginning of your death.”

“Kiera, if only you knew how amazing the blood makes you feel,” she said. “It’s not death that you feel – it makes you feel alive for the very first time. It will make you more powerful than you could ever imagine.”

Then looking into her eyes, I said, “But that’s where you and I are different. I don’t want to be powerful – I just want to be me – Kiera Hudson.”

Without saying anything, my mum took her hands from behind her back, and I stumbled backwards. Just like in my nightmare, her hands were dripping red with blood from the pieces of flesh that she held in them. Then smiling, she offered it to me.

“Go on, Kiera,’ she urged, bringing the flesh closer. “Just a little bite.”

Although I shook my head in disgust, I couldn’t help but think the smell of the flesh was inviting. I could feel the inside of my mouth start to water and it felt so good. Maybe she was right, just one little bite wouldn’t hurt.

But another part of me, the human part was screaming *No* at me.
Don't touch it Kiera, not even one little drop! You won't ever be able to go back! Your hunger and thirst won't be sedated – it will grow worse!

“Go on, Kiera,” she coaxed me. “Would I ever give you something that was bad – something that would hurt you?”

I looked away from the flesh that she held before me, and up into her eyes. She smiled at me, and I felt warm tears spill onto my cheeks.

“I love you, Kiera,” she smiled.

However much I needed to hear her say those words, I pushed her hands away and said, “Never! You'll never get me to drink human blood!”

With her dead-black eyes fixed on me she said, “If you won't drink it for me then perhaps someone else can persuade you!”

“Who?” I asked, my heart racing.

Without answering me, she looked towards the cell door and said, “Bring him in.”

I looked up as Phillips and Sparky entered, dragging someone or something between them.

“Look who we pulled out of the lake,” Phillips said, as he and Sparky dropped Luke onto the floor of the cell.

“Luke!” I gasped, rushing over to him.

I rolled him over and almost screamed. His face looked beaten and bruised beyond recognition. His neck, arms and chest were covered in so many bite marks, tears, and scratches that it was hard to see a piece of his flesh that wasn't in some way injured.

Cradling him against me, I whispered, "Luke, its Kiera."

Without opening his eyes, he stirred in my arms and cried out in pain.

"What have you done to him, you animals!" I screeched at my mother, Phillips, and Sparky.

"If you think he looks bad now," my mother smiled, "You couldn't even begin to imagine what my friends here will do to him unless you eat this," and she held out her bloodied hands again.

I looked at the lump of flesh that dripped between her fingers and back at Luke again. Half opening his eyes, he looked at me and whispered, "Don't eat it Kiera...whatever they do to me...don't..."

But before he had finished, Phillips had lashed out with one of his feet and kicked Luke in his bloodied chest. Screaming in pain, Luke slipped from my arms and back onto the floor.

"Leave him, please!" I begged my mother.

"Then have some of this!" she screamed – her patience wearing thin.

“Please, mum,” I cried, looking into her eyes and hoping that she might still have some feelings for me – that her addiction to human blood hadn’t totally taken her soul.

“I’m growing tired of this!” she roared, shoving the flesh beneath my nose. I grimaced and turned my head away. Seeing this, she said, “Kill him!”

At once, Sparky and Phillips set about Luke. They kicked and punched him, smashing his already disfigured face into the rocks that covered the cell floor. Luke screamed out in pain and I covered my ears with my hands and closed my eyes. But I could still hear his agonising screams.

Not able to bear it any longer, I screeched at the top of my voice, “I’ll eat it! I’ll eat it!” Then looking at my mother, I cried, “Please don’t hurt him anymore!”

Closing my eyes, I lunged forward and sunk my teeth into the flesh that dripped from between her fingers.

Vampire Breed

(Kiera Hudson Series One)

Book Four

By

Tim O'Rourke

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For Joseph, Thomas & Zachary

Chapter One

There was only silence, darkness, and pain. I eased my eyes open – just a fraction – not too wide. There was a splinter of white light and I shut my eyes against its glare. The pain twisted and burned inside my skull then clawed its way down one of my legs. I wasn't sure which one – the pain was agonising and it consumed me. The darkness came again and took the pain away.

The grunting noise woke me. The grunts came in deep, booming waves, causing my whole body to rattle. I forced my eyelids open and they felt heavy. Shiny black hair brushed against my cheek and it felt brittle and coarse. There was a smell too – not the sweet scent of flowers but the smell of animals and sweat. I was yanked across a rough stone floor by my ankle and a bolt of pain exploded inside of me. It felt as if my spine were being twisted out of shape. I cried out, my throat dry and sore. There were several more grunts and then the blackness took me again.

My tongue felt swollen and stiff. I ran the tip over my lips and they were cracked and sore. The need for water was overwhelming. I opened my eyes and I could see a small silver dish sitting a few feet away from me on the grey stone floor. Too weak to stand, I slowly inched my way towards it. There was water in that dish. I knew it because I could smell it and nothing had ever smelled so good.

I dug my fingers between the gaps in the floor and dragged myself towards it. My legs felt heavy and unmoveable. I looked back at them and they looked fragile and bare. There was a bandage wrapped around my right calf just below my knee. As I crawled towards the dish, pain seeped from beneath the bandage and scampered through my whole body with every inch I covered.

The dish was only millimetres away now and I plucked at it with the tips of my fingers. I nearly had it – it was within my grasp. The darkness was coming again. I could feel it.

I made a desperate lurch forward with my hand and took hold of my prize. But in my haste, I flipped the dish over. The water poured out and splashed across the stone floor. Tiny little rivulets snaked away from me and I looked at them longingly. The darkness was nearly upon me again.

I feebly prodded at the upturned dish and as I did, a thin stream of water came running towards me across the filthy floor. I pressed my head

flat against the ground and licked up the drops that trickled amongst the grooves and cracks. Those drops of water tasted wonderful, but there was something else – something my body craved for.

Then the blackness took me again.

My whole body felt warm. It was soothing. I looked up and a chink of sunlight was pouring through a square hole in the ceiling above me. The hole was covered with wire mesh. I looked down at my leg. The bandage was grey and filthy-looking. The pain that radiated from it had eased; instead of feeling like someone had submerged my leg into a burning furnace, it just throbbed like a steady heartbeat.

The silver dish still sat upturned and to look at it reminded me of my thirst. I hoisted myself up onto my elbows and looked around. I was in a room made of grey stone. It looked like a prison cell without any windows. Set into one of the walls was a small wooden hatch and I wondered where it led to. On the opposite side of the cell, there was a hole in the floor. From the putrid smell wafting from it, I guessed it was the toilet. In the centre of the wall which faced me was a large black, rusty-looking iron door.

Where am I? I wondered. Am I still in the caves beneath the mountains or have they moved me to a new location?

Where was Potter? Where was Luke?

The only thing that I could be certain of was my name – I knew I was Kiera Hudson and I was thirsty.

Chapter Two

There was a noise coming from the other side of the rusty, black door. It sounded like somebody was moving around outside. Whoever it was sounded huge and heavy, their feet thundering into the ground, making the whole cell shake.

Then, the booming sound came again and it was similar to howling. The kind of noise that a large dog, no, a wolf would make.

I inched myself away on my elbows, my legs too weak and painful to carry me. There was a rattling and clanking sound as keys were turned in the lock. The door slowly swung open and Phillips came striding in. He looked different in his Vampyrus form.

Phillips stood in the doorway, huge and dominant. He was stripped to the waist, and his torso was ripped with muscle which was covered in fine, silver hair. He stared at me with his dark eyes and puckered his lower lip into a grimace. Then, without warning, he threw his arms into the air and let out a terrifying roar. The sound was deafening and I flinched backwards, sending a bolt of pain up my back and down through my bandaged leg.

Brandishing a set of yellow dagger-shaped teeth at me, he slammed his claws together. My cell became filled with a deafening *boom-boom-boom*, and I stared at his giant black wings as he flapped them together. I'd never seen Phillips in his true Vampyrus form before, and he looked even more intimidating than ever. The last time I could remember seeing him, was when he had ripped Murphy's heart from his chest and then set about Luke on the floor of my cell.

I scuttled backwards as fast I could, pressing myself against the far wall. Seeing this, Phillips lowered his arms and sauntered towards me. As a Vampyrus, Phillips looked primitive and savage - like an animal. Covering my head with my hands, I turned away. I knew what Phillips had been capable of in human form - but as a Vampyrus, I knew that anything could be possible. Although I couldn't see him - I dare not look at him - I knew he was right on top of me. The sound of his breathing was deep and menacing and I could feel his breath, hot against my flesh.

"What do you want?" I whispered without looking at him.

Suddenly, he grabbed hold of my bandaged leg and yanked me towards him. Although I hadn't drunk anything in God knows how long, I felt my bladder begin to sting as if I desperately needed to pee. Peeking through my fingers at him, I could see that he was now studying my damaged leg. He prodded at the bandage with a hook-shaped finger. Pain

exploded in my calf like a firecracker going off. The pain rushed through my veins, and I feared that I was going to lose consciousness again.

Don't you dare black out! I screamed inside. Go to sleep now and you will be defenceless – Phillips' play thing!

But I was just fooling myself. I knew deep down that awake or asleep he could snap me in half like a twig if he wanted to.

He ripped the bandage free from my leg and I let out an agonising scream. Looking at me, he simply grunted in response to my obvious pain, and turned his back on me. Gripping the soiled bandage in his hand, he ambled back towards the cell door. I pulled my leg against my chest as I rocked back and forth in pain. Tears streamed from my eyes and gathered at the corners of my lips. I poked my aching tongue from my mouth and licked them away.

I looked up and could see him watching me from the doorway.

"I'm thirsty," I whispered, my voice sounding broken and raw.

"Thirsty for what?" he asked, and I could see a smile tugging at the corner of his mouth.

"You know what," I snapped, my throat feeling as if I'd swallowed broken glass.

"Tell me."

"I can't," I whispered, bowing my head in shame.

“There’s no shame in wanting what you need,” Phillips almost seemed to gloat.

With my body aching with cravings, I screwed my hands into fists and said, “I want blood!”

Looking at me, Phillips seemed to smile as he said, “I’ll see what I can do.” Then slamming the door behind him, he left me alone in my cell.

Chapter Three

I pulled myself up onto my elbows and peered down at my leg. There was a deep cut running from my shin to my knee. Although it looked as if it had begun to heal, it didn't look good. A long, black crusty scab had formed over some of the cut, but other parts still looked open and wet. It made me feel sick. It wasn't just how it looked - it was the odour – it smelled *bad*. I desperately fought to remember how it had happened, but I had no real memories of anything after that night I had been taken kicking and screaming from my cell hidden beneath the mountains. But how long ago that had been, I didn't know. My back hurt, too. I didn't want to think about that because when I did my mind was full of the memories of Kayla telling me how Doc Ravenwood had cut those little black bones from her back.

So instead, I looked down at my hands and inspected them. They were covered in dirt, and my fingernails were black. They reminded me of Luke as he had clawed at the cave floor beneath the mountains when Phillips and Sparky had beaten him.

“Whatever had happened to Luke?” I wondered aloud as broken images and memories came flooding back to me. I hadn’t seen him since Phillips and Sparky had...but my mother had been there too.

And what about Potter? Had he escaped? I prayed that he had. Snapshot images of our last stolen moments together swept across the front of my mind and I pushed them away. Not because I regretted what had happened between us, but it was just too painful to remember them.

Suddenly the hatch in the wall – the one I’d noticed earlier – was forced open. Without thinking, I scuttled backwards again and pressed myself against the wall, wincing at the bolt of pain that flashed up my back. I watched as a bony hand with long misshapen fingers shoved a bowl of food and a fresh dish of water into my cell. With an ear piercing screech, the metal hatch was slammed shut.

With my leg trailing painfully behind me, I crawled over to the food and water. Without even looking at the food, I raised the dish to my mouth and gulped down the water. It was cold and crisp and it tingled in my mouth and down the length of my dry throat. I drank so hard and fast that some of the water oozed from the corners of my mouth and splattered the grubby looking hospital gown I was wearing.

Hospital gown? I briefly wondered, but the water was too precious to waste. So turning my thoughts back to that, I slowly pulled the dish from

my mouth and placed it back on the floor. I had no idea how long it might be before I had water again, so I decided to drink it sparingly – just small sips when I could no longer stand the thirst.

But it wasn't water that would cure the real thirst - the *thirst* inside of me that made my stomach cramp with pangs of hunger and made my skin burn hot as if I had a fever. It was what lay in the second dish that would do that. I turned towards it and stared at the large slab of meat. It hadn't been cooked. It was raw and blood oozed from it forming a little red lake in the dish. Not able to resist it, my stomach flipping with excitement, I began to wolf the food down in large, succulent handfuls. Tearing it apart with my fingers, I stuffed handfuls of the pink-red meat into my mouth. At first my stomach began to tighten but then welcomed it. Blood streamed from the meat and ran off my chin, splashing the floor of my cell. I ran my tongue across my lips, then sucked the blood from my fingers.

Once my initial hunger – *craving* – had been dealt with, I began to break off smaller pieces and pop them between my splintered lips, savouring every mouthful as if it were some expensive delicacy. There was an overwhelming desire to finish it all at once, to lick the bowl clean of the 'red stuff' as Potter liked to call it, but just like I had with the water, I left enough of the meat to last me until the cravings became unbearable again – whenever that might be.

I pushed the leftovers to the edge of my cell and lay down next to the dish. I wanted to stay close to it, just in case Phillips came back and took it from me. If I did hear those keys in the lock again, I would ram as much of what was left of the bloodied meat and water down me. So curling up on my side next to the two dishes, I lay looking at them, as if protecting them like a junkie protecting the last of their stash.

With my thirst and hunger now at bay, I already felt stronger and more comfortable. With my eyes open, I lay still and silent – listening intently for the sound of Phillips’ return. I waited and waited but he never came. As I lay on the stone cold floor, I caught my reflection in the shiny silver dish. I peered at myself, and like my hands, my face was covered in dirt and grime. My black hair was matted together in lumps and sat limply around my shoulders. Deep shadows hung under my hazel eyes and I was scared to see that I was starting to look older than my twenty years.

What has happened to me? I wondered, as I closed my eyes against the reflection. As the day outside grew old, the sunlight which had spilled in through the square hole finally faded. It was gradually replaced with darkness. Without even being aware of it, my own darkness came again and I fell into a deep and troubled sleep. This was the start of my nightmares.

Chapter Four

I could hear screaming. It wasn't the sound of someone in pain – it was fear. The screaming came again in long, terrified bursts. I was in bed and the sounds had woken me. More screaming followed and I listened to their agonising groans. Throwing the bedclothes to one side, I stood up and crossed the darkened room. There wasn't any carpet, just hard, cold sterile tiles.

The screaming came again and it was coming from somewhere nearby. I tried to pull open the door but it was locked.

There was a small, round window in the door and I pressed my face against it and peered through the glass.

More screaming.

Whatever lay outside my room was shrouded in darkness and I couldn't see anything, I could only hear the sound of running feet – lots of running feet as they dashed up and down on the other side of the door.

Screaming! More Screaming!

I twisted the door handle again, but it was locked tight.

“What’s happening?” I called out.

My question was met only by the sound of those feet dashing back and forth.

I peered through the round window again, my eyes flickering from left to right. Then suddenly, a face appeared at the window and I recoiled violently, staggering backwards and falling to the floor.

A young male pressed his face against the window and stared in at me. His hair looked wet and was plastered in black streaks to his brow. His face glistened with sweat and I could see the wispy tails of steam coiling up from his skin as if he were burning alive with a fever. His face was contorted with pain.

The sound of running came again.

“Kiera!” the male screamed as he looked in at me lying on the floor. “Help me!” he begged, banging weakly against the window with a set of bony fingers. “We have to get out of here, Kiera!”

As he looked into my face, my heart began to race in my chest as I recognised who it was staring back at me.

“Isidor!” I screeched.

But he was grabbed roughly away by someone or something on the other side of the door and was gone.

I clambered to my feet and rushed back to the door. Again I pressed my face against the glass and peered out into the darkness.

Someone appeared on the other side of the glass and met my stare with a set of cold, black eyes.

“I want to see my friend Isidor!” I shouted, banging my fists against the glass.

“Get back from the window!” the face ordered. “Go back to bed, Kiera Hudson!”

I stepped away from the door and made my way back to my bed – all the while, that face glaring at me from beyond the glass.

All of a sudden I felt incredibly thirsty – my throat felt dry. I desperately needed water.

The face at the window continued to watch me.

Any thoughts of Isidor faded and I just wanted to tell the face how thirsty I was and that I only wanted a cup of water, but no words would pass over my cracked, blistered tongue.

“Go back to bed!” the face screamed.

Pulling the blankets over my head I closed my eyes.

I forced my fingers between my lips and sucked them, hoping that this would moisten the inside of my mouth. But it wasn't water I wanted, it

was something else - warm and sticky that would not only quench my thirst, but sedate my hunger too. It was the red stuff I wanted. So with my fingers in my mouth, I began to chew. Slowly at first, just enough to draw some...

Chapter Five

...blood on my tongue and it tasted coppery. I woke suddenly and pulled my fingers from my mouth. The tip of my right forefinger was bleeding from around the edge of the nail. Sucking the blood away, I felt a woozy feeling wash over me, like I'd had too many glasses of wine.

My cell was cool and dark and a beam of blue moonlight shone through the square hole above me. Just like my dream, my throat was dry and sore again and my leg was throbbing, too. I picked up the dish with the water in it. Trembling, I brought it up to my mouth and took a sip.

It was then that I became aware of something or someone moving in the far corner of my cell.

"Who's there?" I croaked.

Silence.

Staring through the darkness, I watched the shape move along the far wall. Whatever it was, it was huge. Carefully placing the dish back on the floor, I shuffled away from the shape.

"What do you want?" I mumbled.

As if in response to my question, the shape made a woofing sound. The noise was deep and throaty and it made me shudder in fear.

It then began to move out of the shadows and come slowly towards me. I pressed myself against the rough stone wall, whining at the stabbing pain in my back and trying to make myself as small as possible.

It moved into the centre of the cell and stepped into the moonlight. It looked at me, its eyes sharp and clear. A huge, pink tongue snaked from its gaping jaws as it licked its own face.

I felt both petrified and in awe at the same time. Although it looked fearsome and deadly – the wolf now standing before me was magnificent. The moonlight shimmered off its fur and glittered in its piercing eyes. But the wolf just stood and stared at me. My heart thumped in my chest and I began to shake uncontrollably as I remembered now that I had seen such wolves before. They had been called the Lycanthrope - a group of serial killers dammed by God to walk the Earth half human/half wolf. *Seth! Jack Seth!* Was he here, too? No, he had escaped the caves and I closed my eyes as I saw Potter racing away from me up a long tunnel - screaming back over his shoulder that he would return for me. But just like Luke, where was Potter now? Why hadn't he come for me?

“Are you cold?” the wolf suddenly asked.

I sat feeling numb, too scared and shocked to reply.

The wolf stepped forward, its paws whispering against the stone floor.

“Are you cold?” the wolf asked me again.

On hearing it speak to me for the second time, I placed my hands over my ears and turned away.

“Why won’t you answer me?” The wolf pressed.

“Because you’re not really talking to me! I’m imagining it and if I answer you then that means I’m talking to a werewolf – a Lycanthrope – and that would mean the memories that I’m having are all true!” I shouted.

I heard the soft patter of its paws as it closed the gap between us. The wolf was so close to me now that I could smell and feel its breath against my cheek. Its breath smelled of raw meat – just like the meat I had eaten earlier. I didn’t want to think about that, not because it made me feel like an animal, but because if I thought about it, I would want more of it.

“But you can *hear* me, right?” the wolf whispered in my ear.

“Okay I can hear you – but you’re not really here - I’m imagining you!” I groaned.

Then, I felt something rough but wet run up the side of my face. I quickly turned to see the wolf slipping its pink, fleshy tongue back into its mouth.

“Imagine that, did you?” the wolf teased.

I wiped its spit from my face in disgust.

“Well?” the wolf asked me.

“Well what?” I whispered, reluctantly resigning myself to the possibility that the wolf was really there and *talking* to me.

“Are you cold?” the wolf asked again.

“No.”

“Then why are you shaking?”

“Because I’m scared,” I said softly.

“Scared of what?”

“Of you!” I told him.

The wolf tilted its head to one side as if genuinely puzzled. “Why are you scared of me?”

“Because you’re a Lycanthrope,” I said. “A werewolf - a *serial killer*.”

“But why would I want to hurt you?”

“Because that’s what werewolves do,” I said. “I’ve seen it with my own eyes - I’m starting to remember it.” And I was remembering. I could see how the Lycanthrope had deceived my friends and me, leading us into a trap beneath the caves that were hidden behind the Fountain of Souls.

“You’re not to be trusted.” I hissed.

The wolf made a woofing noise as if laughing at me. "If you are worried that I might eat you, then don't."

I dared to meet the wolf's stare and said, confused, "Why not? That's what you do, isn't it?"

"I only eat humans," he purred, "You're only half human - so you don't really count. You taste different."

"How would you know?" I asked.

He glanced down at the wound on my leg, and with a swish of his gigantic tail, he walked away and back into the shadows. I heard the sound of the cell door wail on its hinges as it was pushed open. For a moment there was silence, and then I heard the wolf speak again from the darkness.

"By the way," he said, "I'm Nik. It was good to have met you."

"Where am I?" I asked.

There was no reply, just the sound of the cell door closing on its rusty hinges behind him.

Curling up small, I nestled my head in the crook of my elbow. I closed my eyes and concentrated on the throbbing in my leg and wondered if it had been caused by Nik biting me. But I couldn't remember if he had. The pain in my leg had a rhythm to it - like a heartbeat. *Boom-Boom-Boom* I timed my breathing with the throbbing and then felt myself begin to drift off to sleep. As I did, I wished more than anything that I had my iPod with

me so that I could fall asleep listening to The Calling sing *Where ever you will go*, instead of the pain beating in my leg. Humming the tune softly, I drifted...

Chapter Six

“...out!” someone screeched.

I was standing in the middle of my room – the one with the bed and cold, sterile floor. Ignoring the screams, I continued to stand rigid - refusing and unable to move - staring at the little round window in my door.

“Please let me out of here!” the voice screamed again.

Just like Isidor’s voice had, these screams came in thin, shrill cries.

“You’ve got to let me out...” the voice screamed once more, but the screams were cut short – silenced – as if someone had placed their hand over the person’s mouth.

Now they were quiet.

I inched my way back towards the window and dared to peek out. This time there was light and I was peering down a long, white corridor. There were doors which were identical to mine at intervals down the length of each side.

Two men dressed in surgical scrubs and masks were struggling with a girl, and I guessed it had been she who had been screaming. The girl was

dressed in a white hospital gown.

She struggled with them, her arms and legs pin-wheeling as they tried to restrain her. Then suddenly my view of the girl was blocked by a face at my window.

Throwing my hands to my face, I screamed and stumbled backwards from the sudden apparition. The lower half of the face was covered with a blue surgical mask, but there was something about the eyes that peered at me from over the top of it. They seemed familiar.

“Get back from the door,” he said softly. “I promise no harm will come to you.”

Stepping away from the door, I stole one last glimpse over his shoulder and I could see the girl was still struggling with the men in the surgical scrubs.

The man pushed the door open and came inside followed by two others, one female, the other male. All of them wore surgical face masks and long, white lab coats.

“What do you want?” I asked, edging away and back towards my bed. “Keep away from me!”

“Just calm down,” the female said.

“I am calm, I just want to know what’s going on here!” I demanded.

Without answering me, the female produced a syringe from behind her back.

I looked at the needle and then at the covered face which looked vaguely familiar.

“You look tired, Kiera, we’ve got something here that will help you sleep,” the familiar-looking man said.

“I’m not tired!” I barked, screwing my fists together as if preparing for a fight.

They came towards me, the female holding the syringe above her head. The second male lunged at me and pushed me onto the bed, taking hold of my wrists.

I kicked out with my feet striking the approaching female in the stomach. She made a burping kind of sound as I knocked the wind from her. The syringe flew from her hand and somersaulted through the air. She spun around and chased after the syringe as it skidded away across the tiled floor.

“Goddammit!” she shouted. “Keep her still!”

Then, both masked males were pinning me down. The male who seemed familiar took hold of my arm and yanked up my sleeve, revealing veins which pulsated green and purple beneath my skin.

The female came back towards the bed with the syringe. When she was only inches from me, she looked at the male who held out my arm and said, “Keep her still, Doctor Hunt!”

Hearing the name Hunt, I glanced up at the masked face, but as I did, I felt a sharp scratch in the crook of my elbow. Looking down, I watched the female sink the needle into my flesh. Immediately, I began to relax and loosen, my eyelids becoming heavy and wanting to close.

Doctor Hunt gently laid my head onto my pillow and stepped away, where he stood looking down at me.

All I wanted to do was close my eyes, but I fought the urge to do so.

I stared past him to the corridor. The girl who’d been struggling with the men wasn’t fighting anymore. She lay on her back – face gleaming with sweat. Her eyes were open and staring at me, but they looked dazed and sleepy and I knew that they had injected her, just like they had me.

“Just let yourself sleep, Kiera,” Doctor Hunt hushed.

I stole one last look back at the girl’s face and my heart almost slowed to a stop as I realised that it was Kayla.

Unable to fight it any longer, my eyes closed, and before slipping into unconsciousness, I heard a scratching sound – like metal being scrapped across stone and as I...

Chapter Seven

...opened my eyes, I was startled to see that huge white paw snaking through the open hatch and dragging the remains of my food and water away.

“No!” I shouted, shaking the sleepiness from my head. “That’s my food and I haven’t finished with it yet!”

I lurched forward, but with my leg not yet fully healed, I fell and landed in a heap on the floor next to the hatch, which had now been hurriedly closed.

“Give that back! You can’t treat me like this!” I yelled. “I’m not an animal!” but all I could really think about was the loss of that red, bleeding meat. The thought of it being taken away from me filled me with panic.

The hatch was forcibly thrown open again and that big white paw shoved two more bowls of fresh food and water into my cell. Once again the food bowl was full of fresh flesh - *meat*. I waited for the paw to disappear and for the hatch to close, and then I took the bowls to the opposite corner of the room and began to eat.

I was so engrossed in ramming chunks of the raw meat into my mouth, that I hadn't been aware of the heavy footfalls outside my cell door. A set of keys jangled in the lock, and I looked up. The door was flung open and Phillips came striding in.

He eyed me with an air of superiority, and then sauntered forwards, his arms swinging loosely by his sides. He stopped only inches from me and I cradled the bowl nervously in my lap, fearing that he might snatch it from me. He glanced back at the doorway and I followed his gaze. On seeing the wolf standing there looking at me, I dropped the bowl from my hands and it clattered onto the stone floor. The wolf trotted towards me and I could see that its coat was a light grey colour with white flecks that made it look as if it were covered in a fine layer of snow. Its muzzle was black and its head was attached to a long, muscular neck.

The wolf stopped beside Phillips and sniffed the air around me.

"Hello, Kiera," the wolf said, releasing a hysterical little laugh that sounded almost human. Hearing that laugh reminded me of the nervous laugh my friend Sparky once had. I looked into the wolf's eyes as it stood on its hind legs and began to twist out of shape. It lurched forward as if in pain, grabbing its stomach and snapping its huge head from side to side. And then it almost seemed to shrink before my eyes. Its arms and legs grew shorter and its snout receded back into its face. The wolf's skin appeared to

blister and stretch as its hair began to shed like a moulting dog, revealing human-looking flesh beneath. With the last of the fur falling away, Sparky stood and looked down at me. Just like I'd always remembered him, the skin on his face was flushed with angry-looking spots, his glasses sat skew-wiff on the bridge of his nose and his hair was sleeked back and greasy.

“Where are my friends?” I snapped at him.

Ignoring my question, Phillips grunted and then said, “Show me the leg.”

I just sat there. Before I'd the chance to comply, Phillips impatiently grabbed hold of my right leg and pulled it towards him. I flew backwards and smacked my head against the wall behind me.

“Ow! That hurt!” I shouted.

“Silence!” Phillips warned, meeting me with his hard, red stare.

Sparky grinned and loomed over my leg.

As if I wasn't there at all, Phillips said to Sparky, “What do you think? Is the infection clearing up?”

Sparky glanced at me, then turned his attention to the cut that ran down my leg. Dropping to his knees, he jerked his head forward and rubbed his nose into the wound. I cried out in pain and disgust, not believing what I was seeing. He then ran his tongue down the length of the gash and it felt as if it was being cleaned with sandpaper.

“Get off me, you animal!” I roared and kicked him away.

Licking his lips, he looked away, seeming to savour the taste of my leg. “Mmm, I’m not too sure. Maybe we should get Doctor -” Sparky started.

“No! Not him!” Phillips growled. “Lame is no good to me. I need her to be healthy!”

I looked at the both of them as they stood and discussed me.

“Like I was saying,” Sparky said, “We should get her to the doc...”

“I don’t know if I can trust him,” Phillips said.

“But if the infection doesn’t clear up, then -” Sparky said.

“Then, what?” I asked, cutting over him.

“Then you will be put down,” Phillips barked.

“What do you mean, *put down*?” I asked, but I knew exactly what the Vampyrus meant.

“Destroyed,” Phillips replied. “Got rid of, killed...”

“You can’t just destroy me because I’ve got an infected leg!” I protested.

“You’re no good to us in this condition,” Phillips insisted, as he took hold of my leg again and yanked it from side to side.

“Well it won’t bloody get better if you keep prodding and licking it every five minutes!” I snapped.

“Just as feisty as ever,” Sparky grinned. “Lame or not, she still has that fighting spirit!”

Phillips grunted thoughtfully again and eyed me carefully as his wings flapped behind him. Then, without warning, he let go of my leg and slammed it into the floor. I shrieked in pain and fought the urge to puke as Sparky yelped in excitement.

“We’ll come back in a day or so and I’ll make my decision then,” Phillips said. Turning away, he headed back towards the door. Sparky grinned at me again then went after Phillips.

“What do you want from me?” I cried out in frustration and anger.

At the door, they both turned to face me.

“You’ll find out all in good time,” Phillips grunted as his turned-up snout twitched. “Just pray that leg of yours starts to get better.”

Sparky looked at my leg then back at me and said, “You’re useless to us with an infection and the only way of killing the infection will be by killing you.” He then licked his lips slowly and purposefully.

Slamming the cell door closed behind them, they left me alone again in my cell. I guessed that Sparky had once more changed back into a wolf as I sat and listened to the sound of his howling echoing off the stone walls outside. Throwing my hands over my ears, I fought back the tears that burned in the corners of my eyes.

Chapter Eight

I sat like a statue until the day grew dark outside. My leg still hurt and I continued to wonder where I was and what the Vampyrus and Lycanthrope had planned for me. What would be the point in killing me? Didn't they need me? Wasn't the whole point of this to extract my DNA somehow – for them to find a way of breeding more like me – more like Kayla and Isidor?

And then as if a bright light had been switched on inside my brain, I could see the girl in the room at the monastery – the one who looked like Kayla – the one Isidor had killed. But there had been something wrong with her. The girl in the room hadn't bred properly – there was something missing. Perhaps my DNA was the missing key? But they had me now – they could extract as much as they wanted. In my mind's eye, I could see the unfinished email that I'd read on the computer at the monastery. It had said something about me being delivered dead or alive. But delivered to who, and where?

To think of those things made me think of my friends - Luke and Potter. *Where was Luke now? Was he still alive? And why hadn't Potter come for me? Was he dead too?*

The only way to know for sure would be to get out of the cell and find out for myself.

But how?

I looked around my cell in the gloom of the dying light which spilt in through the square hole above me. Somewhere inside me, I knew that I used to be good at seeing things - like really *seeing* things, so I should be able to *see* a way out of my cell. Sitting back against the wall and taking a deep breath, I saw there were only three exits available to me.

Firstly, there was the most obvious – the cell door, but that was always locked. Secondly, there was the hatch that my food and water was pushed through – but the big white paw lived on the other side of it. And finally there was the square hole in the ceiling, but that was covered with wire mesh and well out of reach.

I sat and looked up at it and tried to work out if it were big enough for me to fit through. It was hard to tell from where I was sitting on the floor. It seemed so far away. But even if I could fit through it, there was all that wire mesh that would need to be removed, and I had no cutting tools, nor could I reach it. Even if I could, what would I find on the other side?

My mind see-sawed with a million questions and doubts. The whole escape idea seemed impossible – but what other options did I have? Phillips and Sparky would be back in a few days and I feared that if my leg were not healed, I was going to be in serious trouble. But then again – even if my leg did heal, what was it they had planned for me?

However impossible my escape seemed – I had to try something – I had to get out of my cell.

But if I left my cell – escaped from wherever it was they kept me, what would I do about the...the blood? How would I get more? To think of it again made me want it. So picking up the bowl, I closed my eyes, and put some of the flesh inside my mouth.

It was dark when the cell door creaked open and Nik came trotting in. He stood in the wedge of moonlight that illuminated the middle of the cell, and looked at me.

“I’ve brought you something,” he purred and then quickly turned away and disappeared back into the shadows by the door.

I could hear a scraping sound as he dragged something into my cell. Nik came walking slowly backwards towards me, pulling a chair between his wide jaws. He stepped into the pool of moonlight and let go. The chair

tipped over onto its side and the sound of it hitting the stone floor echoed off the walls like cannon fire.

“I thought you might like to sit on this, instead of being on the floor all of the time.”

I was momentarily touched by his kindness but then wondered if it was not some sort of a trick.

“Why?” I asked.

“It will be more comfortable,” he simply added.

Sensing my unease, Nik backed away from the chair.

I got up slowly and hobbled over to the middle of the room. I righted the chair and sat down on it. The chair wasn't particularly comfortable with four straight aluminium legs, a green plastic seat and cushioned back – but Nik was right, it beat sitting on that hard stone floor.

I looked at him, as he waited on the outskirts of the moonlight.

“Thank you,” I said.

There was an uneasy silence between us, as I sat on the cheap plastic chair and he stared at me. I eventually broke the silence.

“You're Lycanthrope, right? A werewolf?”

“Yes,” he said, sounding a little confused.

“So why did you struggle in here with that chair between your jaws when you could've simply done it in the form of a man?”

“I’ve been captured,” he said.

“So you’re a prisoner like me?” I asked him, shocked at the thought that perhaps there were Lycanthrope imprisoned here.

“Not that kind of *captured*,” he started to explain. “I’ve been captured in the form of a wolf, like frozen – stuck like this.”

“How come?” I asked, confused. “If I remember rightly – and to be honest I could be wrong, my memory seems a little fried at the moment - you can change form at will.”

“Not me,” Nik said, dropping to the floor by my feet and resting his giant head on his paws. “My father is punishing me and until I make amends – I’m stuck as the big-bad-wolf.”

“What did you do that was so bad?” I asked him.

“It doesn’t matter now,” he barked, his tail snaking back and forth across the ground. He licked one of his massive paws and then rubbed it softly over his face. Knowing that he didn’t want to talk about what it was he had done to be so cruelly punished, I changed the subject asking, “How did I come to be in this cell?”

“You were brought here with the others,” Nik replied, as he licked his paw again and started to wash his huge ears.

“Others?”

“A boy and a girl,” Nik said, looking at me from the floor.

“Isidor and Kayla!” I breathed, my heart starting to thump with excitement in my chest. “They’re here, you said?”

“Yes,” Nik woofed.

“You’ve got to let me see them!” I told him, getting up from my chair.

“Impossible,” Nik said and licked his long black snout.

“Why?” I pushed. “You have to let me see them.”

“I can’t do that,” he said.

“Why not?”

“If I were caught in here with you, I’d be...well, I’ve been punished enough don’t you think?” he said, flicking his tail from side to side.

“Are they okay?” I asked him, lowering myself carefully back onto my chair.

“They’re very much like you,” he said, looking at me with his yellow eyes that glinted in the shaft of moonlight.

“What’s that s’posed to mean?”

“They’ve been operated on.”

“Operated on!” I spat, getting up from my seat again and wincing at the pain in my leg and back.

“They’ve been tested...perhaps *operated* was the wrong word,” Nik said.

“But I’ve seen them in my dreams...nightmares,” I told him. “I saw Isidor and Kayla and they were in pain. They were screaming.”

“Are you sure they were nightmares?” Nik asked fixing me with his brilliant stare.

“Of course they were nightmares! I was in them. I was locked in a room that was similar to a hospital and I was wearing a hospital...” Then looking down at myself, I whispered, “...gown.”

Nik just looked at me, his tail swishing back and forth across the stone floor of my cell.

“Oh, my God!” I breathed deeply. “They’re not dreams or nightmares – they’re memories! All that stuff has really happened!” Then twisting around on the chair, I reached over my shoulder and touched the space between my shoulder blades. At once, pain exploded across my back and I snapped forward. I waited for the pain to ease but it never truly faded, so I touched my back again. With the tips of my grubby fingers, I could feel those little black bones sticking from my back as they twitched and wriggled like fingers.

Snatching my hand away, I yanked the hospital gown from over my head. Folding my arms over my breasts, I showed my back to the wolf and said, “What have they done to me?”

Nudging the metal bowl across the floor towards me with his snout, Nik said, “See for yourself.”

I crouched down, and picked up the bowl with my trembling fingers. Holding it in the air and slightly behind my left shoulder, I turned my head and peered at the reflection of my back in the shiny surface of the bowl. At once I dropped it, and it clattered to the floor, spilling what was left of the meat.

“No!” I whimpered at the sight of the cuts and gashes that covered my back. But it was the sight of those black bony fingers wriggling from the cuts that frightened me the most. They protruded from wounds that were bruised green and purple where they had been stitched together.

Pulling the hospital gown back over my head, I slumped back onto the chair and wrapped my arms around myself, rocking back and forth.

“Why are they doing this?” I whispered as tears fell onto my cheeks.

Ignoring my question, Nik stood up on his four muscular legs, and said, “Oh, I nearly forgot, I brought you something else.” I heard the sound of his paws padding against the floor as he headed back towards the door. He returned moments later pushing a book along the floor with his snout.

“I thought you might want to read this, you know, to relieve the boredom,” he said.

Numbly, I glanced down at the floor and at the book he had bought for me. I didn't say anything – I couldn't.

"I thought it might help you," he said, stepping out of the moonlight and heading back towards the cell door.

"Wait a minute...don't go!" I called out to him.

"What?" he woofed, from within the gloom.

"Where am I?" I asked softly. "You can at least tell me that."

"You're in a zoo," his voice floated back out of the darkness.

"A zoo?" I whispered. "What do you mean, *in a zoo*?"

"That's where animals are kept, isn't it?" he asked.

"I guess," I said numbly, not really taking in what he had just told me.

I don't know how long I sat there for, dazed and confused. But when I peered around the cell some time later, the werewolf had gone and my cell door was closed again. My skin had started to itch again and my stomach had started to flip and I knew what I needed to make those feelings go away. Glancing down at my feet, I could see the upturned bowl and the dirty strips of bloodied meat that had fallen from it. I picked it up with my filthy fingers and brushed away the dirt that had stuck to it from the cell floor.

Closing my eyes, I put the meat in my mouth and it tasted bitter and felt gritty against my tongue. Swallowing hard, I forced the raw meat down my throat. I sat on my chair, stinking and dirty with the taste of raw meat in my mouth, I shut my eyes and wondered if Nik hadn't been right after all. Perhaps I was an animal and deserved to be kept in a zoo.

Chapter Nine

Doctor Hunt came into my room at the facility - zoo? Again I felt incredibly tired and struggled to keep my eyes open, let alone focus in on him. It was like I was coming around from anaesthesia.

He came towards my bed, the lower half of his face covered with a blue surgical mask. There was something about him...perhaps it was his eyes and his jet-black hair that lay across his brow that made me think I had met him before.

“Do I know you?” I babbled, my mind feeling groggy and my lips opened and closed as if out of sync with my voice.

“I don’t think so,” he replied softly, picking up a book that he had brought into the room. He began to read.

My eyes closed again and I could hear Doctor Hunt reading ‘The Wind In The Willows’. My father had read the book to me as I child, and for a moment I could see myself nestled on his lap, my head resting against his chest and listening to the soft beating of his heart. I’d been about six then and I’d loved to hear about the adventures of Ratty, Mole, Badger and

Mister Toad. But I was older now – twenty – so why was Doctor Hunt reading this children's book to me?

Hunt's voice was soft and soothing, and I couldn't help but let my eyes slide close again. I listened to the story but there was something not quite right. Why hadn't he started reading the story from the beginning? Why had he started the story towards the end, where Mister Toad had been sent to prison and needed to escape?

I struggled to open my eyes again, but I managed to look past the doctor who sat beside my bed. He had left the door to my room open, and like Mister Toad, I knew I needed to escape. I raised my arm off the bed and it felt heavy and sluggish as if held down by a thousand weights. Pointing towards the open door, I...

...tipped forward and fell off the chair onto the hard stone floor. I wailed in pain as I landed awkwardly on my injured leg and back. I rolled onto my side and gripping my shin, I told myself never to fall asleep on the chair again. It was still night and pale blue light continued to slice my cell in two from above.

Looking up at the square hole then at the chair, an idea came to me. So, with the tips of my fingers, I positioned the chair directly under the hole. Using it as a crutch, I hoisted myself up and climbed on. I held the

back of the chair and pushed myself into a standing position, gingerly teetering on the foot of my good leg, being mindful not to put any weight on my bad leg.

Balancing like a tightrope walker, I slowly raised one arm above my head and reached up towards the hole. To my amazement and delight, I could reach it. I pushed my fingers through the wire mesh and felt the cool night breeze dance over them. The chair wobbled beneath me and I gripped onto the wire mesh as tightly as I could until I had regained my balance. Hovering on a chair on one leg wasn't easy, but at last I felt that perhaps there was a way out of my cell – some hope. I tugged on the mesh, but it was fixed firmly into the surface of the ceiling. Running my fingers around the inner edge of the hole, I could feel that the wire had been embedded into the plaster and concrete that went to make up the structure of the cell.

I clenched my teeth tightly together and yanked several times on the mesh, hoping it would come away, but however hard I pulled on it, the wire didn't budge. Unless I was mangled through a mincing machine, there was no way I was ever going to fit through the tiny holes that made up the mesh.

With growing frustration, I tugged on the wire one last time but in doing so I lost my footing and cartwheeled through the air, landing on the floor. There was an explosion of pain in my calf and I bit my arm to drown out the sound of my screams.

I lay on my side panting like a wounded animal.

“Let me out of here!” I screamed, in frustration, but my cries just echoed harmlessly off the walls.

I felt cheated and more frustrated than before. As I’d stood on that chair and poked my fingers through the holes, I felt for a moment that perhaps I could escape – perhaps I would be free. But the most infuriating thing about it all was that the only thing separating me from the outside world was a small square of wire mesh.

I pounded my clenched fists onto the floor and screwed up my eyes until I could see white spots dancing around on the inside of my eyelids. *I wouldn’t be beaten – not ever!* I told myself. I was Kiera Hudson – I could see things. Wasn’t I meant to be good at figuring things out?

“*We’ve been sent a right little Miss Marple, this time around,*” I heard Potter say inside my head, and it was almost as if he had whispered it in my ear. Hearing his voice like that just frustrated me even more. *Where was he?*

When my hands became numb from the constant banging against the cold, hard floor, I opened my eyes and looked across my cell at the upturned chair. It was then that I saw something; I could see my way out. It gleamed at me in the moonlight and I wondered if there could still be yet a glimmer of hope.

I crawled across the room to the upturned chair and inspected its legs. The base of each leg had been fitted with a silver-coloured cap – each one was the size of a £2 coin. I felt around the edge of the caps and found a small groove where each one had been fitted to the legs of the chair. I dug my fingernails into the groove and without too much effort, managed to prise one of the caps free. The inside of the chair leg was hollow.

Holding the cap in the palm of my hand, I could see that one side of it was concaved like a tiny dish. I tossed it up and down in my hand like a coin and looked up at the hole, grinning to myself.

Gritting my teeth against the burning sensation in my leg and the ache in my back, I pulled myself up onto the chair. Balancing again on one foot, I took hold of the wire mesh. With my free hand, I took the metal cap and began to chip away at the grey-coloured plaster that housed the wire.

To my delight, the plaster began to break away in tiny pieces and fall to the floor below. I scratched the cap against the edge of the hole again and more of the plaster began to crumble. It only broke away in minute pieces at a time, but it was something. I wondered how deeply the wire mesh went into the ceiling. If it was only an inch or two then it wouldn't take me too long – but if it went further than that, it could take me days – perhaps weeks - and that was time that I didn't have.

I reasoned that I could probably do with releasing the wire mesh on two sides. Once I had them free, I could bend it to one side and this would give me a big enough gap to climb through.

So without wasting any more time thinking about it, I put my plan of escape into action. For the rest of the night, I teetered to and fro on the chair as I hovered on one leg and chipped away at the ceiling. It took longer than I had originally thought, as I had to keep stopping to rest. It wasn't my leg which caused the problems, it was my arms and back. With one hand, I gripped the wire mesh and with the other I furiously scratched away at the plaster. With both arms constantly held above my head, they began to ache with numbness and tingle with pins and needles. When the pain became too much to bear, I'd carefully climb down and shake my arms.

As soon as I could feel them again, I climbed back onto the chair and started all over again. I worked through the night until I could see the first rays of sunlight fan across the morning sky above me.

I can't wait to be standing under that sun and feeling totally free! I thought to myself.

The urge to continue was strong, but it was light now and I might be seen and if I were to be caught now, I may never escape. So reluctantly, I climbed down from the chair and looked up at my handy work.

"Oh, shit!" I gasped.

All along one side of the square hole the plaster was broken and chipped. The wire mesh could now be clearly seen, where once it had been hidden. It would be obvious to anyone what I had been up to, should they glance upwards.

Frantically, I looked around the room and searched for anything I could use to cover the gaps and cracks with.

Kiera, how could you be such a dumb arse? I scolded myself.

Then I spotted my bowl of water and had an idea. I hobbled over to it and brought it back to the chair, mindful not to spill any as I only had a little left and I would probably need all of it for my plan. Placing it on the floor next to the chair, I turned to the book that Nik had brought me and froze, my hand hovering over it. Looking down, I could see that the book was *'The Wind in the Willows'*.

This was the book I remembered Doctor Hunt reading to me. But had he? Perhaps I had noticed the book when Nik had brought them into my cell and it had somehow worked its way into my dream. But if Hunt had really read this book to me – why had Nik brought it to me? Had it been by chance or a deliberate act?

I thumbed through the pages and looked at the wonderful illustrations inside. Running my fingers delicately over the pages, it pained me to carry out what I had planned.

Closing my eyes so I couldn't see those illustrations and the neat rows of printed words, I slowly began to rip out several of the pages. I then tore these into thin strips.

Opening my eyes, I looked down at these torn pieces of paper and cringed. I felt awful for destroying the book, partly because I knew books were precious – but more importantly, I got a feeling deep inside that this book had some significant meaning but I didn't have time to figure out what – it was just a strange feeling that I had.

The toad had escaped from his cell. He'd gained the sympathy of the jailer's daughter and she had disguised him as a washerwoman and helped him escape. But there was no jailer's daughter and definitely no disguises to be had.

So slowly, I gathered up the strips of paper and placed them into the bowl of water.

"Sorry Mister Toad," I whispered.

Once the paper was sodden, I squeezed the strips into several small, mushy pulps and climbed back onto the chair. With my thumb and fingers, I worked and moulded the wet paper into the cracks and holes that I had made during the night. I smoothed the paper over with the palm of my hand and blended it into the ceiling. When I was happy that I had filled in all the gaps, I climbed down off the chair and looked back up at the ceiling. The

colour of the paper didn't match perfectly with the colour of the ceiling, but it was close enough. I guessed it would fool the passing glance but perhaps not a careful examination.

As I stood and admired my cunning, I heard the rattling of keys in the lock of my cell door. I quickly looked about myself, just to make sure that I had covered all of my tracks. It was then that I noticed the mounds of chippings and tiny pieces of plaster, which had fallen from the ceiling and now covered the floor of my cell.

Chapter Ten

If these tiny pieces of plaster happened to be seen, it wouldn't take too long to work out where they had come from and what I had been up to.

The keys jangled in the lock and with my heart pounding in my chest, I looked down at the chair.

I love you Nik! I thought to myself as I turned the chair upside down, and I doubted he knew he had unwittingly provided me with the tools that I needed to make my escape. Scooping the plaster chippings together with my hands, I piled them all together. I gathered them into my fist, and then poured them into the hollow leg of the upturned chair. A few tiny pieces dribbled through my fingers and back onto the floor, but these were so tiny, I doubted they would have been noticed. I poured the last of the chippings into the chair leg, snatched up the silver cap and rammed it back into place.

Just as my cell door swung open, I righted the chair, scooped up '*The Wind in the Willows*' and pretended I'd been reading all along.

Phillips came striding into my cell, and I continued to read my book as if I hadn't noticed him. Slowly, he circled me, and although I was pretending he wasn't there, I knew he was looking at me.

"Who gave you the chair and the book?" he barked.

"A wolf," I said without looking up.

Without warning, he snatched the book out of my hands and tossed it across the room.

"Which wolf?" he roared so loudly, I nearly fell off my chair.

Guessing that Nik shouldn't have given me these items and not wanting to get him into trouble, I replied, "They didn't tell me their name."

"What did they look like?"

I met his gaze and said dryly, "Mmm...let me think about that...I guess they looked like a *wolf!*"

"Don't get smart with me, Hudson, or it will be the last thing that you ever do!" he grunted as he moved closer towards me.

"Well how am I supposed to know? As far as I'm concerned, wolves all look alike," I tried to explain.

"Well you're not keeping them," Phillips growled.

No! He can't take them away! What about my escape? I need them!

"Please don't take them," I said. "I hate sitting on the floor all the time – it's so uncomfortable."

“Tough luck,” Phillips snapped and pushed me off the chair with one shove of his claw-like hands.

I hit the floor hard and although my leg flared with pain, I noticed it was nowhere near as bad as it had been. But nevertheless, I gripped hold of it and screamed.

“Can’t you see I’m in pain?” I cried.

Phillips just stood over me and puckered his large fleshy lips.

“If I had somewhere comfortable to sit my leg might heal quicker,” I groaned.

Hearing this, he stared into my eyes and I saw a flash of something in them. It was as if I had said something that touched a nerve within him.

“The floor is hard and cold. How is my leg ever gonna heal if I’m lying on the ground all the time?” I told him.

I could sense that Phillips was thinking about this for a minute and then he said reluctantly, “Okay, you can keep it for the next few days, in the hope that it may aid your recovery. But if it doesn’t, I’m taking the chair back. Besides, if your leg hasn’t healed by then, you won’t be needing it again.”

On hearing this, I rolled over onto my side and rubbed my leg, “Thank you,” I said. “I’m sure it will help.”

Phillips just snorted in response and went back to the open door.

As he reached it, I called out to him and said, “What did you really come to my cell for?”

On hearing this, he stopped in the doorway and grinned at me.

“I came to tell you that you stink and it’s time for a wash!” He then disappeared into the corridor and as he went, I heard him say to someone or *something*, “She’s all yours!”

I looked at the open doorway as two Vampyrus appeared. It was only when I was hit in the chest with a powerful jet of water that I noticed the hosepipes in their hands.

The Vampyrus laughed between themselves as they hosed me down. The force of the water was so strong that it pushed me across the cell floor and into the wall. The water was freezing cold and tasted salty, like sea water.

Once they had their fun and games, they turned off the water and left me alone, wet and cold on my cell floor. I rubbed my hands up and down the length of my arms to dry myself. My hospital gown was soaked through and clung uncomfortably to me. Moving to the centre of the cell where the sun shone through the hole, I lay on my back and warmed myself in the pool of light. I looked up at the hole and smiled to myself.

So far so good! I’ll be out of here by the end of the week!

I knew that I would have to spend the next few nights chipping away, so I would have to sleep during the day to keep up my strength and give my leg a chance to heal. Phillips could open the zoo gates and give me an hour's head start, but if my leg was still infected, then any escape would be pointless as I wouldn't get very far.

The sunlight felt warm and soothing against my skin and as I drifted off to sleep I imagined that I was in a nice soft bed curled up under...

...the blanket. It felt safe under the blanket.

I could hear the sound of sobbing.

"Bring me blood!" someone cried from down the corridor outside my room.

There was the sound of keys rattling in a lock.

"Have you brought me some blood?" the voice gasped.

Even from my hiding place beneath my blanket, I could hear the desperation in the voice – it sounded as if they were going out of their mind with cravings. I pulled my blanket tighter over my head.

Then there came a scuffling sound in the corridor outside. I peeked over the top of my covers and could see shadows darting back and forth under the gap beneath my door.

“She’s gone,” I heard a voice say and I knew it was one of those doctors talking, their voices sounding muffled as it seeped from beneath their surgical mask.

Climbing from under my blankets, I swung my legs over the side of my bed and stood. Immediately, I grabbed hold of the mattress as my head swooned with a dream-like weightlessness. Composing myself, I inched my way towards the little window in my door.

I peered over the lip of the frame and watched as two of those doctors wheeled a stretcher from a room down the corridor and headed towards me. As they came nearer, I could see Kayla lying on her back, her head propped up against some pillows. Her lips were swollen and purple. But as they pushed her closer, I could see to my horror that her lips weren’t swollen and purple, they were covered in blood.

They paused outside my door and I ducked down.

“Kayla, what have they done to you?” I whispered.

Then they were moving again and I stood up and looked back through the window just in time to see Kayla suddenly reach up with one bony hand. It looked hot and clammy and her fingers were twisted like claws. She waved her hand in the air as if acknowledging me. But that was impossible, right? How did she know that I was there? It was as if she had

heard me whisper her name. And then the stretcher was gone and so was Kayla, as the doctors carried her away down the corridor and out of sight.

I crossed the room back towards my bed. Pulling the blankets back over my head, I closed my eyes again. I wanted to go to sleep and wished that I would never...

“...wake-up!” the voice said in my ear.

I peered through my half-closed eyes and stared into the face of Nik. The wolf was standing over me. The cell was in semi darkness, as the daylight outside began to fade.

“What do you want?” I groaned, my stomach aching and my skin feeling hot as my body started to crave the red stuff again.

“To say thank you,” he said softly.

“What for?”

“For not telling.”

I pulled myself up onto my elbows and winced. My bladder was full and I desperately needed to take a pee.

“What you talking about?” I mumbled.

“For not telling Phillips it was me who brought you the chair and book.”

“Oh, that,” I said, as I got to my feet. I gingerly placed my right foot onto the floor and waited for the explosion of pain, but it didn’t come. It still hurt and throbbed, but not as bad as before. My back continued to throb where I had been operated on, but it was bearable.

“Phillips was asking all sorts of awkward questions. He wanted to know which one of us it was,” Nik said.

“What happened?” I asked, as I placed the flat of my hand against my bladder.

“He said that if he ever found out who had been kind to the half-breed, he would rip their throat out,” Nik told me. “I’m going to have to be careful until Phillips has got everything sorted out.”

“Got what sorted out?” I asked him.

“I don’t know,” he told me.

“How did I know you were gonna say that?” I said dryly, looking over my shoulder at the hole in the ground. The urge to pee was gnawing away inside of me now and I didn’t know how much longer I could last.

“Are you okay?” Nik asked, looking at me with his yellow eyes.

“Yeah, I just need to pee.” I told him.

“Well go then,” he said. “What’s the problem?”

“You are,” I winced, as I tried to hold back.

“How come?”

“I’m not going in front of you,” I assured him.

“Why not?”

“What do you mean, *why not*? It’s private – that’s why!”

“How strange,” he woofed, and it sounded as he were laughing at me.

“Strange to wolves perhaps, but not to me. I don’t like to be looked at while I’m going, if you know what I mean.”

Nik turned away from me with a swish of his tail. “Happy now?” he asked.

“Not perfect, but better,” I said hobbling over to the hole in the ground. “Promise you won’t look?”

“I promise,” he replied wearily.

Hitching up my gown, I peered over my shoulder just to make sure I wasn’t being watched. Once I had finished, I turned round and made my way back to the middle of the cell.

“You can look now,” I told him and although he hadn’t watched me as promised, I still felt stripped away as if I had lost most of my dignity and I knew in my heart that I was living like an animal.

Turning around, Nik said, “I don’t know what all the fuss was about.”

“You wouldn’t understand,” I moaned, sitting on the chair.

“You’d be surprised how much I understand the situation you’re in,” Nik said, laying on the floor and resting his snout against his paws.

“What do you mean?” I asked him, his giant flanks easing in and out as he lay at my feet.

“I told you I’d been captured, right?” he said, glancing up at me. “It’s like I’ve been caught in a photograph – trapped in that pose forever – unless...”

“Unless what?”

“Unless I make amends...for my past,” he barked. “Until I do that I’m trapped in the guise of a wolf just like you’re trapped inside these four walls.”

“So if you make amends for whatever it is that you’ve done, the curse is lifted,” I said. “But where does that leave me? What do I have to do to get out of here?”

Nik lay still on the floor and I watched how his long grey fur shimmered in the cool breeze from above us. Then looking down at his paws, he said, “You can’t get out of here, Kiera; like me, you’re trapped.”

Glancing quickly up at the ceiling, I whispered, “What makes you so sure that I can’t get out of here?”

“You might think about escaping,” he said, still not looking at me, “but even if you did, you would only come back.”

“You’re kidding me, right?” I scoffed. “If I ever did get out of here, I couldn’t think of one reason that would entice me back to this filthy, godforsaken place.”

“I can,” he said.

“And what’s that?” I demanded.

“Human flesh,” he barked softly. “You’re an addict, Kiera.”

Hearing those words made my stomach somersault, but this time not with hunger of desperate cravings, but revulsion. In my heart, I knew that the raw meat that had been passed to me through the hatch had been human flesh, but in my head I had convinced myself that it had been raw steak or anything but human. But to hear it spoken aloud by Nik had pulled the curtain aside that I had so conveniently hung over what was really feeding my addiction.

Not wanting to reveal my own self-loathing and revulsion at what I’d been eating, I swallowed hard and said, “I could find more if I really wanted to.”

“Believe me, you really would want to find some more,” Nik woofed and looked up at me. “But human meat is in short supply in these parts.”

I shot forward in my chair and said, “How long has it been since you’ve seen a human?”

“Months,” he said, flicking away a swarm of flies with his tail.

“What, they’re all *dead*?” I asked, not believing what I was hearing.

“In this area, yes,” he replied. “I don’t venture out of the zoo much – but there is a town nearby to the east, its called Wasp Water. But all the humans there are dead.”

Hearing him say this upset me and made me fearful for what I would find if I ever managed to escape from my cell. But unwittingly, he was giving me information just like the jailer’s daughter had helped Mister Toad in *The Wind in the Willows*, and again I glanced down at the book where Phillips had tossed it. To know that the town of Wasp Water was to the east of the zoo told me that I was still in Cumbria in the north of England. Wasp Water had been one of the towns that Murphy had skirted us around on our way to the monastery, so I knew that I wasn’t far from the lake and the Fountain of Souls.

It wasn’t much, but it was something. It gave me some bearings – a direction to head in when I broke out of here. But if all the people were dead there, what would be the point? There would be shelter, cars, technology – anything that I might be able to use to get as far away from Cumbria as possible or at least tell the rest of the world what was really going on behind and beneath the Cumbria Mountains.

“So if all the people are dead in Wasp Water, where has the...the *meat* been coming from?” I asked him.

“The Vampyrus rounded up several hundred of them and they’re being kept here at the zoo in cages,” he said.

Hearing this reminded me of something my mother had said to me in my cell beneath the mountains. Hadn’t she said something about keeping humans like animals in factory farms?

“But you can’t keep people locked up in a zoo!” I hissed.

Looking at me with his yellow stare, Nik said, “It’s the only zoo in the world where the humans are the exhibits and the animals come to visit.”

“This isn’t some kinda joke, you know!” I yelled at him. “We’re talking about human beings!”

“Of which you’re not one,” he said, standing on all fours.

And every time someone or *thing* reminded me of that, my heart sunk a little bit deeper inside my chest and I couldn’t help but reach round and gently poke those bony black fingers that protruded from my back. They were my constant reminder that Nik was right. I was fast losing my human side, and becoming just like them – an *animal*. But that didn’t mean I had to behave like one of them. No longer was I going to eat that meat they pushed through the hatch at me. I wouldn’t have another mouthful even if it meant killing me.

With a swish of his tail, Nik headed towards the cell door.

“What’s going to happen to me?” I called after him. “What’s going to happen to Kayla and Isidor?”

“If Phillips has his way, you and your friends will all soon be dead.” Then Nik was gone, disappearing beyond the door and leaving me alone again.

Chapter Eleven

“*Dead!*” I yelled at the closed door. Lashing out in frustration, I kicked the chair across my cell. Immediately my leg roared in pain and I dropped to the floor and held my shin.

My desire to escape was even stronger than ever and I looked up at the hole above me. I couldn’t believe that the world just outside its walls was now being run by a bunch of talking animals who intended to kill me and my friends. I needed to find out for myself if it were all true. Finding myself locked up with the Vampyrus and Lycanthrope was enough to drive anyone insane – but to think that my friends might soon die on the strength of my scabby leg – that was more than I would or *could* comprehend.

The pain in my leg began to ease, so I shuffled across the floor to the chair. On the way, I noticed that a fresh bowl of food and water had been placed by the hatch and I guessed the paw had put it there while I had been sleeping earlier. I stopped long enough to devour half of the water, leaving some to aid me with my escape later. Looking down at the bowl of meat...flesh sitting in its bloody puddle, I reached out for it. But the images

of people locked up in cages, being taken away and butchered to feed my cravings was enough to make me push the bowl aside. Even though I turned away, in the back of my mind, I knew that it was there, red and ripe and succulent.

“Stop it!” I hissed out loud as my stomach began to knot, my throat turning dry and my skin beginning to prickle with heat.

“I won’t eat it!” I seethed.

Knowing that I had to stop thinking about the meat, I pulled the chair across the floor and stationed it under the hole. I tipped it up and removed one of the caps. I was mindful not to use the same cap from the previous night, as that leg was now full of the debris I had hidden in there.

Carefully, I climbed onto the chair and hoisted myself up. I removed the paper that I had put in place and began to scrape away at the edges of the hole.

Throughout the night I worked, stopping every so often to rest my aching arms and sip some of the water I had saved. I figured that I possibly had only one more night after this before Phillips came for me. I really needed to be in a position to make my escape before first light of the following day.

But what about Isidor and Kayla? I wondered. I had to take them with me. There was no way I was leaving them in the zoo. And what about Luke? Where was he? Then, remembering how he'd looked on the floor of my cell beneath the mountains, I feared that he might not be alive anymore. Not wanting to think about that, I pushed those pictures of his battered and cut body from my mind and focused on my escape.

Once out of the cell where would I go? I wondered.

I had no idea of my exact whereabouts in the zoo, but I reckoned that if I could at least find my way to the main entrance, I'd stand a good chance of escaping. I doubted that the animals would have locked the main gates. If what Nik had told me was true about there being no more humans other than me, Isidor, and Kayla, then the animals would have no reason to keep the gates shut – they could come and go as they pleased in their new world.

“But you're not one of them!” I heard Nik say in my head.

But I was human – in part at least- the better part. I'd always believed myself to be human and I wasn't going to stop believing that now. I feared that if I did, I would never get that half of me back. There was no way I was going to live like an animal, behave like an animal and eat like one. I was going to get out of this cell, out of this zoo and take my friends

with me. *I'm Kiera Hudson.* I kept telling myself that over and over again in my head. I had to keep hold of that – I had to keep hold of me.

But once I had escaped from my cell, what then? How would I find Kayla and Isidor? I didn't have the answer to that. But nevertheless, I kept chipping away at the concrete around the wire mesh above me. I had to keep going, I had to keep thinking, planning as it took my mind off that bowl of red stuff that my stomach was now aching for, my throat was thirsty for.

Keep planning Kiera – keep thinking ahead, I told myself.

I'd already decided that once I was out of the zoo, I would head straight for the town of Wasp Water. I would be in familiar territory then – *human* territory. There would be a million and one places for Kayla, Isidor, and me to hide.

What about food? a little voice spoke up from within side me, and I glanced down at the red stuff. *Just one little bite wouldn't...*

There would be shops. The shelves would be stacked with cans of food – *normal* food. The cans would probably still be in date as they lasted for years. I would be able to find clothes and shoes in disused department stores. We would be alright.

Then what?

With sweat running off my brow into my eyes, the cravings for the red stuff in the bowl gnawed away at my insides. My stomach was beginning to cramp in sharp violent spasms, and several times I had to stop chipping away at the concrete to lean forward and double up until the pain passed. My throat felt as if it was on fire, but I couldn't even quench it with the water as I would need that later. Mopping my feverish brow with the sleeve of my hospital gown, I reached up and continued to scrape away the ceiling around the wire mesh.

By daybreak, I had completely removed the plaster around one entire edge of the mesh. I poked and pulled at it with my fingers and yanked it free. The wire gave under the strain and bent downwards revealing a gap big enough for me to put my arms through.

The urge to carry on throughout the day was overpowering, as the smell of freedom now seemed intoxicating. It was so strong that it even masked the stench from that hole in the corner of the cell, which I had been using as my toilet. But I had to be focused. If I were to be caught now, I would certainly never be given the chance to escape again.

So I climbed down from the chair, piled up the loose chippings and poured them into the hollow chair leg and replaced the cap. The hole in the ceiling was now twice as large as the one I had made the previous night and

would definitely be noticed by any one of the animals that came into my cell.

Reluctantly, I ripped some pages from my book – or perhaps it was my escape manual? I worried that if Phillips, Sparky, or Nik happened to pick up *‘The Wind in the Willows’* they would notice that the pages had been torn out.

Once I had ripped the pages into strips, I placed them in what was left of the water and filled in the gaps above me. When I had papered over the last of the cracks, I climbed off the chair and looked up. The paper was a different shade to the ceiling and it did look more obvious than the papier-mâché I’d created the night before. I now had to cover a larger area with it. Screwing up my eyes, I squinted up at my handy work, and like that it didn’t look too bad. It looked like a big damp patch. That was the best I could do in these circumstances and I just prayed that none of my captors noticed it.

Confident that I’d hidden every trace of the work I’d carried out overnight, I curled up in the corner of my cell and closed my eyes. My stomach ached, and I felt as if I was going to be sick. My skin felt hot and clammy. I knew that I could make the pain go away and I looked over at the bowl that sat by the hatch. Turning away, I tried not to think about that red sticky meat and my head raced with thoughts of escape. Over and over

again, I tried to plan for every conceivable outcome – but at no point did I ever consider failure – because for me, that wasn't an option.

The thought of being free of this stinking cell, to be wearing clean clothes, and to sink into a nice warm bath was overwhelming. I imagined walking free along a beach, with waves crashing up onto the shore and I could smell...

Chapter Twelve

...disinfectant. I knew it was disinfectant that they were spraying up and down the corridor outside because it wafted through the gaps beneath the door. It smelt bitter and it made my nostrils sore and my eyes sting.

Doctor Hunt sat beside my bed and read from a book. Mister McGregor was chasing a rabbit named Peter through the vegetable patch. Peter Rabbit was trying to escape!

With bleary eyes I studied Doctor Hunt's face, well the top half, as he continued to hide the lower part of his face behind that blue surgical mask.

His eyes looked older somehow as if since his last visit to my room much time had passed. Nets of wrinkles were engraved around the corners of his eyes and I was sure that they hadn't been there before. The Doctor's usually jet-black hair was now spattered with flecks of grey and his hands looked boney and worn as they curled around the edges of the book that he held in his lap.

"Have you gotten older?" I mumbled feeling half asleep.

Doctor Hunt closed the book and looked at me.

“No,” he replied softly. But even his voice had sounded different, and I realised that it was worry – fear – in his voice that I could hear and see in the wrinkles around his eyes.

“How long have I been here?” I asked.

“Two months,” he whispered and glanced over his shoulder at the door to my room, as if making sure that it was closed.

“What’s wrong?” I asked, sensing his fear.

Hunt looked at me and his eyes smiled, but his look was insincere and hid his true feelings.

“I’ve performed a miracle, Kiera,” he whispered, snatching another quick look back over his shoulder.

“What sort of a miracle?” I asked him, my foggy mind trying to make sense of what he was telling me.

“You’re my miracle,” he said. “They brought me here to finish off the work that Doctor Ravenwood and I started on a cure for the half-breeds – to help them survive and live past the age of sixteen. You, Kayla, and Isidor are the only known half-breeds that have lived past that age.”

“So what’s the miracle?” I asked him, fighting to keep my eyes open.

“I cracked the code!” he whispered with excitement. “I’ve found the cure!”

“But that isn’t a miracle- that’s a curse,” I told him, my speech starting to slur. “The Vampyrus will now be able to breed their army of half-breeds. I saw one, it looked like Kayla...”

“But I haven’t given the Vampyrus the correct code. It works to a point, but it will never produce the perfect half-breed – not like you, Kayla, or Isidor. They will grow weak, become ill, and die.”

“How come?”

“You were bitten on the leg by one of those murderous Lycanthrope,” Hunt said. “The wound has become infected and spread throughout your system. Your leg will eventually heal – your immune system will fight off the infection. But I tweaked the DNA code that Phillips has, so in the half-breeds that they manufacture, the virus will slowly take over their system and kill them.”

“But isn’t Phillips going to figure out at some point that you’ve deceived him?” I asked.

“Not for a while,” he said, “and by the time they do, it will be too late – I’ll be dead.”

“Dead?” I breathed.

“I know what the Vampyrus have planned for me once they think my work is complete,” he said matter-of-factly.

“So why didn’t you just drag out your work?” I asked. “You could have made your research last for years.”

“The work was too important for me and Ravenwood not to finish,” he said. “Remember, it’s a cure for those future half-breed children that are born, and there will be more, Kiera.”

“But let them kill you?” I yawned, fighting the meds that I’d been given. “You could escape.”

“Ravenwood tried that with half of the completed code. Although the Vampyrus believe that they have the complete code, we separated the original,” he explained. “I don’t know how far Ravenwood got, I’ve not seen or had word from him since, but I’m certain he managed to hide his half of the code somewhere safe.”

“How can you be so sure?” I asked him.

“Because if Phillips had captured Ravenwood with anything that looked remotely like a DNA code he would have known that we were trying to deceive him,” Hunt said.

“So where is the other half?” I said, staring at him through my half-closed eyes.

“I’ve given it to someone,” he replied, glancing back over his shoulder again.

“Who?” I asked, feeling more confused than the drugs were making me.

“I knew I had to give it to someone,” he said. “Someone I could trust – someone I knew who would have the sight to find a way to escape these Vampyrus.”

“Who?” I asked again, wanting to hear their name before I lost consciousness again.

“I’ve given it to you, Kiera,” he said. “You have it.”

“What...where?” I slurred.

“I’ve written it amongst the pages of this,” he said, holding up the book, ‘The Wind in the Willows.’

Seeing the book in his hands...

...I woke up and crawled over to the hole in the floor and was sick.

I tried not to breathe in the stench that wafted throughout my cell from the hole. But it wasn’t the smell that made me throw up, it was the agonising cramps in my stomach and the cool, feverish sweat that covered my skin that made me feel ill. It was my cravings for the red stuff and I didn’t know if I could hold out.

I had to!

I felt dirty and I smelled, too. The hosing down the Vampyrus had given me had only freshened me up – it hadn't been a proper wash, not like relaxing in a hot bath with mountains of frothy bath suds while listening to my iPod.

Vomit swung from my chin and I knocked it away with the back of my hand. Standing, I crossed my cell to the chair. I was no longer hobbling and my leg was beginning to feel stronger. My hair was matted and I tried to drag my fingers through it, but it was impossible. The '*Wind in the Willows*' lay open on the dusty floor, and I looked down at the torn pages. In my dream – *memory* – Doctor Hunt had told me that he had written his half of the code in the book. But if he had, how much of it had I ripped out, mashed-up into a soggy-pulp and filled the holes in the ceiling with? Reaching down, I picked-up the book and thumbed through the pages. Sweat ran from my brow where I was burning up with fever, dripping like rain drops onto the pages. Squinting, I looked down at the book but couldn't see anything that looked like handwritten code amongst what was left of the pages. To be honest, I didn't even know what I was looking for. What did DNA code look like anyhow? My cravings were what mattered and they felt all-consuming. But something inside of me, the part of me – Kiera – that was still holding on told me that the code was the most important thing.

If discovered by Phillips and this *invisible man*, it would be used to breed more of those half-breeds and their special gifts would be used to destroy...

Dropping the book, I staggered over to the hole in the floor again and gagged as more sickness gushed from the pit of my stomach, up my throat, and into the hole. It burnt my mouth like acid, and it came out in thick, black, ropey streams.

Just have some of that red stuff, a voice whispered in my ear. *Go on, just a bite, you'll feel so much better.*

At first I thought it was that other part of me, the Kiera that wanted to give up and make the pain go away. But then I realised it was the voice of my mum talking inside my head, and I pushed the sound of her voice away.

Covering my ears with my hands, I rocked backwards and screamed, "No! I won't eat that shit!"

"Go on," my mum's voice whispered inside my head. *"The red stuff will take the pain away."*

"But it's not just *red stuff* you want me to eat!" I screamed until my throat felt raw. "It's human flesh and I won't have anymore!"

Then her voice was gone – like a fine mist lifting away as the sun comes up.

Looking up at the square hole, I took comfort in the knowledge that in the early hours of tomorrow morning, I would be disappearing through it. I'd be getting away from this filthy, stinking cell, away from this zoo. This time tomorrow, Phillips would come to my cell and find me gone.

Through the hole I could see that it wasn't yet night, but the moon would only be a couple of hours away. I got a jittery feeling knowing that this would be my last night in the zoo.

What about Kayla and Isidor? I wouldn't leave without them. I needed a plan – but I couldn't think. It was like the pain in my stomach was stopping me from focusing, from *seeing* what I needed to do. Rolling over onto my side, I noticed that a fresh bowl of food – *red stuff* – and water had been placed in my cell and I wondered what type of creature that big white paw belonged to.

A polar bear?

Did they have polar bears in the zoo? I wondered. Why not? They seemed to have every other type of animal. I crouched down on my haunches and realising that this would be the last time that the paw would shove me my food through the hatch, I lent close to it and shouted:

“Thank you, white paw, for all of my food!”

I listened for any sort of a reply but there was nothing. A growl would have done.

What was I doing? What was I thinking of?

Why was I even concerning myself with what type of creature had been shoving that red stuff through the hatch? Why was I thanking them? They hadn't been doing me a favour – helping me out in some way. They were no more than helping feed my addiction. They were a part of all of this. And I knew, somewhere behind the pain that I was in, I was going mad – losing sight of escaping from my cell and fighting the cravings that I'd had since eating that flesh for my mother. But I hadn't eaten it for her – I'd eaten it for Luke. Where was he now? By eating it, had I saved him?

I looked at the bowl of meat sitting in a pool of black blood. Trembling all over, I reached out and touched it with the tips of my filthy fingers. The meat felt warm and moist and I just wanted to snatch it up and ram it into my mouth. To tear it into pieces with my teeth, taste the blood on my tongue and let it sooth my burning throat. With tears running down my cheeks, I stretched out my fingers and pushed the bowl away. Turning towards the water, I cupped it in my shaking hands and raised it to my cracked lips. I poked my tongue from my mouth and licked at the water and it felt cool and wonderful. Sitting on the floor of the cell, I sipped at the water, and let it wash over my tongue and down the back of my throat.

“Save some!” The Kiera that still wanted to escape said in my ear.
“You might need it to soak the pages of the book in.”

“But I need those pages,” I whispered aloud. “It has a secret code written on them.”

“Save it – you’ve got a long night ahead of you and you need to be strong,” the other Kiera said.

I took the bowl from my lips, and placed it back on the floor. I couldn’t help but notice how the water looked so nice as it sloshed against the side of the bowl.

Trying not to think about the water and the other stuff – the red stuff, I thought of Nik and I wondered how nice it would have been to see him before I made my escape. I secretly hoped that he would come before nightfall. Although I had found him frustrating at times, he had been a friend to me.

Then as if my prayers had been answered, there was the sound of keys rattling in the lock and the door was slowly swung open. Glancing up, I hoped to see my friend. Instead, with what little strength I had left, I edged myself away from the door as Phillips and Sparky came towards me.

Chapter Thirteen

I scrambled onto my chair as Phillips strode in with Sparky beside him. Both were in human form. Phillips wore a black shirt that was open at the throat, and I could see the scars that ran down the length of his face and neck. They still looked raw in places, pink and mauve and I remembered how I had watched from high up in a tree in St. Mary's graveyard as Potter had attacked him. That night seemed like years ago now. They circled me a couple of times, I noticed Sparky sniff the air as if his Lycanthrope instincts simmered beneath his Human form.

Phillips stopped in front of me and asked Sparky, "How's her leg healing?"

Sparky came forward, crouched down, and rubbed his nose into the scabs that had now completely formed over the wound. He then ran his tongue up the length of it. He smacked his lips together and then turned to face Phillips.

"I think her leg has more or less healed," he said.

"Are you sure?" Phillips asked, with a tinge of excitement in his voice.

“She’ll be good enough,” Sparky smiled at Phillips.

“I am right here, you know,” I said.

Without warning, Phillips pushed me from my chair and sent me sprawling across the floor.

“What was that for!” I yelled.

Phillips came slowly forward and towered over me.

“Who gave you the book?” he asked, his black eyes boring into mine.

“I told you, I didn’t catch their name,” I protested.

“Liar!” Phillips roared. Sparky almost seemed to giggle behind him.

Phillips reached out and picked up *‘The Wind in the Willows’* and flicked through it. I nervously glanced up at the ceiling. Sparky caught my stare and I immediately looked back at Phillips. His long, bony fingers were methodically turning the pages, and then they stopped. He slowly raised his head and looked at me.

“There are pages missing,” he grunted. “Why have you ripped pages from the book?”

My mind raced and the pain in my stomach grew worse and it felt as if my innards were being ripped from me. I had to think of something and quick. Then looking up at him, I winced and said, “Well what do you expect when you don’t provide any toilet paper? What am I meant to do?”

Phillips eyed me suspiciously, and then said, “You’re a savage!”

“Why don’t you get laughing-boy over there to go check out the hole?” I said with as much confidence in my voice that I could muster.

“He’s obviously got an *amazing* sense of smell!”

Phillips glanced at Sparky who seemed to have lost his sense of humour all of a sudden.

“Aw, Phillips you can’t be serious?” Sparky barked.

Then looking back at me, Phillips said, “I’m taking the book.”

“No you can’t...” I started to protest, but then I realised that I didn’t actually need it to assist my escape anymore, as I would be gone tonight and they would discover the hole tomorrow anyway. But if my dreams – *memories* – were true, the book had some deeper meaning – it had a code hidden within its pages.

Seeing my distress, Sparky began to chuckle again, and if I hadn’t of needed all of my remaining strength for what lay ahead of me that night, I would have punched him straight in his fucking face.

“Tell me who brought the chair or I’ll take that as well,” Phillips said.

A surge of panic now swept through me, as I knew that without the chair my escape would be over.

“I don’t know their name,” I tried to convince him.

“This is your last chance! Tell me their name or the chair goes!”

Phillips warned.

I looked at him and I knew that he meant every word. But I remembered Nik had told me that if he’d been discovered bringing me the book and chair, Phillips would have ripped his throat out.

“They never told me their name!” I shouted.

Phillips looked at me then turned and snatched up the chair.

“No!” I yelled. “You said I could use it to help heal my leg. Don’t you need my leg to be better?” I pleaded.

Phillips turned at the cell door and grunted.

“Your leg is good enough for what I have planned for you!”

Sparky then turned, produced a large broom from the corridor outside and threw it at me.

“And clean this cell – it’s disgusting!”

“You clean it, you piece of shit!” I shouted.

Phillips slammed the cell door shut, taking my chair and my chance of freedom with him.

“No! Bring them back!” I screamed. But it was no good, from within my cell I could hear Phillips stomping away down the corridor, Sparky chuckling insanely beside him.

I got to my feet and limped over to the cell door. I banged on it with my fists and roared over and over again.

“Let me outta here! I’m not an *animal* – it’s you who should be locked up in here, *not me!*”

I slid down the door and settled on the floor, rolling into a ball. I looked up at the ceiling and wiped away the hot tears that ran down my dirty cheeks. The last shards of daylight shone through the square hole and I knew that my escape was over. The thought of spending the rest of my life locked in a zoo terrified me and I knew that the thought of escape was the only thing that had kept me going over the last few days. Now that had been taken away from me, I didn’t know how I would get through tomorrow – let alone a life time of captivity. And what about the book with the code? He had taken it.

What was it that Phillips had in store for me? I wondered.

Tomorrow morning he would come for me and the thought of that moment filled me with dread.

I rolled onto my back and looked up at the square hole and the wire mesh. Over the last few days, as I had toppled on the chair, frantically scratching away the plaster, freedom had seemed so close – but it was something I now believed I would never have.

Closing my eyes, I pictured lakes, forests and mountains. I imagined running towards them, feeling the sun on my face, the rain on my skin, the wind tugging at my hair and the...*broom!* My mind screamed at me suddenly.

I can use the broom that Phillips gave me to get out of here!

Clambering to my feet, I snatched it up from the floor. I looked up at the square hole and could see only blackness outside. There was no moon tonight and I was grateful for that, because tonight I was going to escape and the darkness would hide me.

Taking hold of the broom firmly in my hands, I raised it above my head and began to jab away at the pages from the books that I had pressed into the holes. The paper began to fall away in large chunks and land on the floor of my cell. I continued to prod away at the papier-mâché until I had broken it all free.

Once I could see the edges of the wire mesh, I worked the handle of the broom under it and pulled it loose. The edge of the mesh hung down like a drooping lip and I turned the broom over and worked the head of it between the edge of the wire and the hole. I yanked on the broom and bent the wire mesh back on itself, so there was a gap. Standing back, I looked up at it, but could see that it still wasn't quite big enough for me to squeeze through.

If only I had that chair with its little silver caps for just one more night, then I would have been able to have scraped away enough of the plaster to release one more side of that wire mesh. But I hadn't one more night – I only had tonight and I would just have to improvise and make the best of the broom.

Then, I heard a growl come from behind the hatch. I froze in the darkness, my heart racing against my chest.

The paw never bought food at this time of day – it had always been early morning!

Maybe it had heard the sound of the broom banging away at the ceiling – perhaps that was what had roused its attention. I listened intently and I could hear whatever it was moving about outside the hatch. Pulling the broom away from the hole, I quickly swept the pieces of paper into the corner of the room and lay down on top of them.

I lay in the dark and waited. The paw beyond the hatch – if that's what it was – continued to move about, woofing and barking into the night.

What was it doing?

Maybe I had been discovered and it was signalling for Phillips to come quickly to my cell. Then I could hear movement in the corridor outside, there was an animal out there and it was coming towards my cell. I

lay as still as I could, hoping that if it was Phillips and he did look in to check on me, he might think that I was asleep and leave me alone.

But what about the hole?

I opened my right eye and peered up at it. The wire mesh hung down, bent and twisted out of shape.

Anyone would notice it – even a dumb Vampyrus!

Then the sound of scraping against rust filled my cell as the black iron door was swung open.

Chapter Fourteen

Nik came sauntering silently into my cell; the only sound he made was the soft whisper of his paws upon the ground.

“What do you want?” I asked impatiently. I didn’t mean to be rude, but I was burning up with fever, my stomach was cramping and I didn’t want my escape delayed.

“That’s nice,” he woofed. “I risk everything to come and see you every night and that’s the thanks I get!”

“Why do you bother then?” I asked, as I continued to lay motionless on top of the pieces of paper.

“Because I’m curious,” he purred again.

“About what?”

“You!”

I looked up at the hole and could see that he was standing directly beneath it. If Nik stayed there, I doubted he would notice it.

“Look Nik, I don’t mean to be rude – but I think you should go,” I told him. “I’m already in enough trouble with Phillips and if he finds you in

here – we’ll both get it!”

“Where’s your sense of fun?” he asked.

“Sense of fun?” I asked disbelievingly. “I lost my sense of fun months ago,” and I thought of how much life had changed since arriving at The Ragged Cove.

Nik came closer, stepping from under the hole above him. I looked up and then quickly back at Nik. He came closer still and then to my surprise, he nuzzled his head against my cheek. His fur was smooth like silk and as soft as pillows.

“I know what you are going through, Kiera. I know what it feels like to be trapped behind bars all day, unable to run free,” he whispered into my ear. “Your prison is made of stone walls, mine is the coat of fur.”

“What are you really like?” I asked him, trying to keep his attention so he didn’t look up at the great gaping hole above.

“What do you mean?” he asked.

“You’re a Lycanthrope, right?” I asked. “So what do you look like when you’re not masquerading as a wolf? How old are you?”

“I’m sixteen-years-old,” he said, fixing me with his piercing yellow eyes. “I stand about six-foot-seven in height. I have blonde hair and am quite scrawny.”

It was hard for me to picture Nik as he described himself when not shaped as a wolf. It was hard for me to believe that he could look human at all as I'd only ever seen him as a wolf. But to think that there was a person beneath the thick coat of grey fur, made me feel sad for him. Like he said, he was trapped too.

"What was it that you did which was so terrible that you've been trapped?" I asked him, and this time I wasn't asking because I wanted to distract him from the hole in the ceiling – I really did want to know.

"I can't tell you that," he said.

"Why not?"

"What I did is too terrible to speak of," Nik barked at me, then with a swish of his giant tail, he slumped to the ground. "But I have cravings just like you do, Kiera. I understand your suffering – you want that flesh in the bowl over there as much as I want to rip your throat out."

"Rip my throat out?" I breathed, and if it wasn't for the fact that I was hiding the mashed-up pages of that book beneath me, I would have leapt to the other side of the cell.

"But it's more than just wanting to rip your throat out," he explained, never taking his bright yellow eyes off mine. And just like I'd stared into Jack Seth's eyes, I could see glimpses of Nik's true intentions. In those snapshots, I could see him hurting me – but it was more than just

hurting me. He was torturing me, slowly and deliberately. He had me caught in his trance, and although my pain and suffering was unbearable, I couldn't help but tell him how much I needed him, wanted him. And even though in those glimpses I was bleeding and close to death, my whole being yearned for him.

Then those nightmarish images were gone, and Nik had broken my gaze.

“See, Kiera, I'm nothing more than a killer,” he growled. “And like you, fight the urge to run to that flesh over there and devour it, I fight the desire to do all of those things to you that you've just seen in your mind's eye.”

“What would happen to you if you did?” I asked him, my heart racing in my chest.

“Just like if you ate that flesh over there, you'd be lost to yourself forever. With each mouthful you would become like those other Vampyrus – Phillips and your mother – feeding off humans and creating vampires for the rest of eternity,” he explained. “And if I were to murder you now, pleasure myself – the pleasure would only be short-lived as my father's curse would only embed itself deeper into my soul.”

“Can the curse be lifted?” I asked him.

“Like your curse, Kiera, it can only be lifted if you beat your cravings for flesh,” he said, “and mine will be lifted when I’ve beaten my cravings to murder and kill.”

“So that’s what all this is about?” I asked him. “You bringing me the chair, the book – being kind to me. It’s your way of redeeming yourself somehow?”

“It’s more than that,” he said, still unable to look at me. “You don’t know how much I want you, Kiera. Of all my victims, none have enticed me as much as you. To be in your presence drives me half crazy – I’ve never taken a half-breed before. The others have all been human. But with you, there is something different and it makes my heart race and fills me with nerves, anger, hatred; but most of all, desire. To be with you is overwhelming and every fibre of my being is screaming at me to take you – ravish you. So if I can fight the cravings that I have for you, then I can beat this – I can stop being a killer.”

Then, looking down at the large, black scab that covered my shin, I said, “But it was you who bit me, right?”

Looking at me he said, “Yes, it was me – but it’s not what you think.”

“So you just bit a lump out of my leg for fun?” I hissed.

“Doctor Hunt got me to do it,” Nik barked at me.

“Doctor Hunt?” I said, not believing what I was hearing.

“It has something to do with a code and that book I brought you,”
Nik said.

“I don’t have the book anymore,” I stressed. “Phillips has taken it.”

“That doesn’t matter,” Nik woofed at me.

“But the code is in it!”

“No, its’ not,” Nik said, looking straight into my eyes.

Breaking his stare in case I succumbed to him, I said, “But I remembered Doctor Hunt telling me that he’d hidden the code within the pages of that book.”

“And he did,” Nik said. “But he was convinced that there was a spy amongst you and your friends – a traitor. You had a friend called Murphy, right?”

“Yes,” I said, nodding my head.

“Doctor Hunt told me that this Murphy and he were friends. Murphy stayed with Hunt at his manor for a while. Hunt told him of his fears, but Murphy wouldn’t believe that one of his friends could be caught up in all of this. Doctor Hunt said that he was close to finding out who it was, when suddenly he was captured and brought here to this zoo, never finding out who the spy was. But he is convinced that there is one amongst you. The

book does hold a part of the code – but he made a second copy and hid it somewhere safe.”

“Where is it?” I asked him. “I need to find it.”

“I don’t know,” Nik said.

“Did Hunt tell you who he thought this traitor might be?” I asked him. “And why would he trust you?”

“No he didn’t know who it was,” he said. “And he trusted me because he knew that I was trying to make amends for my previous sins. Doctor Hunt understood how much I wanted to be free of my curse.”

Staring down at my leg, I said, “So what is it that Phillips has planned for me tomorrow?”

“They started to breed the half-breeds in some desolate factory farm a few miles from here. But just as Hunt had planned, they didn’t live very long – the infection from the bite I gave you attacks their immune system and they die, so they abandoned the factory,” Nik said. “Although Phillips and his crew don’t know that the infection was deliberately placed there by Hunt, they’re smart enough to know that it’s the infection in your leg that has destroyed the DNA that they had. So now they know your leg is better they plan to start breeding tomorrow.”

“Breeding?” I said, my heart thumping in time with the jabbing pains in my stomach.

“Phillips is happy that he has the correct code now, so tomorrow they start the breeding process with you and your friends Kayla and Isidor.”

“But what if my leg hadn’t healed?” I asked him.

“They were going to kill you,” he said. “They suspected that once you had died, the infection inside of you would have died too and they would have just taken the sample then.”

“So why didn’t they just kill me weeks ago and just take what they wanted?” I asked Nik.

“Whoever this traitor is – this invisible person without a face - wants you alive for some reason,” he said, then looked away.

“So this invisible man is my protector? My saviour?” I scoffed

“Let’s just say – whoever it is, doesn’t solely have your best interests at heart – but for the time being, you are safe; for the time being, they need you,” Nik barked over his shoulder.

“Need me for what?” I pushed.

Nik slinked back across the cell and stood under the hole. He turned to face me. “I don’t know,” he said, then left my cell.

Chapter Fifteen

Should I have told Nik about my planned escape? I wondered. After all, he said that he was trying to redeem himself. But then again, he was a serial killer who wanted to torture and murder me! Could he really be trusted, when at any moment my ally might become my executioner? No. Even through the pain that clouded my mind, I knew that I had made the right decision in not telling him about my escape. He had spoken about trust, how Hunt had suspected that one of my friends was a traitor, and even though I knew that Murphy suspected the same – I couldn't bring myself to believe that. I mean, who out of them would do such a thing? And why?

With daybreak not far off, Phillips and Sparky would soon come for me to start their perverse breeding program. Knowing I only had a matter of hours to get free of my cell, find Luke, Kayla and Isidor and then find my way out of the zoo, I lifted the broom above me and forced the head between the gap I'd made between the ceiling and the mesh.

Placing all of my weight on the handle of the broom, I pulled. The wire gave a little but not enough. With one hand above the other, I pulled

my way up the length of the handle, but my hands were clammy with fever and I slipped down the broom and landed in a heap on the floor. It was covered with dirt and dust, so I rubbed the palms of my hands across the ground until they were covered in muck. Taking hold of the broom again, I started to haul myself up towards the hole.

This time around, my hands gripped the handle firmly and I managed to heave myself up. Once I was level with the hole, I placed the fingers of my right hand through the mesh, and held onto the edge of the hole with my left. I then began to rip and pull on the wire with all my strength. At first, the wire showed no sign of moving, so I continued to pull at it. I yanked so hard that the wire cut into my fingers and they began to bleed. I looked at the blood, then turned away. I couldn't allow myself to think about that now, no matter how much my body screamed at me to slide back down the broom handle and eat some of the red stuff in the bowl. Bit by bit, tiny pieces of plaster began to fall away from the edge of the hole and the wire mesh began to loosen some more.

The growling on the other side of the hatch started up again and I knew deep within me that it was responding to the sounds of my breakout. It would only be a matter of minutes before Phillips came bursting through my cell door with Sparky cackling hysterically behind him.

Then a voice from my nightmares whispered in my ears as I remembered Doctor Hunt sitting beside my bed in the facility.

“Someone I could trust,” he said. “Someone I knew who would have the sight to find a way to escape these Vampyrus.”

I closed my eyes and understood the trust and belief that Hunt had placed in me. I couldn't let him down – I couldn't let myself down. So in sheer desperation, I began to rip the wire free. Taking hold of it with both hands, I swung from it like a monkey. I pulled at it with all my weight, as my feet swayed above the floor of my cell. My legs swung back and forth in the air, and I kicked out to give myself some momentum. I could feel a warm sensation running down my arms, and in the darkness I could just make out thick streams of blood oozing from between my fingers.

Then suddenly, just when I was about to give up hope – the wire mesh gave way and I fell to the floor. I landed on my back, squeezing the air from lungs. There was a noise from the corridor outside and the owner of the paw on the other side of the hatch released an agonising howl into the night. I got to my feet, doubled up in pain and fought to suck mouthfuls of air back into my lungs.

The broom lay on the floor beside me and I snatched it up. I pushed it through the hole and hooked it in one of the corners. Yanking on it to make sure it was secure, I began to hoist my way back up the broom handle.

I didn't get very far before my hands began to slip again, as the blood continued to pour from my torn fingers. Dropping back to the floor, I hastily wiped my hands against my hospital gown.

Keys jangled in the lock of my cell door. I could hear laughing coming from outside and I could picture Sparky grinning from ear to ear in the dark. Turning my back on the cell door, closing my mind to that insane laughter, I took hold of the broom handle and started to climb. One hand over the other I went, as I shinned my way towards the hole above me with those words of Doctor Hunt whispering in my ears like a weak radio signal.

“– someone I knew who would have the sight to find a way to escape these Vampyrus!”

At the top of the broom handle, I reached out with my right hand and took hold of the edge of the hole. I then let go of the broom with my left hand and pulled myself up. My back scraped against what was left of the wire mesh, and I could feel those black finger-like bones recoil. I bit into my lower lip to stop myself from screaming out in pain.

Sweat ran into my eyes as I forced the upper half of my body through the hole. Immediately I felt my face caressed by a crisp cold breeze. It felt wonderful – like an angel stroking my face. I hoisted my way up onto my elbows and crawled onto the roof. To be out of that cell felt wonderful. At last I felt free and that feeling was incredible.

I looked back down into the darkness and saw Phillips charge into my cell, followed closely by Sparky. Phillips seemed to be momentarily confused, and then glanced upwards. Seeing me standing looking down at him, he screamed with rage. He brandished his fangs and even in the dark, they glowed yellow in his mouth. I watched as he raced across the cell, clattering into Sparky and sending him flying from my view. Phillips grabbed for the broom handle, but I quickly pulled it up through the hole and out of his reach.

“You won’t escape me, Kiera!” he roared from below.

‘You’ve gotta catch me first!’ I spat and turning away from the edge of the hole, I ran across the roof of the cell.

Chapter Sixteen

Teetering on the edge of the roof like a tightrope walker, I used the broom handle to balance myself. I looked down below, and in the gloom I could see something huge and white pacing back and forth.

So I was right, that huge white paw did belong to a polar bear! I thought. Just then, the creature looked up at me and howled and I could see that it was actually a wolf that was as big as a polar bear!

Staring up at me, it made a wailing sound in the back of its throat as if alerting everyone else in the zoo that I was making my escape.

“Where do you think you are going?” It called angrily up at me.
“You can’t escape!”

Looking all about me, I couldn’t see any way off the roof. I began to panic as I raced along the outer edge of the wall. Running back in the direction I had come from, I saw that there was another building with a flat roof adjacent to the rooftop I was on. I ran towards the edge of the building and estimated the gap between the two to be about ten foot. Taking several paces backwards, I drew in a deep breath and ran as fast as I could towards

the gap. A splinter of pain knifed its way up my right leg from the scabby-gash that had now mostly healed. If the pain had been a colour it would have been dark and purple, as it electrified all the nerve endings on its way up to my brain. Then suddenly, my legs seemed to take on a life of their own as they began to quicken. I looked down at them and they seemed almost a blur.

As I reached the edge of the building at an incredible speed, I threw myself into the air and soared across the gap. Landing with a thud on the other side, I rolled onto my back. The other Lycanthrope and Vampyrus in the zoo must have sensed something was up, as they began to roar, shriek, and howl.

I raced across the roof I had just landed on and didn't stop until I reached the other side. Looking down into the darkness, I could see water. It looked black and velvety, and would make a soft landing.

As I stood on the ledge and prepared to jump, a voice from inside my head screamed, "*What's in the water?*"

Then from behind me, came the deep sound of roaring. I looked over my shoulder to see Phillips scrambling onto the roof. But he no longer looked like my old sergeant who had trained me back at training school; he had taken on his true Vampyrus form again. Turning away from him, I

looked down at the black water, closed my eyes and jumped, the broom still firmly gripped in my hand.

I plunged in with an almighty splash. It was cold and I felt something large brush up against me. Instinctively, I kicked my legs out beneath the water to push whatever it was away. Holding my breath, I swam to the surface, and using my broom as a float, I paddled to the edge of the pool. As I climbed out, I looked back over my shoulder again to see Phillips leaping from the roof, his giant black wings rippling on either side of him.

“Come back!” he screeched as he swooped towards me.

From all around the zoo, I could hear the sounds of howling, barking, and gnashing of fangs and it was almost deafening. Then, closer to me, I heard the sound of screeching. It was coming from behind me. I whirled around, brandishing my broom in the air. It was then that I realised what it was that had swam along side me in the pool. A vampire was climbing out of the water and it was racing towards me.

Sprinting around the edge of the water in a blur of shadows, I headed towards a door that was set amongst the rocks and boulders that had been built to recreate some kind of sea life area in the zoo. The sound of Phillips’ beating wings was right behind me now and I dared not look back to see that mountain of muscle and black hair swooping out of the night at me.

The door was only feet away as I felt Phillips swipe at me with one of his mighty arms. His fingers ran down the length of my back, as he tried to take hold of my hospital gown. But I was just beyond his reach and I shot through the door and slammed it closed behind me.

The door rocked in its frame as Phillips crashed into it on the other side. I leant against the door as he tried to force it open. My bare feet began to slide across the tiled floor, as he smashed against the door. I turned slightly and barged the door closed with my shoulder. There was a bolt and I frantically fumbled with it in an attempt to lock the door. But Phillips was too strong and he rammed the door open an inch or two. I peered through the gap as he pressed his giant-sized head against it. I looked straight into one of his black eyes and he glared back at me.

“You can’t get away,” he growled and his breath was hot and stank of that same meat I’d eaten.

“I won’t be your prisoner!” I yelled, as I jabbed the end of the broom between the gap in the door and rammed him between the eyes.

Phillips wailed in pain and fell backwards. Seizing my chance, I forced the door closed and locked it. No sooner had I slid the bolt into its housing then Phillips was crashing and banging on the other side again. The door began to bow and splinter under the weight of his pounding claws.

Fearing that the door would soon come smashing down, I ran frantically around the area that I now found myself in, desperately looking for another way out.

I found myself in a large room filled with metal cages. Some of them were stacked neatly on top of each other and some had been thrown across the floor. I raced amongst them and slipped over on several decomposing lumps of flesh that lay stinking on the ground. Ahead of me there was another door. I sprinted towards it and without thinking; I pushed the door open and went tearing out into the grounds of the zoo.

The night had started to fade and the first rays of daylight could be seen slicing through the clouds above. *That was good wasn't it?* I screamed inside my head. *At least the vampires wouldn't be able to track me in daylight.*

I found myself in a wide, open area, which had animal enclosures built all around it. Nervously, I looked around. To the right of me, I could see empty animal cages and to the left some kind of enclosure that was littered with hay and half-eaten pieces of meat. The huge metal bars, which had once kept the animals locked inside, had now been twisted apart or ripped down.

What had happened to all the animals? I wondered.

Then the sound of the door finally giving way under Phillips' weight startled me back into action and I ran down the concrete path that ran between the animal cages. I rounded a bend in the path and froze. Standing before me only feet away was a wolf. Its giant snout was buried in the stomach of a human corpse that lay spread across the path ahead of me. Slowly, very slowly I started to back away, not wanting to disturb it and draw attention to my presence. I'd only gone a few feet, when the wolf raised its huge head and glared at me. Its yellow eyes burnt with anger, and its razor-sharp teeth glinted in the early morning light.

"Stop right there!" it boomed in a thunderous voice.

I continued to edge away as the wolf licked the blood from its snout and began to kick at the ground with its front claws.

He's gonna charge at me! I screamed inside as I continued to shuffle backwards. Although doubting it would offer me any protection against this beast, I raised my broom into the air.

Then, as I had suspected, the wolf lowered its head and brandishing its teeth, it came racing towards me. Wheeling round, I ran back in the direction I had come. I raced back past the empty cages, and as I reached the door that I had only moments before burst through, Phillips came bounding out. He immediately swiped at me with his meaty arms and I dropped to the floor and rolled under them. I clambered to my feet and

continued to run as fast and as hard as I could. My right leg began to burn as I propelled myself forward – faster and faster and *faster!*

There was a fork in the path and I glanced up to see a sign that read, ‘*Zoo Exit*’. I raced towards it. Souvenir shops, hotdog and ice cream stands looking derelict and unused whooshed past me in a haze.

I stole a quick glance back over my shoulder and could see both Phillips and the wolf were only feet away. I pressed onwards, my arms pumping up and down like pistons, my legs thrusting me onwards, creating a blaze of dust, which trailed behind me like smoke.

At last, ahead of me, I could see the turnstiles that the visitors had once used when visiting the zoo. Beyond these were a huge set of iron gates that towered up into the sky. I could see freedom waiting for me on the other side of those gates – I could smell it and my mouth almost watered at the thought.

Then there was something on my back, its paws were dragging me down by my shoulders. I frantically tried to look backwards expecting to see Phillips but he had slowed down along with the wolf some way back.

The sound of hysterical laughter filled my ears and I knew who it was that had pounced on me. I fell to the ground under the weight of Sparky, as he barked and snarled. I rolled onto my back and he lay across my chest, his huge pink tongue dribbling onto my face.

“Get the fuck off me!” I screamed. *“Let me go!”*

Sparky just looked at me wildly with his crazy yellow eyes and cackled with laughter and in them, just like I had with Jack Seth and Nik, I could see into his murderous soul. But unlike the others, when I looked into Sparky’s eyes, I didn’t see images of him torturing and murdering me – it was Mrs. Lovelace that I watched him butcher. My head jerked backwards as my mind splintered with graphic pictures of him leading her into Hallowed Manor, believing he was taking her to safety. I could see Sparky pushing open the giant drawing room doors. Then he was tearing at her throat, dragging his claws down the length of her wrinkled neck, her blood spraying his face.

Then he was moving away, sniffing the air like an animal - a wolf. I watched him as if I had been there the whole time, as he climbed the stairs that led from the great hall and made his way up towards the forbidden wing. But someone was waiting for him up at top of the stairs, shrouded in darkness. They stood on the landing, their head cast down, long black wings trailing from their back. Darkness cloaked them, and I tried to see through it. But the darkness masking their identity wasn’t cast by the shadows at the top of the stairs, it was as if the blackness radiated from them - a darkness so dark that it blinded me from seeing who they were.

At the top of the stairs, Sparky dropped to his knees and clasped his hands together as if in prayer. He rocked back and forth on his knees as in worship. Who could demand such reverence, I wondered? But in my heart I knew who it was, it was that *invisible man* that Murphy, Luke, and Potter had talked about. But what was he doing at the manor? Had he been there all along, secreted into the shadows and watching all of us? Murphy had wondered how this man had always been one step ahead of us, been able to move his followers, like Mrs. Payne, into position – perhaps he had been there all the time?

Sparky glanced up at the figure that stood before him, his hands clasped together. But I knew, like me, Sparky couldn't see through the darkness that radiated from the figure. It was impenetrable - like a cloak surrounding him. Then the figure struck Sparky with his foot, sending him sprawling onto his arse. Turning away, the figure climbed the stairs to the secret hospital where the half-breed children lay dying, only kept alive by Doctor Ravenwood's and Lord Hunt's medicines.

As I lay captivated by Sparky's bright yellow stare, I could see the figure and Sparky enter the ward hidden in the attic of the Hallowed Manor. The children in their beds recoiled even before the figure or Sparky had come close. It was as if they could sense their hatred for them. I watched as Doctor Ravenwood came from his office at the end of the ward, and he

begged Sparky and the other not to hurt his patients and it was then I knew how *blind* I had been - I hadn't *seen* it!

How had Sparky, on returning to the manor with Mrs. Lovelace, while my friends and I had fought the vampires in the clearing by the summerhouse, managed to single-handedly kill her and all the half-breeds? He also managed to overpower Doc Ravenwood and take two of the remaining children hostage. He had an accomplice – this *invisible man* had been waiting for him at the manor – they had acted together.

And the vision was over. No longer could I see Sparky and the winged stranger go from bed to bed, killing each of the half-breeds in turn. The pictures disappeared as quickly as they had come, like a T.V. being switched on then off.

With Sparky still astride me and grinning into my face, I reached out for the broom, which I had dropped. Curling my fingers around it, I brought the broom handle up into the air intending to bring it crashing down on top of Sparky's skull. But it was violently snatched from my hand.

I looked up to see who had taken it from me. Phillips was standing over me grunting and panting. He pounded the broom against his chest then threw it to one side. Sparky looked up at Phillips and drooled, "Let me eat the girl now – I can feel her heart beating in her chest – it will be ripe and bloody!"

Then Sparky yelped as Phillips knocked him flying off me with the back of one of his giant claws.

“Get away from her! She’s not to be harmed – not yet anyway!”

Phillips roared.

Sparky got to his feet and shook his head from side to side. He looked at Phillips and whimpered pathetically. He caught me looking at him and then giggled.

Phillips pulled me to my feet.

“Let me go!” I yelled, kicking and punching at him. “You can’t treat me like this!”

But Phillips was too strong and his hold was like a vice. Then, out of the corner of my eye, I saw Nik. He stood in the shadow of a ticket booth, tucked away from view.

“You told on me! You saw the hole and told on me!” I roared at him. “You ain’t ever going to be redeemed now. You’ll rot in hell!”

Phillips, Sparky, and the wolf turned to see who it was I was screaming at, when two winged creatures flashed past me in a wave of shadows and clattered into Phillips and Sparky.

Chapter Seventeen

Taken by complete surprise, Phillips crumbled to the floor, his giant black wings sending up a shower of dust and dirt from the ground. Sparky howled and the second werewolf darted away, all of them taken by surprise.

“Take these!” someone barked from beside me. Looking to my right, I could see that Nik had now appeared from the shadows of the ticket booth and was nudging what looked like a pile of rags across the ground towards me with his snout. I peered at the rags and could see that in fact it was my long black coat that I’d been wearing the day of my capture beneath the mountains. Snatching it up, I pulled it on and immediately checked the pockets. I was relieved when my fingertips brushed over my iPod, the CD I’d taken from the monastery and Murphy’s crucifix given to me by Potter. To have some of my possessions back was incredibly liberating as if I’d already escaped from my prison – but of course I hadn’t.

Pulling my coat tight about me, I looked at Nik, and with some distrust in my voice I said, “What’s going on?”

But before he'd the chance to say anything he was springing through the air towards Sparky, who was lunging at one of the winged creatures that flashed all around him in a blaze of black shadows. Sparky was quick, and he snagged one of the creatures with his claws. The creature almost seemed to stutter in mid-air and slow, and as it did so, its identity became clear.

"Kayla!" I gasped, seeing her try and pull herself free from Sparky's grasp. Her wings beat furiously and her auburn hair rippled out behind her in the morning breeze. But I could see that her once brilliant flame coloured hair now looked dull and lifeless. Then she was gone, released back into the sky as Nik lunged at Sparky and took a bite of him with his huge gaping jaws.

There was a wailing behind me, then the familiar sound of stakes whizzing past me. Spinning round, I was overwhelmed to see Isidor, raining down a wave of stakes at Phillips. Phillips wrapped one of his wings around him as a shield, then raced towards Isidor who hovered in the air. But just as Kayla's hair had lost its brilliance, Isidor looked pale, gaunt, and weak. He was naked to the waist, apart from the rucksack thrown over his back, and his wings that trailed from beneath his arms.

"Isidor!" I shrieked in delight at seeing him. Whether he heard me or not, I didn't know, as he remained focused on Phillips who raced towards him. Within feet of Isidor, Phillips launched himself into the air, stakes

zipping past him as Isidor released them from his crossbow. But Isidor's aim appeared to be off, either that or Phillips had lightning reflexes as the stakes flew harmlessly past him. Knowing that Isidor was in trouble in his weakened state, I rushed forwards towards the point from which Phillips was taking off from the ground. Even though he was more than a hundred feet away, I was upon him in an instant. It was like I had disappeared and reappeared on the other side of the walkway in a blink of an eye.

Before I'd the chance to fully understand what had just happened, I was yanking at Phillips' ankles and pulling him back out of the sky. He hit the ground with a sickening thud, and it sounded like I could hear every bone in his body rattle. Releasing him, he rolled quickly over, and seeing it was me who had thrown him to the ground, his face revealed a fleeting glimpse of surprise and shock.

Without taking his eyes from me, Phillips scrambled to his feet and I was sure I could still see that look of shock in his eyes. But he recovered quickly, spinning through the air like a rocket. Then, as if from nowhere, Kayla was plummeting from above, driving her feet into him and knocking him off course. Snapping my head to the left, I watched as Phillips flew out of control into the derelict, old ticket booth, his impact causing it to erupt into a shower of splinters.

Seizing his chance, Isidor swooped from the sky, and wrapping an arm about my waist, he raced me away over the walls of the zoo.

“We can’t leave without Luke!” I yelled over the deafening sound of the wind that rushed over his wings. “We have to go back for him!”

“Not now!” Isidor shouted back. “We’ve only just managed to escape!”

Looking back, I could see Kayla tearing through the sky behind us, her wings rippling like two glittering sails. Then from above, I watched as Nik bravely continued to fight off Sparky as we made our escape.

Clinging to Isidor, we floated silently in a mass of low-flying cloud. Kayla was beside us, her wings almost folded close, but open enough to keep her airborne. She seemed to have come a long way since I spied on her in the grounds of Hallowed Manor when she had practiced using her wings. The bony black claws at the end of each wing opened and closed as if snatching at the air. She looked like some kind of prehistoric butterfly, if any such creature had ever existed. On the other side of the cloud, I could see the shadows of the Vampyrus, as they soared back and forth in search of us. But we floated away with the clouds, unseen by our pursuers. Just like Kayla, Isidor was motionless, his wings slightly apart, just enough to keep him in the sky. It was then I remembered Luke telling Isidor about how the

hunters amongst the Vampyrus used echolocation to track their prey - homing in on the vibrations that their giant wings made.

Holding my breath, we floated like that until we were cold and wet through from the cloud moisture. How long we hid like that, I couldn't tell; it was like time had stopped inside those giant clouds. We waited for the sounds of the Vampyrus to fade away. When the only sound was the wind tugging at the strands of my filthy, unkempt hair, Isidor and Kayla cautiously descended through the clouds and back towards the ground below.

The road we landed on was narrow and it twisted its way into the distance, finally disappearing between two hills. The world seemed eerily silent, only broken by the odd bark or growl that came from amongst the trees that grew tall and wild on either side of the road. This wasn't how I'd remembered the world to be – something had changed – but I didn't know what.

Chapter Eighteen

I'd watched in awe as Kayla had fluttered out of the sky. She had landed softly, and I hobbled towards her and took her in my arms. At first we didn't say anything, we just stood in the cold wind and hugged each other. Like me, she wore a grubby-looking hospital gown, and her face, legs, and arms were covered in grime.

"I'm sorry, Kayla," I said.

"What for?" she whispered back.

"For not rescuing you," I told her.

"I knew you would come for me," she said, "even though it put your life in danger and you ended up being captured yourself."

"It wasn't just me - the others came in search of you, too," I told her. There was so much I wanted to - *needed to* - tell her. Her mother and father's death, the murder of Murphy. But now wasn't the time.

"I'm sorry I didn't believe you about Phillips," she said.

"You have nothing to be sorry for," I told her.

She pulled herself away from me, and over her shoulder I could see Isidor standing in the middle of the deserted road. Like all of us, his feet

were bare, and he wore a baggy pair of striped pyjama bottoms. His body was deathly-white, and where I had once remembered a well-defined chest and stomach, I could see his chest plate and ribs almost seeming to poke through. The stubby-looking beard which grew from his chin was now long and black and the bottom of it nearly touched his chest. The black flaming tattoos covering his upper arms and neck looked as if they had been etched on the skin of a deflated balloon.

I looked at him and he met my stare.

Half-smiling at me, he said, “You look like shit, Kiera.”

“It’s good to see you, too,” I smiled, and it was then I realised I couldn’t remember the last time I had smiled.

Like I had embraced Kayla, I limped towards him, and threw my arms around his bony shoulders.

“It’s good to see ya,” he said and squeezed me so tight I thought my ribs were going to snap inside of me. Then in my ear he whispered, “She doesn’t know I’m her brother – she doesn’t know me at all.”

“Okay,” I whispered and squeezed him back. “I’ll leave that for you to tell her.”

“Thanks,” he said back, then pulled gently away.

Turning to face Kayla, I said, “Hey Kayla, this is Isidor.”

Coming towards us, her eyes wide and staring she said, “I’ve seen you a couple of times before - I think you tried to escape once, didn’t you?” she said to Isidor.

“I tried a few times,” he said, throwing his crossbow across his naked back, “not that it got me very far.”

“So how did you both get out?” I asked them.

“That wolf set us free,” Kayla said.

“Yeah, he came to my cell, just before dawn and said that if I wanted to escape than I should follow him. At first I thought it was some kinda sick joke,” Isidor explained. “Then I saw Kayla was with him, and he had my crossbow and rucksack. So before he changed his mind, we went with him and he told us to wait in the shadows by the entrance to the zoo.”

“I asked him what we were waiting for,” Kayla cut in, “and he told us that we would soon know. It wasn’t long before I saw you racing up that path towards us with Phillips and Sparky chasing you down. It was then that I realised that it was a breakout.”

“Why do you think that werewolf helped us?” Isidor asked, rubbing the tops of his arms in an attempt to keep warm.

I thought of Nik and how he had been cursed by his father. I could only imagine the horrendous crimes he had committed, but he had been true

to his word and he seemed to be in search of redemption in one way or another.

“He had to do it,” I told them.

“Why?” Kayla asked. “Phillips will kill him for helping us.”

“Maybe that’s what he wanted,” I whispered, almost to myself.

“But, why?” Kayla pushed.

Then meeting her gaze I said, “Just like us, Kayla, I think that all he wanted was to be free. And maybe he has his freedom now.”

Cocking an eyebrow at me, Kayla said, “Whatever you say, Kiera. I won’t pretend to understand what you’re going on about and I’m too cold to be bothered to find out. Let’s say that we find ourselves some meat.”

Hearing Kayla say this, I gripped her arm and said, “What do you mean? What sort of meat are you talking about?” From the corner of my eye, I could see Isidor staring at the both of us.

“Whatever it was they were giving us back at that zoo,” Kayla started, “I don’t know what sort of meat it was, but it was delicious and I can’t get enough of the stuff.”

I glanced at Isidor and something struck me. He looked like a corpse that had been warmed-up – all bones and loose skin, and I looked pretty much the same. But although Kayla looked battered and bruised in other ways, she didn’t look undernourished. Kayla looked as if she had eaten well

during her time in captivity at the zoo. And although my whole being craved for the red stuff like an agonising itch that wouldn't go away however much I scratched it, Kayla was yet to understand that she was addicted to human flesh.

Knowing that this wasn't the time to explain to her what the Vampyrus and Lycanthrope had been feeding her, I dreaded the moment when I would have to tell her everything that had happened while she had been held prisoner. With my heart sinking in my chest at the thought of that conversation, I put my arm around her shoulder and said, "C'mon, we should find somewhere to hide until we can figure out how we get Luke out of that place."

Supporting me as I limped down the country road, Kayla said, "Kiera, why are you limping? Have you got something wrong with your leg?"

"It's a long story," I said back, "I'll tell you about it later."

"Okay, sure," she smiled, happy enough with my reply. Then, she added, "Hey did you meet my father at the zoo?"

"Uh-huh," I said, not knowing what to say.

"I think he musta escaped like us," she smiled at me.

“What makes you think that?” I asked her, knowing that by now he was probably dead.

“Because he stopped coming to see me,” she said, and looking into her eyes, I wondered if she actually believed that.

I glanced back over my shoulder in search of Isidor, another person to join in the conversation, so I wouldn’t have to answer all of Kayla’s questions. But he walked several feet behind us, his head stooped low and I guessed he could hear all of Kayla’s questions and he was wondering how he was going to tell her that he was her brother.

Chapter Nineteen

The track leading away from the zoo carved its way through dense areas of woodland. I was grateful for the trees that climbed high above on either side of us, as they offered a natural camouflage against any of the Vampyrus that might still be searching for us high above. But all the while I kept heading east, towards the town that Nik had called Wasp Water.

When the trees thinned out along the roadside, I ushered the others towards the bushy hedgerows to avoid being seen, just like Murphy would have told us to. Thinking about him, I put my hand into my coat pocket and brushed his tiny silver crucifix with the tips of my fingers. We made our journey in silence, all of us looking paler and weaker by the minute and I knew that like me, Kayla and Isidor were fighting their cravings for the red stuff. My stomach continued to cramp, and even though the morning air was bitterly cold, hot beads of sweat streamed from my forehead. Kayla's fiery red hair lay matted to her brow and cheeks in damp clumps and Isidor staggered along the uneven road, cradling his feverish body with his arms.

I don't know for how long or how far we had walked, but the meandering track that we had been walking on widened and we found ourselves on a road, which had signposts and markings on it. I prayed that we were nearing the town and hopefully some help.

A small cluster of houses appeared ahead but I could see no signs of life anywhere. The world seemed eerily silent, only broken by the sound of crows squawking from high up in the trees. As we drew nearer to the houses, I could see that some of them looked as if they had been smashed down, like buildings that had been bombed during the Second World War. Now all that was left was mountains of rubble, with the foundations protruding from the ground like twisted limbs. Even through the pain of my cravings, itching skin, and agonising thirst, that voice inside of me, the Kiera that was pushing me on, told me that something was terribly wrong. But my thoughts of searching for help – for Potter – nagged away at the corners of my mind and I knew that we must keep on going. We needed to find food, water and some clothes.

A bath would be good too! I thought to myself.

So we passed the deserted homes to the left and right and I walked towards the town. As we grew nearer we could see more deserted houses. The world seemed so quiet, only the sound of our bare feet could be heard smacking off the tarmac. Looking down, I was shocked to see that the road

surface had split and cracked in places, leaving wild and untamed weeds and plants to sprout from them. Nearing the town, I noticed a sea of lights twinkling on and off up ahead. As we drew nearer, it became clear to me what these lights were. It was the glare of the pale winter sun glinting off the cars that lay strewn across the deserted road.

We walked slowly towards the cars. The wind blew amongst them and I could hear the creak of a car door as it swung open and closed. I took my hand and covered my mouth and nose as a rancid stench wafted towards me. A gasping sound came from behind me and I spun around to see Isidor doubled over getting sick. His sense of smell was far greater than mine and Kayla's, so the stench must have been overwhelming for him. Going to him, I rubbed his back, and his flesh felt burning hot.

Brushing my hand away, Isidor straightened himself and whispered, "It's okay, Kiera, I'll be fine." Covering his nose and mouth with his hands, he walked on.

Passing amongst the rows of cars, I dared to glance into some of them and then looked quickly away. There were people in them – *dead* people. Their faces were bloated and purple in colour. Black crusty lumps of blood had dried in streams around their noses and mouths. It was obvious they had been running from something – trying to escape the town with the people that they loved. I saw the broken windshields, the scratches running

across the hoods of the cars, the hanging bumpers, the upturned faces of the dead, the desperate fingers forever frozen as if clutching the air. I could see the black tire tracks on the road and then my head was thrown back as if invisible hands had grabbed at my hair. And, closing my eyes against the glare of a cold winter sun, I could see what had happened to these people as if being played out like a movie on the inside of my eyelids.

They had come...

...at dawn, just as the first shades of pink had spilt over the mountaintops. But there was something wrong! Why, on such a beautiful morning, were there black clouds in the sky? The clouds were moving fast, racing over the horizon as if a storm were coming. Black and threatening they came, and as they grew nearer they changed shape. It was as if the clouds were breaking up – falling apart – and the shadows they created on the fields below were just as black and moved faster if that were possible. But they weren't clouds or shadows. It was Vampyrus that raced through the sky and Lycanthrope that sped over the mountains and fields towards the town. Swooping low, their giant black wings splayed on either side of them, the masses of Vampyrus flew over the town, their white fangs glistening like knives. The werewolves howled and barked as they bounded through rivers, leapt over gates and crashed through people's front doors.

Children sat up in their beds, rubbing the sleep from their eyes, as they stared in fear at the giant wolves that stood licking their giant snouts.

“Mummy...!” the boy cried, but before he’d had the chance to raise the alarm, he had been snatched away, carried like a rag doll in the giant jaws of a werewolf as it raced back across the fields and between the mountains with its prey.

The town of Wasp Water didn’t wake to the sound of alarm clocks, letters being delivered, toast popping out of toasters, or the rustling of newspapers at kitchen tables. They woke to the sound of screaming, running, barking, howling, tearing and the ripping of flesh.

Half asleep, they ran from their homes, scrambling into their cars as the Vampyrus dropped through the air like stones above them. Windscreens imploding in showers of crystal glass as the Vampyrus ripped the occupants from the vehicles and fed on them. Blood jetted from throats, ears, and noses as the Vampyrus fed in a frenzy of excitement and hatred for these humans.

Cars crashed into each other as their owners fought like demolition derby drivers to get out of town. Some managed to get onto the main road, but the wolves were quick – super fast, and they raced along beside the cars, smashing their giant skulls into them. The cars crumbled as if made from cardboard, veering off the road and into ditches where the occupants

were dragged kicking and screaming, until their life's blood was drained from them. And those who managed to outrun the werewolves were set upon from above, as Vampyrus ripped open the roofs of the cars as if opening a can of sardines. The families inside were snatched away into the sky where they were torn to pieces by the Vampyrus.

More Vampyrus and Lycanthrope came like a plague of rats, their squawking and howling deafening, making me tremble and shake like a tree in a storm. I lurched to and fro as...

...Isidor shook me.

"Kiera! Snap out of it!" he shouted, shaking me from side to side.

"Kiera – you've got to stop Kayla!"

Snapping my eyes open, I felt my knees buckle, and Isidor steadied me. His eyes were grey and dark smudges circled them.

"Kiera – look at Kayla!" he shouted at me.

Still dazed and disorientated from my vision, I turned slowly and looked at Kayla. She was standing in the centre of the road and staring into one of the cars. Her arms hung motionless by her sides and the wind blew her hair from her shoulders. She appeared to be transfixed by the hideous sights hiding inside the cars. Then slowly, she reached out and opened one of the car doors, spilling one of the dead occupants onto the road. It lay half

in and out of the car, its head lolling to one side at an awkward angle as if its neck had been snapped. But looking more closely, I could see that the corpse's neck hadn't been broken, it was barely there at all, ripped away by one of the Vampyrus or Lycanthrope.

As if waking to find myself in a nightmare far worse than the one I'd just woken from, I watched Kayla drop to her knees, brush the hair from her face and lower her mouth to the festering hole beneath the corpses chin.

Then, as quickly as blinking, I was pushing her off the body, sending her crashing onto the road.

"No Kayla" I yelled. "You mustn't!"

Kayla sprung to her feet, and with fangs sprouting from her gums, she launched herself at me. Isidor leapt at the same time as Kayla and dragged her out of the air.

Wrapping his arms about her, Isidor screamed, "Help me, Kiera!"

Kayla kicked and clawed at Isidor, spittle flying from her fangs as she fought against Isidor who tried to restrain her. "I can't hold her for much longer!"

Seeing the desperation in his eyes, I raced towards him and pinned Kayla's arms to her sides.

"*Get the fuck off me!*" she screamed with uncontrollable rage. Then she snapped her head forward as if to take a bite out of my face. Jerking

backwards, I felt the spit from her fangs spatter against my face, and it burned like acid.

“Kayla!” I screamed back at her. “Calm down!”

“I’m thirsty!” she screeched, and her eyes rolled back, revealing the whites.

“She’s burning up!” Isidor shouted. “And I’m too weak to hold her.”

With Kayla’s arms held fast to her sides, I looked into her face, and it looked flushed, like she had had too much sun. “Kayla, listen to me!” I roared at her. “You can’t have that red stuff – it isn’t going to help you. We’ve got to fight this!”

“Thirsty!” she screamed back and this time her eyes rolled down and she stared at me like she had gone insane.

Lowering my voice, I shook her by the arms and said, “Kayla, listen to me. I want that stuff as much as you do and so does Isidor, but we can’t have it anymore.”

“Thirsty,” she groaned again, but this time her voice sounded weaker, as if the anger was leaving her and I guessed that her raging fever was beginning to sap her strength.

Sensing that she was no longer a threat to us, Isidor loosened his grip on her, and stroking the side of her hot face with my hand, I said,

“Trust me Kayla, that red stuff you’ve been eating isn’t like normal meat – its human flesh.”

“Flesh?” she mumbled her eyes half open.

Knowing that I had to get her away from the corpses and the stench of their rotting flesh, I didn’t answer her. Instead, I looped my arm around her shoulders and helped her up the road and towards town. Isidor followed and I could hear his teeth chattering in his gums as if he were freezing cold.

As I weaved my way amongst the parked cars, I came across corpses splayed from their vehicles as if they had tried to make a last, desperate attempt at escape during the remaining moments of their lives. Some had their hands gripped about their throats as if they’d tried to stop the blood that had pumped from them. Others clutched their chest with bony hands and I saw a sickening image of Murphy’s heart being ripped from him. Pushing the image of Murphy away, as it was too painful, I looked down at the bodies as I stepped over them, and was sickened at the sight of the flies crawling in and out of their open mouths and maggots wriggling from their nostrils and out of their ears.

I looked away in revulsion, shoving Kayla into Isidor’s arms. I ran to the curb and puked what little of the red stuff I had left in my stomach into the gutter. It swung from my lips in clotted streams and I brushed it away with the back of my hand. My stomach cramped and I heaved again,

but this time nothing came out. When I felt able to go on, I took hold of Kayla again, keeping to the edge of the curb. I tried desperately not to look upon those dead people again. I wanted to get away from them as quickly as possible. Not because of the way they smelled or how they looked, it was because I knew that if some of them had been bitten by Vampyrus, there was every chance that before long, they would wake as vampires.

Chapter Twenty

The town seemed closer now and I could clearly see the individual outlines of buildings in the distance. Another mile or so and we would be lost amongst them. I continued to support Kayla; her fever had eased a little and she shuffled onwards, her head down, chin resting against her chest. Isidor walked silently beside me, his hands pressed over his mouth and nose to block out the smell, and every step he took was sluggish. The cars grew in number as we reached the outskirts of the town, and they stood either empty or contained dead passengers.

I spotted a police van, and with my heart leaping in my chest, I raced towards it. The word 'POLICE' seemed to scream 'HELP', 'SAVED' and 'AUTHORITY', but did I really believe that if there were any police officers left alive in that van, wouldn't they have tried to help these people? But we had to pass it if we were to reach the centre of town. So without thinking, I started off towards it as if it were calling to me like a mirage in a desert. Before taking too many steps, Isidor grabbed my arm and stopped me from going any further.

“What are you thinking of, Kiera?” he asked, his eyes wide and fearful.

“I’m going to checkout that police van,” I told him. “There might be some police officers in there and they might be able to help us.”

“Have you lost your mind?” he snapped. “Remember those vampire-cops we ran into? The ones who tried to run us off the road? The cops who shot at us?”

Realising that Isidor was correct, I shook my head and said, “Isidor you’re right. I don’t know what I was thinking of.”

“It’s okay,” he whispered looking over at the police van. “I guess we’re all going to be a bit cranky.” Isidor hunkered down between two abandoned cars. I helped Kayla down into the gap, and we crawled amongst the cars towards the police van. As we drew near, I could see that its back doors were open and several of the cops, who were wearing boiler-type suits, were hanging out. They appeared to be lifeless and still.

“Look after Kayla,” I said to Isidor, as I crept forwards on my hands and knees, not daring to get up in case it was a trap. Dropping onto my stomach, I inched my way further towards the van, not taking my eyes of those bodies hanging out of the back.

When I got as close as I could without being detected, I peered around the rear wheel of one of the cars. Several of the cops had managed

to climb from the van, but had landed in a heap on the road. To my horror, some of them stared up at the sky with half of their faces and throats missing. The lower half of their heads appeared to have been eaten away, leaving a huge, fleshy hole. Then, from behind me I heard a noise. Looking back over my shoulder, I could see Isidor crouching down with Kayla propped beside him. I sensed that Isidor had also heard the sound as his eyes were darting from left to right. The sound came again and I froze. Daring not to move an inch, I listened intently to the noise. The sound was coming from one of the cars several rows away.

Was it one of those corpses waking up as a vampire?

But what if it were a survivor – some child who had managed to survive the Vampyrus and Lycanthrope attack? Shouldn't we help them? It could be someone from the town, come in search of their family and they might know where other survivors are – there could be more – several more – even hundreds more who might be able to help us.

With these thoughts spinning through my mind, I got up slowly and crept between the cars. The noise came again, a shuffling sound like feet on concrete. I headed towards it. Then the noise came again, but from the opposite direction. I wheeled around.

“Hello?” I called out. “Is there anyone there?”

Silence.

I glanced back at Isidor, and he shrugged.

Crouching again, I shuffled deeper between the line of cars.

Then the sound came again and it was close. I gingerly poked my head over the edge of one of the car bonnets and found myself looking into the eyes of a tiger.

Its upper lip crumpled as it snarled at me. The tiger's teeth were like ivory daggers and they were covered in blood and flesh. Long, silver whiskers twitched around its snout, and its orange and black coat glimmered in the sunlight. Seeing the blood smeared around its powerful jaws, I knew it had been feeding on the bodies strewn across the road and had probably escaped from the zoo when the Vampyrus had moved in.

I threw myself backwards in terror and clattered into one of the many cars. Regaining my balance, I darted between them and away from the tiger. It growled behind me, which was followed by the sound of its paws pounding against the roofs of the cars as it raced over to catch me. I saw Isidor peek out from over the hood of a car.

"Get down!" he screamed at me, as he raised his crossbow. But, in his weakened and frail state, Isidor looked as if he were having trouble taking aim. The crossbow wavered up and down and from side to side in his hands.

I weaved between the cars housing dead people and I had no intention of becoming one of them. My feet snapped off the tarmac, and as I rounded the front of a large four-by-four, I slipped and lost my balance completely. I hit the ground hard, knocking the wind from me. The tiger appeared on the roof of the four-by-four and snarled. Without taking my eyes off it, I inched backwards. The tiger looked down at me, and with a flash of those bloody teeth, it leapt from the four-by-four and flew through the air towards me. Closing my eyes, I waited for the tiger to sink its teeth into me.

There was a thud and a high-pitched wailing sound and as I opened my eyes, I saw something large and grey fleet across my line of vision, knocking the tiger out of the air. I turned my head to follow it and could see that the tiger had been brought down by another creature. They rolled about amongst the abandoned vehicles in a flash of colour and claws. The sounds of the creatures' woofing and howling were terrifying and I slid underneath the four-by-four for safety. From my hiding place, I could see the two animals clawing and biting at each other, but it was such a violent blur of rage, that it was hard to see exactly what was taking place.

Manoeuvring myself, I watched as a huge set of jaws came clamping down on the tiger's throat as it howled in agony. The other creature shook it violently to and fro and the tiger kicked out with its back

legs. But its efforts were useless. The other creature was bigger and stronger and within moments had completely ripped open the tiger's throat in a spray of crimson. The tiger twitched and jerked for a few more seconds then became still as the other animal nuzzled its face into the open wound and began to eat.

I lay under the four-by-four and covered my ears against the sounds of ripping and tearing as the creature devoured the tiger. Not daring to move, I stayed there until I thought it was safe to open my eyes. Looking sideways, I gagged at the sight of the dead tiger now lying on its side, its stomach torn open and a mass of entrails spilled onto the tarmac. Then I heard the sound of woofing and breathing beside me. I slowly turned my head to see the bloody face of Nik staring at me.

"Are you going to lie under there all day or are you going to start looking for a way out of here?" he barked, licking away the blood and sinew that dangled from his whiskers.

"What are you doing here?" I asked him as I pulled myself out from beneath the four-by-four.

"To help you," he woofed.

"But I thought..." I started.

"You thought what?" he said, fixing me with his bright yellow eyes.

"But I thought you were dead back there," I said.

“And I probably will be if I ever go back, but it’s too late for me to worry about that now. I don’t think it took too much for them to work out it was me who gave you the chair and that book.” Nik looked at me then turned away.

“Where you going?” I called out.

“I have something I need to do,” he said with a swish of his pointed tail.

“What about my friend, Luke Bishop?” I asked.

“What about him?”

“Why didn’t you save him, too?”

“I didn’t have time,” he said, licking the last of the tiger from his whiskers. “Besides you made so much goddamn noise escaping, the whole zoo came running.” Fixing me with his yellow stare, he added, “If I were you, Kiera Hudson, I’d forget any ideas you might have about going back for your friend, Luke.” Then he was gone, bounding away between the cars and out of sight.

“I can’t forget about Luke!” I called after him. “I *won’t* forget about him – he’s my friend!”

Chapter Twenty-One

“What happened?” Isidor asked, as he came shuffling towards me, his arm around Kayla. And just for a glimpsing moment, I could see that they did look like brother and sister.

“There was a tiger,” I told him, pointing to the remains of the giant cat.

“Did you do that?” Isidor asked, eyeing me.

“It was Nik.”

“Nik?” Isidor said.

“The werewolf that helped us escape from the zoo,” I explained.

“Where is he now?”

“Gone,” I told him. I could see he was struggling to support Kayla, so I went to him and tucked my arm around her waist and her head flopped against my shoulder.

“Gone where?” Isidor asked me.

“I don’t know,” I said, then added, “look we should really try to make it into the town. There might be people – somebody that can help us.”

“Why has this happened?” Isidor said, as we made our way up the road.

Remembering my earlier vision, I said, “The town came under attack by the Vampyrus and Lycanthrope. They took the children and killed the adults.”

“But, why?” Isidor asked me from behind his hands which he’d placed over his nose and mouth again.

“Like Murphy warned us, they want to take over and rule the Earth. This looks like the start of it,” I told him.

“But how have they gotten away with it? Why aren’t the humans fighting back?”

With my heart sinking in my chest, I looked at him and said, “Perhaps there aren’t any humans left.”

“I can’t believe we’re the only humans left alive on Earth,” Isidor said.

“We’re not strictly human, remember?”

We walked on in silence, Kayla lent against me, her feet seeming to drag behind.

Just when I thought Isidor was lost to his private thoughts, he said, “Maybe they had their time – humans I mean. Perhaps it’s the end of humanity.”

“I can’t accept that,” I breathed, as I struggled to support Kayla.

“Maybe you’re gonna have to!” Isidor said, and shuffled ahead.

I followed close behind him and we walked the rest of the way in silence.

Although Kayla was small, the weight of supporting her as we stumbled our way into the town made my arm go numb and I knew that once I had finally put her down, I would have the worst case of pins-and-needles ever.

I didn’t have to wait long, as the road finally led us into the town of Wasp Water. The streets were narrow and the buildings that rose up on either side of us looked ancient. The roads were cobbled and we were met with the sight of cars full of the dead. Most of the shops lining the streets had the shutters pulled down, the shopkeepers and staff never making it into work on the morning of the attack. An odd piece of litter fluttered along the kerb, and apart from the sound that it made, the only other noise I could hear were the crows screeching in the distance. The stench of rotting meat wafted on the cold wind that whipped around the eaves of the buildings. Then I heard another sound; it was faint – but it was definitely there. I began to walk slowly to the right, my head tilted to one side as I homed in on the noise.

“What’s wrong?” Isidor asked me.

“Shhh,” I replied.

Isidor hobbled over and stood beside me. I could see that his bare feet, like mine, were raw and cold-looking.

“What is it?” he whispered, as he waved his crossbow before him.

“I can hear something,” I said, as I continued to move towards the sound with Kayla. Then I had it, and I started to move as fast as I could towards it.

“What can you hear?” he called after me.

“The sound of running water!” I whooped.

I made my way towards a tall stone building, and as I drew close I could see that it had once been a church, but the steeple and the crucifix that had once adorned it now lay in a pile of rubble on the ground. The church door was wedged open, and I had to look away at the sight of decaying bodies that were piled high in the doorway. I feared that if I looked at it for too long, then I would see them clambering over one another, desperate for the sanctuary that the church would offer against the vampires. Dragging Kayla past the front of the church, I followed a narrow path leading to the town square. There were tables and benches for people to relax on as they basked in the sun of long warm, summer evenings. But it was what was in

the centre of the town square that I was interested in –a fountain. Water tumbled from it in thick, frothy streams.

I gently rested Kayla on one of the benches, then taking off my coat, I climbed into the fountain and plunged myself beneath the water. It was ice-cold and my whole body tingled as if it were being shaken awake. I threw handfuls of water over my head and scrubbed away the dirt that covered me. Throwing his Crossbow aside, Isidor jumped in beside me and also began to throw water over himself. Isidor splashed with his hands like an overly-excited kid and showered me with it. I began to laugh as I stood under the fountain letting it wash the filth and the smell of that zoo from me.

Isidor flopped and danced around in the water and it was like it had breathed new life into him – into both of us. I watched as he shook his wings from side to side, sending forth a spray of water that glistened in the winter sunlight like a rainbow. Just like Isidor, I leapt from the fountain and shook the water from me. I ran my fingers through my hair and untangled it. My hospital gown was soaked through and it clung to me like an extra layer of skin. Once I put my coat on, I placed my hands back beneath the frothing fountain, and once they were covered with the freezing water, I went over to Kayla who sat slumped on the bench. Gently, I covered her

cracked lips with my wet fingers. Instinctively, Kayla popped her tongue from her mouth and licked at the tiny droplets of water.

Seeing what I was trying to do, Isidor cupped his hands, filled them with water from the fountain and came over to the bench. Holding them out, I lent Kayla forward and said, “Kayla, drink some water. It will make you feel better.” I didn’t know if it would or not, it hadn’t taken the cramps away in my stomach, but it had cooled my skin and made me feel more alert and awake.

Kayla lent forward with her eyes closed and sipped some of the water that Isidor had cupped in his hands. Some of it dripped from the corners of her mouth, but she swallowed some. Leaning back on the bench, Kayla slowly opened her eyes.

“I’m sorry, Kiera, about what happened,” she said. “I didn’t really want to hurt you.”

“It’s okay,” I whispered and smoothed the hair away from her brow. “Come over to the fountain and have a wash, you’ll feel so much better.”

Closing her eyes on me, she shook her head. “I just want to sleep,” she murmured.

Knowing that if I didn’t get her fever down quick, she would be in serious trouble, I looked at Isidor and said, “You stay here with Kayla, I won’t be long.”

“Where are you going?” Isidor asked, and I could see that he was already burning-up again, as sweat ran from his temples.

“I’m gonna go and see if I can find some medicine,” I said, “If Kayla doesn’t get some help soon...” I trailed off.

As if he knew what I meant to say, he slumped down on the bench next to Kayla and said, “Don’t be gone long. We shouldn’t separate like this.”

Heading back across the square, I looked back at him and with the best smile that I could muster, I said, “See you in a while, crocodile.” I knew that Isidor was right, we should stay together, but Kayla was suffering more than we were, and if I didn’t get her some medicine quick, she would only slow our escape.

I hurried as fast as I could through the uninhabited town, and at times, the silence seemed deafening. My whole body ached, and any benefits I had felt after showering in the fountain had now passed. The skin on my arms and legs itched and prickled with heat, and the scar on my leg throbbed. After some time, I came upon a street full of shops. I looked up at one of the buildings, and hidden amongst the grime and dirt, I could just make out a sign that read ‘High Street’. Like all of the other buildings in town, they looked as if they had been built hundreds of years ago. Each of

them had been constructed out of stone and beams of wood, but some of them looked as if they had been modernised, as the old lattice windows had been removed and replaced with big, glass windows and modern-looking name signs. There was a small boutique, a shoe shop, several classy-looking restaurants, and one small electronics outlet. I made my way along the deserted street until I came upon a department store. It wasn't as grand as anything I might have seen in a shopping mall, but in the front windows stood dummies dressed in the latest fashions.

Knowing that all of us would need some new and warm clothes, I pushed on the large glass doors and they swung silently open. The store stank and the smell was similar to the stench I had come across on the road. Next to the door there was a display of scarves, so I pulled one free and wrapped it around my nose and mouth.

I took a deep breath and crept through the store.

"Shit, this is creepy!" I whispered, trying to stay calm. But with every little noise I heard, I would freeze on the spot, my heart pounding. "Get a grip, Kiera!" I said aloud, "It's just a store with dead people in it!" I shuddered, but hearing the sound of my own voice kind of made me feel more at ease, as if I were having a conversation with someone; that I wasn't alone.

Further into the store, I came across cashiers slumped unceremoniously across the counters. A security guard lay slouched in the doorway of an elevator, and I had to step over a beautician from the perfume counter who lay face-down on the floor. I walked over to the clothing section, just wanting to get out of the store as soon as possible. I plucked myself a pair of jeans from a rack and pulled myself a sweatshirt from a hanger. Taking myself a pair of knickers, a bra, and some socks, I pulled off the filthy hospital gown and got dressed into my new clothes and they felt soft and fresh against my skin.

I took a pair of trainers from a display and held them against the sole of my foot.

“I think they’ll fit,” I said to myself, prising them on over my feet. I hurriedly tied the laces then grabbed a coat from the display. I put it on, and before ditching my old one, I removed my iPod, Murphy’s crucifix, and the computer disc from the pockets. Then, snatching a rucksack from a display, I threw in some clothes and shoes for Kayla and Isidor. I had to guess their sizes and what they might like, but I figured anything was better than Kayla’s dirt-ridden gown and Isidor’s striped pyjama bottoms. Glad to be leaving the store, I made my way out.

I pulled the scarf from my face and dragged my hair into a ponytail. I tied the scarf around my hair, and apart from the ever-increasing stabbing

pains in my gut, I felt human – *half-human* – again.

I was conscious of the fact that the sun was beginning to fade behind the mountains in the distance and if there were vampires lurking in the town, they would soon come awake and start searching for food. A wind had picked up and I looked up at the clouds, which were turning gunmetal grey as they hung over the mountaintops.

Across the street I saw a supermarket. Without wasting another moment, I darted over to it. The automatic doors hissed open and I stepped inside. Just like the department store, the supermarket was littered with the deceased.

The freezers and fridges were still working but the non-frozen meat was rotting in pools of its own blood. This immediately gave me some idea as to how long I'd been held captive in the zoo. I had been taken hostage in October and the food looked at least six to eight weeks out of date. So that made it early to mid-December. I knew I had only been in the zoo a few days – so had I been in the facility prior to that? But where was it?

I picked up some of the meat and the sight and smell of it reminded me of the red stuff that the white paw would shove through the hatch and into my cell. Just thinking of that made my stomach leap and my throat burn with thirst. Gooseflesh covered my skin as those cravings that had been lurking just beneath the surface revealed themselves again. Dropping

the meat with disgust, the sight of all those decaying bodies in their cars came flooding back into my mind.

Perhaps I'll become a vegetarian! I thought to myself and turned away from the stinking lumps of meat.

I hurried as fast as I could about the supermarket until I came across the canned tins of fruit. I opened up my rucksack and threw several cans inside. Then I went to the isle that housed the biscuits and crisps – sweet stuff would be good – a short burst of energy. I added these to my shopping but kept enough room for some bottles of water. Then to the medicine isle where I took several packs of Aspirin and hoped that these would help control Kayla's, Isidor's, and my own fever.

Once I had everything I thought we might need, I took a can of tinned fruit from my bag and pulled back the ring. Plunging my finger inside, I hooked out a bright orange slice of peach and popped it into my mouth. I then ate another and another until the syrup was running off my chin and onto the floor. When I was full, I gathered up my rucksack and swiping a can of Coke from the fridge on my way out, I swallowed two of the Aspirin and then left the supermarket. It was almost dark outside, and I could hear barking and howling in the distance. The sound of it made my heart race and I knew that I had to get back to the town square and find somewhere for Kayla, Isidor, and me to stay for the night. But where? Then,

glancing across the street, I saw the perfect place. It would be secure and was bound to have somewhere inside that we could lock ourselves away and be safe. But before I brought Kayla and Isidor all the way back across town, I would check it out first – just to make sure that it was as safe as I hoped it would be.

So, throwing the rucksack over my shoulder, I crossed the street and stepped into the police station.

Chapter Twenty-Two

I hoisted myself over the front counter as the door leading to the rest of the station was locked. I walked as quietly as I could through a maze of corridors, pushing doors open as I went. In several of them, I found dead police officers curled on the floor. All of them, like the dead in the cars, were locked rigid in grotesque poses, as they silently grabbed at their throats and faces. Some of the police officers were dressed like the vampire-cops, in black boiler suits and thick, heavy boots. These must have been the real T.S.U. officers, not the ones I'd seen rip the throat out of the police sergeant while I had been hiding in the park with Potter, Luke, and my other friends. Some of them had guns clutched in their dead hands and I could see bullet holes sprayed across some of the walls.

"What's happened here?" I asked aloud, my voice echoing back at me off the walls. Deep down I knew what had happened, but I could *see* that these officers had fought to save the police station. It had become a fortress against the Vampyrus and Lycanthrope who had tried to storm it from outside. But the Vampyrus and Lycanthrope had been let in, they

hadn't forced their way in. There had been a traitor amongst these police officers. Hunkering down, I could see that the officers' flesh wasn't as decomposed as much as those cocooned in their cars. They showed all the signs of only being dead a few days. The police station door had been left open, it hadn't been smashed down, which meant somebody had opened it from the inside. These police officers had retreated back into this room, where they had fired upon the Vampyrus and Lycanthrope that came for them.

I had seen enough. I closed the door and made my way deeper into the deserted police station. The florescent lights overhead flickered and buzzed, and I guessed that the station was now running on its emergency energy source. How long it would last before I was plunged into total darkness, I didn't know. My stomach was beginning to feel like I'd swallowed broken glass, and I wished that I hadn't eaten those peach slices. Sweat dripped from my forehead and stung my eyes.

At the end of the corridor, I found a set of stairs. Slowly, I climbed them and at the top, I came across a small landing with a door set into the far wall. Written across it were the words:

Control Room

Authorised Personnel Only

I doubted if the warning still held any relevance, and technically I had never been dismissed from the Force, so I pushed the door open and stepped inside. The room was circular in shape and in the middle, there was a series of control panels and computer screens. Radio headsets and microphones lay littered across the desks, entangled around the arms of the dead staff that had once worked in there.

Again the room smelled ripe of decomposing flesh, but I tried to block it from my mind. I walked around the central control panel, mindful not to step on any of the bodies that lay sprawled at my feet.

I looked at one of the computer screens and a message flashed on and off in green letters. It read:

...all mobile phone lines down. No formal lines of communication open. Internet has gone off line...

The next screen read:

...the clouds seem to be alive. They are coming out of the clouds...

And the last screen flashed:

...they're animals. It's the wolves...and they are talking...

I felt something brush up against my leg and I looked down to see Nik standing beside me.

“What are you doing here?” I gasped with surprise.

“Watching your back,” he woofed, and he glanced at the message about the talking wolves.

“Why?” I asked him, still startled by his sudden appearance.

Then, staring at me with his crazy yellow eyes, he barked, “Like I said, Kiera, it’s all about redemption.”

Breaking his stare, I picked up one of the radio handsets, which was attached to the array of control panels.

“What are you doing?” Nik asked.

“Calling for help!”

“But -”

“Look, there are dead police officers in here,” I cut in, “And they only died in the last few days, which might mean that they were able to tell the rest of the world that exists on the other side of these goddamn

mountains, what's been going on here." Then, turning my back on him, I pressed the talk button on the handset and spoke into it.

"Help! Somebody help us! If anyone is receiving this please come back to me!" I released the talk button and waited – no prayed - for a response.

Nothing, only static.

"If anyone can hear this, please help us!" I said again into the handset and again there was only silence.

There was a dial attached to the control panel so I turned it from left to right, hoping that I would tune into another signal – one that had a voice at the other end of it.

I pressed the talk button again and this time I said, "My name is Kiera Hudson and I've been locked up in a zoo...I'm in a town called Wasp Water set amongst the Cumbria mountains. There are dead people here – hundreds of them...please..."

Then suddenly, I heard a snapping sound and I looked round to see Nik chewing through the wire that led from the handset and into the control panel.

"What are you doing!" I screeched in disbelief. "Don't you want me to be rescued?"

"And that's exactly why I've bitten through the wire," he barked.

“What are you talking about?” I cried.

“Because those who come to save you might not be your friends,” he said.

I was speechless and just shook my head in disbelief as Nik continued. “Doctor Hunt told me that one of your friends is a traitor- that they are working for this *invisible man*...”

“Look you’ve already told me this and...”

“Your friend Murphy was reluctant to believe what Doctor Hunt said and it cost him his life,” Nik stared at me, his eyes wide and fiery.

“Look, Hunt got it wrong. None of my friends are working for this...*invisible man*,” I snapped at him. “I trust them – *all* of them!”

“And so did your friend, Murphy,” Nik said.

To hear those words made me realise that Nik was right. He was right because in my heart I knew that Murphy had come to suspect that one of us was a traitor. I could remember the conversation that I’d heard between Murphy and Potter in the signal box next to the disused railway line. Potter had been mad at Murphy as he believed that he suspected him of being the traitor. But knowing this, I still glared back at Nik, and said, “You’re wrong about my friends and so was Doctor Hunt – none of them are traitors. I trust all of them with my life.”

Nik shook his giant head and said, “Why don’t you do what you believe is best, Kiera?”

“Sounds like a plan to me,” I snapped and then threw the radio set onto the floor.

I stormed past Nik and left the control room.

“Where are you going?” he called out.

“To find a safe place for me and my *friends* to sleep!” I hollered angrily back over my shoulder. It was then that my head began to feel light and weightless. I started to retrace my steps back down the stairs, but halfway down, my stomach knotted and a searing bolt of pain cut through me. Gripping the handrail, I staggered down another two steps or so. The handrail felt ice cold against the burning skin of my hand. The world turned black, then came back into focus again and I could hear the sound of running in the distance. I glanced behind me and back up at the stairs. Nik stood at the top and silently looked down at me. I held out my hand towards him, as the sound of approaching feet grew louder. Everything swayed before me, and my whole body seemed to lock and go rigid as the cravings for blood consumed me.

With my hands outstretched before me in a feeble attempt to fight off whoever or whatever it was running loose in the police station, I lurched down the last few stairs. In the corridor, a figure loomed up in front of me

and grabbed me by the arms. Too weak to fight them off, I collapsed against them, and as the lights went out inside my mind, the last thing I heard was someone whisper in my ear, “Take it easy, tiger!”

Chapter Twenty-Three

I woke to find the door to my cell open. The wire mesh was hanging from the hole in the concrete ceiling just like I'd left it, before making my escape.

But what was I doing back in my cell? Had I been recaptured?

My head hurt, and it felt as if my skull was being crushed in a vice. There was a dull thud behind my eyes, my throat was burning raw, and my stomach felt as if my intestines were being strangled by an invisible pair of hands.

Praying that no one would hear me, I crept towards the open door and out into the corridor on the other side. It was then that I noticed I was wearing the clothes that I'd taken from the store.

The sound of barking rebounded off the walls all around me. It made my heart beat so fast with fear that it felt as if it were trying to punch its way out of my chest. I tiptoed around a bend in the corridor. I stopped immediately and jumped back in the direction which I had come and pressed myself flat against the wall.

There was a wolf down there! And it was Sparky. How did I know that? I just did. I waited several seconds just to make sure that I hadn't been hallucinating and peeked around the edge of the wall. Sparky was still there, but now he was pacing back and forth outside an open door further down the corridor.

"I don't know how the doctor could have escaped," he whined.

With my head pressed flat against the wall, I watched from my hiding place as a winged man appeared from the room and approached Sparky. "We need Ravenwood!" he said, his voice low and husky, but there was a hint of anger.

I tried to stare at him, but his face seemed to be cast in shadow. But that couldn't be right? There were no shadows in this brightly-lit corridor. So how was it that I couldn't see his face? His upper body was naked, and I could see that it was taut with muscle. His legs were covered in a black pair of combat trousers, and his feet hidden by thick boots.

"I have hunters looking for him, but -" Sparky started.

"I don't want to hear excuses!" the man snapped. Sparky flinched backwards, his claws clacking on the tiled floor.

"They're not excuses, my -"

Before Sparky had a chance to finish, the man with the long, black wings and the face masked in shadow gripped him by the throat. "Close this

place down. The half-breeds are no good to me in this state. We'll move our work to The Hollows."

"But what about the half-breeds we've been breeding?" Sparky asked, and it sounded somewhere between a bark and grunt, unable to speak properly with the man gripping him by the throat.

"Turn off their life supports like we did with the half-breeds at the facility," the man said, releasing his grip on Sparky.

What facility? I wondered. Was that the place where I'd been operated on?

"But what about the virus?" Sparky asked.

"Once we have Ravenwood again, we'll have the cure," the man said, and his voice was low, almost a whisper again.

"What about Hudson and the others?"

Hearing Sparky mention my name, I slid round the edge of the wall, not because I feared that I might be seen, it was the thumping of my heart that I hoped they wouldn't hear.

"They couldn't have gotten far, not in their conditions," the man said, and the tips of his wings made a whispering sound as they brushed against the ground. "Don't concern yourselves with them, I'll worry about Kiera and her friends."

"What about us?" Sparky chipped in nervously.

“What do you mean us?”

“If you’re heading back to The Hollows, where does that leave me and the rest of the Lycanthrope?”

“I need you to stay here and prepare for the final attack,” the man said, and he sounded as if he were growing tired of Sparky’s questions.

“But...”

“I’ve told you, I’m not interested in excuses. What happened in Wasp Water was just the start – a practice if you like, for when we attack the bigger towns, cities - London,” the man said, in his low husky voice, as if speaking from behind a mask.

“If only we had...” Sparky started, “Somebody like Kiera. Now she is loose, she’ll go looking for Ravenwood. She’s not stupid – she’ll know that he holds the key to breaking the code – she’ll find him and the code. That’s what she does, that’s what she’s good at – I’ve seen her in action.”

“And so have I,” the man said. “Don’t you think I know that she’ll go looking for the doctor? Why do you think her escape was made so easy?”

“So you let her escape?” Sparky sniggered.

“Of course – I needed someone to find the good doctor and she won’t go far – she’ll never even get out of Wasp Water,” the faceless man said.

“And then you want us to go after her and bring her and the doctor back...”

“There will be no need for that,” the man said, with a certain air of confidence.

“How can you be so sure?” Sparky asked.

“Because Kiera and I are friends now,” the man said. “She’ll bring Ravenwood to me of her own free will.”

“Why would she do that?” Sparky barked, and like him I was curious to know why I would do such a thing.

“Because, Kiera trusts me,” the man whispered.

“So she knows you then?” Sparky asked. “But nobody knows you – no one has ever seen your face.”

“Kiera has seen it,” the man almost seemed to laugh. “Kiera sees everything!”

Hearing a noise behind me, I wheeled round and shrieked in terror as I found myself staring into the menacing face of a Vampyrus. Stumbling backwards, I moved away from it. The Vampyrus came forward brandishing two hooked claws. Its muscles rippling beneath its black and silver flecked fur.

“I’ve found her!” he roared triumphantly.

Before his deep, menacing voice had stopped reverberating off the corridor walls, Sparky and the man with the shadow across his face were coming towards me.

“She knows where the code is!” the Vampyrus hissed.

My lower jaw began to chatter uncontrollably as I continued to move backwards up the corridor. My stomach began to cramp again, and I suddenly felt hot – as if I were edging my way backwards into a furnace.

I wanted to speak –but my lips flapped together as if I were blowing a raspberry.

“What is it you are trying to say?” Sparky asked smugly.

“R – R – RUN!” I screamed as I turned on the spot and raced away up the corridor.

I ran as hard and as fast as I could and for a moment – just the briefest of moments - my legs seemed to take on a life of their own as they began to propel me forwards at an incredible speed. But out of my peripheral vision, I saw something big and dark leap from one of the rooms that I sped past and come crashing into me. Whatever it was hit me with such force that I slammed into the corridor wall. I gasped as my head made contact with the floor with a sickening thud. I opened my eyes and screamed as I stared into the face of that man. But I couldn’t see his face, not really. It was as if he were wearing a wide brimmed hat which cast a dark shadow

across his features. But the shadows moved, twisted and contorted out of shape, as if whatever hid beneath them was writhing back and forth in pain.

Then, everything seemed to swirl in and out around me – from light to dark and back again as I fought to remain conscious. I dragged myself along the floor by my fingertips, desperate not to be caught by him. And then I screamed, the pain exploding like a bomb going off in my leg. I glanced back in horror to see that a wolf had sunk his razor-sharp teeth into my leg and was now slowly dragging me back towards him. But it wasn't just any wolf – it was Nik who was taking me back to my captors.

“What about your redemption?” I screamed at him.

I shut my eyes against the sight of his drooling and grinning jaws.

“No Nik,” I pleaded. “I thought you had my back!”

My leg felt as if it was on fire. I could hear the grunts and the growls of the others as they approached. I needed to look...I needed to find out what they were going to do to me. I opened my eyes to see the Vampyrus bring his meaty fist down towards me. Everything went black and...

Chapter Twenty-Four

...there was a red light winking on and off in the darkness.

“Who’s there?” I croaked, sitting up on a bed. My body shivered uncontrollably, and I had never felt so ill. My skin was burning up, stabbing pains knifed through my stomach, and my back ached as if it had been stamped on. Crying out in pain, I swung my legs over the side of the bed, and the floor felt cold against my burning feet. That red light winked on and off again from the corner, but as my bleary eyes grew accustomed to the darkness, I could see a square of pale light just ahead. I stumbled towards it, my legs buckling beneath me. With my hands stretched out, I felt like someone trying to find their way blindfolded. Then my fingers brushed against something hard and cold – it was metal. A door. That square of pale light was coming through a hatch set into it. I was in a cell.

Had I been captured again? Was I back in my cell in the zoo?

My brains felt scrambled, and my heart thumped so hard that it felt as if my eyes were going to explode in their sockets.

I banged weakly on the door with my fists, and a dull thud echoed back at me. The red winking light moved in the darkness – it was coming

towards me, then dropped to the floor and disappeared.

“Where am I?” I whispered, and knocked the cold sweat out of my eyes.

“You’re somewhere safe,” a voice said, and a strong set of arms wrapped themselves around me and held me close. My head rested against their chest, and the faint smell of tobacco coming from their shirt made me realise that the red light I had seen had been the end of a cigarette being smoked in the dark.

“Potter?” I barely managed.

“I’ve got you, sweet-cheeks,” he whispered, guiding me back towards the bed in the corner of the cell.

“Where am I?” I asked again as he gently laid me down.

“In the cells beneath the police station,” he answered, his voice was soft, like a dream floating over me.

“Police station?” I mumbled.

“That’s right.” he said, his voice still a whisper. “We’re safe here.”

“I’m thirsty,” I told him.

“I’ll get you some water,” he said.

“I don’t want water,” I groaned as the pains in my stomach twisted like a corkscrew. “I want some...”

“No, Kiera,” Potter said, and I could feel one of his strong hands stroke my sweat-dampened hair from my brow.

With my eyes closed against the pain, I gripped his arms and pulled him close. “Please Potter,” I begged. “Just a little – it will take the pain away.”

“No,” he said firmly and pushed me down onto the bed.

“Please...”

“No,” he insisted.

“I hate you!” I spat.

“Don’t most people?” he said, and as I flopped back onto the bed, I could picture his face with that wry smile tugging at the corner of his lips.

I opened my mouth to speak and said...

“...What are the odds of me escaping a cell only to find myself freely sleeping in one on my first night of freedom?”

“I’m sorry,” I heard Nik say.

I opened my eyes to see him standing in the doorway. His giant fur covered frame almost blocking out the pale light that came from the corridor outside.

“Sorry for what?” I asked him.

“For biting through that wire,” he grunted.

“Let’s just forget it and get some sleep,” I said. “Tomorrow I’m going to go and get my friends I left by the fountain and then go and find Doctor Ravenwood. You and me can both go our separate ways.”

Nik came into the cell and lay on the floor beside my bed.

“Why don’t you just run, Kiera – save yourself?” he asked.

I reached down and from my rucksack I pulled out a can of the tinned fruit that I had taken from the supermarket. On the front of the tin was a picture of a ripe juicy apple that had been cut in half.

“See that apple, Nik?” I asked.

“What about it?”

“You see those seeds? If you took them and planted them in the ground each one would grow into another apple tree. In turn those trees would produce apples and each apple would be full of seeds which again if planted would make several more apple trees and so on it goes.”

“I’m not sure what you mean,” he said.

“Well if you just kept on planting those seeds, in the end you would end up with a world covered in apple trees. That’s just the same as the vampires. The more the Vampyrus feed on humans, the more vampires will just keep on multiplying until in the end...I won’t need to run, because there will be no place left to run to. The world will be infested with vampires. I

will have to stop running someday – so today seems as good a day as any.”

Closing my eyes, I turned towards the wall, and added, “Instead of having a world of apple trees there will be a world of...”

“...pain,” somebody said.

“Hopefully her pain has gone,” another voice said.

I opened my eyes to see a teenage boy and man standing in the doorway of my police cell staring in at me. I blinked and rubbed my eyes, not believing what I was seeing. The boy was Isidor and he didn't look like a boy at all really, it was just that he looked dwarfed by the height of Jack Seth who stood beside him.

The first thing I noticed was that Isidor looked a lot better. His short dark brown hair looked freshly washed, and although his face looked tired, his blue eyes glistened, and his little beard was neatly trimmed beneath his chin. He wore a black jacket and combat trousers to match. I looked at Seth, and he looked older than I remembered him. He wore a baseball cap, which was pulled low across his brow and his eyes glowed yellow from his sunken eye sockets. His face still looked emaciated and his skin was waxy and pale. He stood bent forward, so as not to scrape his head against the ceiling of the cell. Seth wore the black denim jeans and blue denim shirt I'd seen him

wear before. The red bandanna was still knotted about his scrawny neck and his body still looked painfully thin.

“How do you feel, Kiera?” Isidor asked, rubbing his unshaven chin with the back of his hand.

“Better...I think,” I whispered, realising that those pains in my stomach had gone along with that incredible thirst. “How are you feeling?” I asked, realising that the last time I’d seen him, he sat slumped on the seat by the fountain in the town square.

“Not a hundred percent, but a million times better than I did,” Isidor smiled at me from the doorway.

“And Kayla?” I asked, trying to stand up, but my legs still felt as if they were made from jelly.

“She’s still sleeping,” Seth cut in.

“Sleeping where?” I asked, not entirely trusting him.

Sensing my distrust, Isidor came forward and said, “It’s okay, Kiera. Kayla is asleep in the cell next door.”

“How long have I been out of it?” I asked, my mouth feeling dry and my tongue like an old piece of carpet.

“Four days,” Seth said.

“Four days!” I croaked.

“You’ve been going cold-turkey,” Seth almost seemed to grin and his yellow eyes sparkled.

“Kayla and I have been going through the same,” Isidor explained. “I woke up from my nightmare yesterday.”

“Nightmare,” I whispered almost to myself. “I’ve had plenty of them.”

“You were delirious,” Seth said. “You’ve been shaking, convulsing, and God only knows what else as you battled your addiction to human flesh.”

“Is it over then?” I asked.

“There will be a constant battle going on in your body, heart, and soul for the rest of your life,” Seth explained. “You’ll never be free of it, but you’ll learn to control it. Then staring at me from beneath the brim of his baseball cap, his eyes took on a sudden glow and he smiled, “God knows, Kiera, that I have to fight my urges every time I’m near you.” And just for the briefest of moments I knew he wasn’t joking, as I saw those images again in his eyes – the snapshots of him with his hands around my throat, his skeletal frame lowering itself over mine.

Breaking his stare, I looked at Isidor and said, “Where’s Potter?”

“He’s gone to get more supplies, before nightfall,” Isidor said.

“Supplies?” I asked.

“We’re leaving at dawn tomorrow,” Isidor said.

“Leaving for where?” I asked him.

“The Hollows.”

“The Hollows? But what about Luke?”

Grinning, Seth looked at me and said, “When Isidor says we’re leaving for The Hollows, he means, *us* – Potter isn’t returning to The Hollows, he’s going back to the zoo to rescue Luke.”

Struggling to stand up, I said, “I’m going with him.”

“He’s already got a partner,” Seth grinned.

“Who?”

“Eloisa,” Seth said, still smiling. “Remember her?”

How could I forget that stunningly beautiful woman – Lycanthrope?

“Yes,” I told him. “I remember her.”

“She’ll look after your friend, Potter,” Seth said. “And I’ll look after you.”

I straightened up, shoved past Seth, and I left the cell. Over my shoulder I shouted, “Potter must be going out of his tiny mind if he thinks I’m going anywhere with you!”

Chapter Twenty-Five

Isidor came after me down the passageway that led between the cells.

“Does Potter really think I’m going to go anywhere with that freak?” I asked as I eyed Isidor.

Isidor took my arm gently and stopped me from going any further. Looking back at the cell we had come from, as if to make sure that we weren’t being overheard, he said “Kiera, we don’t have time for this. Potter has a plan.”

“A plan?” I grimaced. “Who put him in charge?” I couldn’t hide the anger I felt for Potter for even suggesting that I go anywhere with Seth.

“Potter will be back soon,” Isidor said. “You should talk to him because he won’t tell me anything. It’s as if he doesn’t trust me.”

“I thought after what happened in the caves between you two that you were okay with each other now?” I asked him.

“Obviously not,” Isidor sighed.

“Okay, I’ll talk to him, but I’m not happy,” I said. “Where’s Kayla?”

“This way,” Isidor said and he led me away down the passage.

“Does she know you’re her brother?” I asked him as we walked.

“No, not yet,” Isidor said. “I haven’t had a chance to speak to her about anything. Like me and you, she’s been out of it for the last few days.”

“We’re going to have to tell her that Sparky killed her mum – *your* mum.” Then realising my mistake, I took Isidor’s arm and looking at him, I said, “I’m sorry Isidor, I know that Lady Hunt was your mother too – but you’ve had a bit longer to understand things, you know, deal with what’s been happening.”

“What about our father?” Isidor asked me. “Do you think he is still alive?”

“This is going to be hard for you, Isidor, but I don’t believe he is,” I said, and gently squeezed his arm. “He told me that he was going to end his life once he had completed the DNA coding that the Vampyrus would use to create the half-breeds. But your father was a good man, Isidor. He helped me escape in his own way. Did you not speak to him about any of this at the facility?”

“I didn’t see my father at the facility – it wasn’t he who treated – *operated* - on me, if that’s what they were doing. It was another Doctor called Ravenwood. But to be honest I was so drugged up on meds most of the time that I could barely speak. Then this Doctor Ravenwood stopped coming and they moved me to that zoo.” Isidor explained. “Your mate

Sparky got me hooked on the red stuff and I went kinda crazy. I knew I had to get off the stuff – so I guess, like you, I stopped eating it, although doing so made me feel as if I was gonna die. But you know what? I would have rather died than spend the rest of my life eating humans.”

“How do you feel now, your cravings, I mean?” I asked him.

“They’re bearable, I guess,” he replied. “A bit like an itch that won’t go away, so I try not to think about it. But it’s still the early days, I guess.”

“And it’s that itch that will keep you alive, kid,” someone said from the other end of the corridor.

We both turned in the direction of the voice to see Potter leaning against the custody block wall. Eloisa towered behind him, her perfectly shaped legs seeming to go on forever in a pair of tight-fitting jeans. Her long, blond hair spilled over her shoulders and down the front of the black jacket she wore. Her skin was pale, but this only highlighted her blood-red lips and golden eyes. Potter took a pack of cigarettes from his shirt pocket and lit one, his right eye closing as the blue smoke trailed up towards the ceiling. He jetted two streams of smoke from his nose and came towards me, Eloisa close behind him. I couldn’t help but notice how *close* she trailed him, and I didn’t like it.

“Good to see you back in the world of the living, sweet-cheeks,” He said, coming towards me.

When he was close enough, I rolled my arm back, then punched him straight in the face.

His head rocked back on his neck, and the cigarette which had dangled from the corner of his mouth span away. “What was that for!” he snapped. “I’ve been trying to save you!”

“How hard?” I asked him, then shot a quick glance at Eloisa.

“What’s that supposed to mean?” he said, rubbing his jaw.

“I was stuck in that filthy zoo for God knows how long while you’ve been gallivanting around here!” I snapped.

Then, gently touching Potter on the shoulder, Eloisa said in the sickliest sweet voice that I’d ever heard, “Sean, I’ll go and find Jack, you two look as if you need to talk.” Then she was gone, striding away on those damn legs of hers, and out of the corner of my eye, I saw Isidor slope away too.

“Sean!” I hissed. “No one ever calls you *Sean*!”

“It’s my name,” he snapped back.

“Now I can see why you took so long in coming to find me!” I shouted.

“Now listen here, tiger,” Potter shouted back, “storming that zoo wasn’t my idea of a rescue – it would’ve been more like suicide! That place was like a fortress!”

“Oh, yeah?” I seethed. “We’ll I managed to break out all right!”

“So what are you complaining about?” he said.

“What am I complaining about?” I almost shrieked in disbelief.

“I’ve been operated on, bitten by a werewolf, imprisoned, beaten, forced to eat human flesh and to top it all off, I had to use a hole in the floor as a goddamn toilet!”

“I’ve heard that squat toilets are all the rage in places like France...”
he started.

“But I wasn’t in France!” I yelled at him. “I was in a freaking zoo being treated like some kind of animal, while you were living it up with *her!*”

“Her?” Potter said, looking now somewhat bemused. “Eloisa, you mean? She’s not so bad.”

“Well you’ve definitely changed your tune,” I spat. “Only a few weeks ago you were babbling on about how you could barely forgive a girl for having hairy armpits let alone a hairy tongue!”

Then, trying to hide an arrogant smirk that I so much wanted to knock from his face, Potter said, “Okay, I get what’s going on here.”

“Get what?”

“You’re jealous,” he said and his eyes glistened.

“Jealous! Me, jealous of *her*?” I blustered. Then, pushing him out of the way, I added, “I was right – you are out of your tiny mind!”

Chapter Twenty-Six

I stormed down the corridor set between the two rows of cells, and finding the one Kayla inhabited, I went inside. Kayla was sitting propped up on the bed, and Isidor sat beside her.

“What was all the shouting about?” Kayla asked me, as I slumped down on the end of her bed.

I guessed with her sensitive hearing she knew what Potter and I had been arguing about, but I still replied, “Ah, nothing. Just forget about it – I am. More importantly, how are you doing?”

“Okay, I guess,” she said, untangling her matted hair with her fingers.

Although, she did look better then when I last saw her semiconscious in the town square, her face still looked wan, and her eyes dull.

“Are the nightmares over?” she asked me.

“The nightmares?” I asked. Although in my heart, I knew what she meant.

“The Vampyrus, that zoo, the experiments?” She said, her eyes wide and fearful.

“That part of the nightmare is,” I tried to assure her. I knew I had to tell her about her mum, her dad, and Isidor had his secret, too.

“What about my mum?” she asked. “My dad? Has he been found?”

“Your dad was at that facility where they operated on us,” I started gently.

“The facility?” she said, leaning forward to look at me. “What was he doing there?”

“He was captured, just like we were,” I said. “Phillips captured him to finish work on a cure that your father and Doctor Ravenwood were working on.”

“A cure for what?” Kayla asked, looking at me and then Isidor, wanting answers.

“I’m a half-breed just like you, Kayla,” Isidor said. “Not many of us survive past the age of sixteen. As far as we know, there are only the three of us – me, you, and Kiera.”

“So you’re just like me?” Kayla asked, looking at me.

“Yes,” I nodded.

“You have wings then?” She asked.

“Yes,” and the thought of those bony fingers made my flesh crawl.

“You’re scared about that, aren’t you?” Kayla said staring at me.

“How do you know that?” I asked, staring back.

“Your heart quickened when you mentioned them. I could hear it.”

Then turning to look at Isidor, she added, “But why is your heart racing, Isidor? What are you scared of?”

“Tell her,” a voice said from the open doorway, and I turned to see Potter standing there.

“Tell me what?” Kayla said, swinging her legs over the side of the bed, and placing her feet firmly on the floor.

“Now’s not a good time,” Isidor said, standing up to face Potter.

“Time is one thing we don’t have,” Potter said, fixing him with his cool stare. “Nor sentiment.”

“Potter, please,” I said, now standing myself.

“If you won’t tell her, I will,” Potter insisted.

“Tell me what?” Kayla said, her voice now brimming with confusion.

I looked at Isidor; he was staring at Potter.

“Why do you always have to be such a prick?” Isidor snapped, taking a step towards Potter.

“Listen, kid, we don’t have time to wallow in self-pity here, we’ve all lost people that we’ve cared about -” Potter started.

“Don’t call me kid,” Isidor snapped. “I thought we’d sorted that out!”

“Jesus, you sound like a tune that’s been stuck on repeat,” Potter said back. Then looking down at Kayla, he added, “Look, I hate to be the one to break it to you, sweetheart, but some spotty-faced asshole called Sparky killed your mum, your father has probably topped himself because he helped Phillips come up with the magic formula that is going to wipe the human race from the face of the planet, and the dude standing over here next to me with the Shaggy-Do beard is your brother.”

Without warning, Isidor darted forward and reached for Potter. But Potter was too quick and slammed Isidor into the wall of the cell. Holding him there with one strong hand, Potter lent in close and said, “Listen to me, Eisenhower, or whatever your name might be, the girl needs to know the truth and she needs to know it quick. We don’t have time to worry about people’s feelings here.”

“Why do you have to be so cruel?” Isidor shouted.

“Cruel?” Potter snapped. “I tell you what’s cruel. Keeping the truth from the girl over there. Yeah the truth ain’t pretty and its gonna hurt her, but with any luck that will make her angry – so fucking angry that she’ll want to rip the head off the first vampire she comes across, because that’s the only way we’re gonna get out of this. This isn’t some sorta game, you

know. The Vampyrus and Lycanthrope are getting ready to shit all over this country from a great height, and we ain't gonna stop them if we're walking around booing and wooing for the people that we've lost. You need to turn those feelings of self-pity into rage – *hate* – my friend, because those are going to be the only emotions that are of any use to me. You don't think those Vampyrus and Lycanthrope are going to pity you, do you? They hate you, *us*, and anyone who stands in their way. So if you ain't up to it, go now because I'm not taking any flower-picking, peace-loving, tree-hugging, whale-saving, do-gooder with me!"

"I can't hate like you," Isidor said.

"Then improvise!" Potter snapped.

"Who put you in charge anyway?" Isidor said back, his eyes glowing.

"Phillips did."

"Phillips?" I asked, confused.

Then, releasing his grip on Isidor, Potter looked at me and said, "The moment he ripped Murphy's heart out."

"Murphy's dead too?" Kayla began to wail out loud.

"Yeah and so we'll all be, if the lot of you don't get your act together," Potter said and left the cell.

I watched as Isidor went to Kayla and slipped his arm round her shoulder, then with my body trembling with anger, I rushed out into the corridor.

“Potter!” I shouted after him.

“What?” Potter yelled back over his shoulder as he continued to walk away from me.

Rushing after him, I said, “I just don’t believe you. How can you be like that to her?”

Potter continued to stride ahead of me, and I had to trot to keep up with him. Leaving the cells behind us, Potter pushed against a door and disappeared into a darkened room. I followed him, the door nearly hitting me in the arse as it swung shut behind me. Even though there were no lights on in the room, I could see through the darkness. We were in a small, deserted cafeteria, where the police officers who were once stationed here took their meal breaks. Chairs lay upturned and on their sides like fallen skittles and tables had been pushed against the walls and windows. Potter stood alone in the middle of the room, a cigarette already burning in the corner of his mouth.

“What’s gotten into you?” I demanded as I marched towards him.

“What’s gotten into me?” he scoffed. “If I remember rightly, you smacked me in the face the moment you laid eyes on me!”

“Where do you get off on making decisions for me without even asking?” I roared.

“What decisions?” he shouted back.

“Deciding that I’m to go off hand in hand into The Hollows with that killer, while you go off to rescue Luke with that walking pair of breasts on legs!” I hissed.

“Breasts on legs?” Potter said, nearly choking on a throat full of cigarette smoke as he stifled his laughter. “You mean Eloisa?”

“I see that you’re on first-name terms with the werewolf –because that’s what she is, Potter. She’s also a child killer and so is her *lover*, Jack Seth!”

“You are jealous and that’s what this is all really about,” Potter smiled. “You’re not pissed at me because I made plans without you – you’re pissed because I’ve been spending time with her.”

“Oh, please,” I groaned, “Why don’t you take your head from out of your own arse and -”

“And what?” Potter said, grinding out his cigarette with the heel of his boot.

“And kiss me!” I snapped.

Potter almost seemed to lunge at me as he gripped my arms and yanked me close. Covering my mouth with his, we kissed each other and I

just wanted to be smothered by him; to be part of him. Raking my fingers through his hair, Potter ran his fingertips down my spine, and I shivered with gooseflesh. I felt consumed by him, and it both thrilled and scared me at the same time, a cocktail of emotions that in some ways I hated, but in others, I passionately enjoyed. I was fearful that I wanted someone so much that in many ways I hated but who had another side to him that I couldn't help but be drawn to, and that scared me. But to be in his arms, to feel his hands roaming the length of my body, to feel his lips pressed hard over mine, took away the memories of my captivity, the operations that I'd endured, the addiction that I had overcome, the realisation that my mother was lost to the Vampyrus, that Murphy had been murdered and Luke...

I pulled away, gently, but I pulled away all the same.

"What's wrong?" Potter whispered, trying to keep me close to him.

"We shouldn't be doing this right now, not while there is so much to do," I said. "We should be planning on how we're going to rescue Luke."

Letting go of me, Potter looked into my eyes and said, "It always comes back to him, doesn't it?"

"He's our friend, Potter," I said, looking away. "We can't just leave him to rot in that prison."

"Don't you think I know that?" he said. "That's why I'm going back for him." After a short pause, he added, "And what happens when I bring

him back?”

“What do you mean?”

“Is it going to be you and Luke again?” he asked, and he didn’t sound angry, just confused. “What about me? Us? What about what happened between us in the caves?”

“How could I forget?” I whispered, but still couldn’t look at him. “You have no idea how much that time we spent together beneath the mountains meant to me.”

“So it wasn’t just because you thought that you we’re going to die this time?”

“Huh?” I said, looking up at him and hating the hurt that I could see in his eyes.

“You said before that you only kissed me in the summerhouse because you thought you were going to die,” he reminded me, and I felt a stab of pain at the thought that I had actually said that to him.

“I didn’t mean that,” I confessed. “I kissed you that time because I wanted to and that’s the truth. I’ve only ever kissed you because I wanted to.”

“But do you really want me, Kiera, or is it Luke?” he asked me.

Looking at him with tears standing in my eyes, I whispered, “Don’t ask me that, Sean, that’s not fair.”

“Sean?” he whispered back. “Nobody ever calls me Sean, remember?”

By the time I’d looked up to give him the answer that I knew he had the right to know, the door to the cafeteria was swinging closed and he had gone.

Chapter Twenty-Seven

I crept from the cafeteria, and looking in both directions up the corridor, I could see Potter had gone. Half of me wanted to go and find him, to talk to him, but the other half of me thought that it would probably be best if I left him alone for a while. Potter was in a cranky mood, but wasn't he always? Still, I made my way back to the cells. As soon as I'd turned onto the passageway, I heard Kayla sobbing in the distance. Her cries echoing off the walls, and my heart ached.

Reaching the cell, I went inside to find Isidor holding her in his arms. She had her head rested against his chest, and I hoped that she was okay with the idea of having a brother. In some way, I guessed that it was probably the best news that she had received; after all, he was the only family she had left.

I sat on the edge of the bed and took one of her hands in mine. Looking up at me with her tear-stained face, she said, "Isidor said that you met my dad at the facility."

Nodding, I said, "Yes, I did."

"Why did he stop coming to see me?" she asked.

“Perhaps he couldn’t bring himself to see you being treated like that, tested and operated on,” I tried to explain.

“But why did he do those tests?” Kayla asked, cuffing away a silver stream of snot that covered her upper lip. “Did he really help Phillips like Potter said?”

“Phillips and the other Vampyrus thought that your dad was helping them. But really, he was tricking them.”

“Tricking them? How?”

“Doctor Ravenwood and your dad had a plan,” I told her. “They wanted to find the cure so they could help future children that were born like us. But they knew that once they had it all figured out, Phillips and this faceless man would use it to breed a race of half-breeds just like us so they could use them to fight the humans when they invaded above ground. You see, Kayla, me, you, and Isidor are very special with amazing gifts, and if the Vampyrus who want to rule the Earth had a whole army at their disposal with our unique abilities then...well, I don’t even want to think about what might happen.”

“So how did my dad and Doctor Ravenwood trick them?” she asked me, her tears now drying on her cheeks.

“I was bitten on the leg by a wolf, his name is Nik,” I said. “The wound became infected, so your father corrupted the cure that he had

designed with the infection. The real DNA code they wrote down.

Ravenwood escaped from the facility with one half of the code and your father wrote the other half down in a book that he gave to me.”

“Where’s the book now?” Kayla asked me.

“I don’t have it,” I said. “I tore pages out of it to help me escape from the zoo, and what was left, Phillips took from me.”

“Then he could have half the code?” Isidor cut in.

“I’m not sure,” I told them both. “I mean, I tore a lot of pages from that book. For all I know, I could have destroyed the pages with the code on.”

“But Ravenwood will know the complete code, right?” Kayla asked me.

“I don’t know that either,” I confessed. “I haven’t a clue as to what this code looks like. It could be a few lines or pages and pages of numbers. I’m guessing that it wouldn’t be something you could easily remember or your dad and Ravenwood wouldn’t have written it down. But your father was a good man,” I said looking at them both. “He encouraged me to escape.”

“How?” Kayla asked.

“He read me passages from children’s books, where the characters were escaping. It was almost as if he was afraid that he was being watched

and listened to – so he had to give me the idea of escaping in a very subtle way.”

“So we need to find Ravenwood.” Isidor said. “But where is he now?”

“He could be anywhere,” I said.

“He will be hiding out in this town somewhere,” a voice suddenly said, and I turned around to see Jack Seth and Eloisa looming in the cell doorway. I didn’t know how long they had been standing there and how much of our conversation they had overheard.

“What makes you say that?” Isidor asked him.

“This town has been sealed off by Phillips and his *special* police force. You know, the ones in the black boiler suits, who sprout fangs and wings and stuff,” Seth said.

“What do you mean they’ve sealed it off?” I asked him, and it hurt my neck to look up at him as he towered over us.

“The rest of the country believes that those attacks on the London Underground were committed by some rabid animals that were smuggled into the UK,” Seth explained. “The newspapers have reported that someone who was bitten down on the Tube Train managed to slip through the cordon back in London and get as far as here before they went half mad with the infection and started attacking the good people of Wasp Water. So to

contain the virus, they have sealed off the town and destroyed all the animals in the zoo to stop the infection spreading.”

“They can’t do that,” I said. “You can’t just shut down a whole town without anyone asking questions.”

“Oh, no?” Eloisa said. “Remember that outbreak of Foot-and-Mouth disease back in two-thousand-and-one and seven? Towns were sealed off all over the place and nobody asked any questions.”

“But that was different,” I said. “That was a genuine disease that was being spread by cattle.”

“Exactly my point,” Eloisa smiled. “You believed it just like everybody else.”

“What are you saying?” Isidor asked her.

“There was no outbreak of Foot-and-Mouth disease,” she smiled. “It was a series of towns that had...how can I say it? A little problem with vampires.”

“See, the government at the time couldn’t let the rest of the country know that,” Seth continued, “And it was rather fortunate at the time for the Vampyrus that one of their own was Minister for Agriculture and Farming and was invaluable at cleaning the mess up.”

“So you’re telling me that the government knows what’s really going on here?” I asked.

“No, of course not,” Eloisa said, as if I were some dumb first grader. God, I really disliked her. “The Prime Minister is far too concerned about saving Europe from collapsing beneath a pile of debt, he hasn’t got time to concern himself with a tiny little town like this. He leaves that up to others – the Vampyrus who have infiltrated the government. People will believe whatever they are told – just like you did back in two-thousand-and-one and two-thousand-and-seven. The rest of society is happy to wander along with their little lives as long as what’s happening in the sleepy town of Wasp Water doesn’t impact on them.”

“And boy, have they got a surprise coming their way,” Seth half-smiled, and his crazy-looking eyes almost seemed to spin in their hollow sockets. “Anyway, me and my good lady are off to bed,” he said. Then fixing his wild eyes on mine he said, “Perhaps you should get some rest too, Kiera, after all, we have to make a long journey together tomorrow.”

Just the thought of spending any time on my own with him made my flesh crawl and I looked away.

Chapter Twenty-Eight

I left Isidor and Kayla alone in the cell, as I guessed that they would have plenty to talk about and would need some time to get to know one another. I didn't feel tired – I'd spent enough time out of it over the last few days. So, picking my coat up from my cell floor I rummaged in my pocket and fished out my iPod. Sticking in the earphones, I switched it on and started to listen to *Grenade* by Bruno Mars. Dropping my coat onto my bed, I saw something bright and shiny fall onto the floor. Reaching down, I picked up the disc I had taken from the monastery. I turned it over in my hands and left the cell.

I made my way back past the cafeteria, pushing open doors on each side of the corridor. Some of the rooms still held sights that I'd rather not have been reminded of, so closing the doors I made my way further down the corridor. At the end, I found a door which had the words, *Report Writing Room*, written neatly across the front of it. I eased the door open. Relieved that there weren't any corpses strewn about the place, I crept inside and closed the door behind me. With the lights out, I made my way across the room towards a long table that housed a number of computers. Sitting down

in front of the first computer I came to, I switched it on. The screen blinked white in the darkness, then came to life. Two boxes appeared on the screen, one for my user name, the second for my password. Knowing what I.T. departments were like in the Force, I hoped that they hadn't yet removed me from the database. I typed in my details and hit the return key. The screen went black, then lit-up with the Force logo and badge.

"Yes!" I whispered, taking the disc and placing it into the hard drive. I listened to the computer whir to life. Another box appeared on the screen which read '*View Files*'. Clicking onto the box, the screen revealed a series of files. There were hundreds, no thousands. I scanned my eyes over them, not knowing what exactly I was looking for, but hoping that one of them would grab my attention.

I dragged the cursor down the page, and about halfway down, I saw a file that had been named, '*Facility 1*'. Opening up the file the screen became awash with diagrams of what looked like big, glass pods. With Bruno Mars singing in my ears, I scrolled down the page, and was baffled by the series of technical diagrams of what looked like a hangar full of racks, on each one there was row upon row of these glass pods. I had no true idea of what they were, but they looked like a series of glass coffins. Then beneath the diagrams, there was a drawing, similar to something that an architect might draw of the monastery. Then, as I looked at the diagram

more carefully, I could see that built into the foundations beneath the monastery was a chamber, which held a mass of these glass-like coffins I'd seen above. I clicked on the image and it increased in size. I continued to zoom in until I gasped at what I could now clearly see.

In each of the coffins lay what looked like a person. It was hard to tell because these were just computer images and not photographs, but each of the people inside the coffins, were featureless. As I sat and stared at the images, I remembered something that one of the monks had said when Potter had been pretending to freak-out for some of the red stuff.

“Brother, take him to the crypt, there is plenty of human flesh for him there,” the monk had said.

Were the images on the screen in front of me what he had been referring to? I wondered. *Row upon row of humans, waiting to be fed upon?*

At the bottom of the page, in bright red letters as if in warning, the following message had been written.

FACILITY CLOSED

I shut down the file and beneath this there was another which had been named ‘*Facility 2*’. Just like I had with the first, I clicked on it and the file opened. Again, I was faced with a series of diagrams of the same pods

come glass coffins. But this was slightly different and had thick umbilical type cords coming from them. I scrolled down the page until I came across another technical drawing of a building. It looked like a large hangar, the type that you might find on an airfield. Again, the diagram had been drawn in such a way that you could see through it and all the hundreds and hundreds of pods that lined the walls. But there was something else. Beneath the building, there seemed to be a tunnel of some kind. It didn't show or say where it led to.

I enlarged the image and zoomed in. There was an upper level to this facility and it had been divided into corridors with rooms leading from them. Some of the rooms had been named. There were examination rooms, laboratories, and an operating theatre. As I sat and stared at the picture, I wondered if this wasn't the facility where Isidor, Kayla, and I had been kept before moving to the zoo. Scrolling to the bottom of the page, I came across a similar message to the one that I had seen before, but this was more of a warning. In bold, red letters it said:

FACILITY CLOSED
BIOHAZARD – NO ADMITTANCE!

Just like I had before, I closed down the file, and was just scanning over the others, curious as to what else I might find on the disc, when a shadow loomed over me, casting the screen in darkness.

Switching off my iPod, I gasped and said, “You nearly scared the hell out of me!”

Without looking at me, Potter leant over the table and switched the computer off.

“I was looking at something,” I said.

“Shhh!” he said, raising a finger to his lips. “There mustn’t be any light. Not even from the screen.”

“What are you talking about?” I whispered.

“Come with me,” he said, and walked towards the windows.

I followed him, and turning to look back at me, he said, “Keep your head down or they might see you.”

Crouching over, I made my way towards the window. Peering over the ledge, I looked out. The window gave a view of the street below, and just opposite I could see the supermarket that I had taken the tins of fruit from. The lights inside were now out. The shop looked in complete darkness, but as I looked into the gloom I could see figures walking about inside amongst the isles and displays.

“Who are they?” I whispered, not taking my eyes off the view below.

“What’s left of the townsfolk,” Potter said. “Yet, they’re not people anymore, they’re vampires.”

I remembered all those dead people in the cars that cluttered the road leading out of town, the bodies in the store and supermarket. My fears had been right; they had woken as vampires, created by the Vampyrus.

“They’ve been coming out every night now, for as long as I’ve been hiding out here with Seth and Eloisa,” Potter whispered.

“What are they doing?” I said, as I watched a group walk into view from further down the street.

“They’re looking for food – *blood*,” Potter hushed. “I guess they’re thirsty.”

I continued to watch the vampires from the window as they almost seemed to roam the street in packs. Their faces were deathly white, their hair and clothes dishevelled. All of them bore the injuries that had been inflicted upon them by the Vampyrus and Lycanthrope. Some shuffled down the street, their heads resting against their shoulders. Others had limbs missing, and I watched one as he tripped over his own entrails that hung from his guts and fell flat on his face in the middle of the street. Then, something bizarre happened and I leapt back from the window. Seeing the

vampire fall onto the road, the other vampires raced over to it and began to feed. With their arms swinging up and down, they ripped and tore the flesh from the fallen vampire. It screamed in pain, and I covered my ears with my hands in an attempt to block out its ear-splitting cries. Peeking over the lip of the window frame, I watched with sickening horror as the vampires in the store raced out onto the street at the smell of blood. Some of them were so eager to feed, that they simply crashed through the windows, sending a shower of glass across the pavement.

“What are they doing?” I whispered at Potter, but unable to tear my eyes from the gruesome scene below.

“I told you they were thirsty,” he whispered back.

“But they’re eating one of their own!”

“All the good human flesh has run out,” he said glancing at me. “All that is left is each other.”

“So what you’re saying is that their cravings will get so bad they will eventually eat each other?” I said.

“That’s exactly what I’m saying,” Potter grinned at me. “They can’t leave the town as it’s been sealed off by Vampyrus and Lycanthrope, so in the end they will turn on each other to feed their thirst. Every night, once making sure that you were okay, I’d sneak from your cell and come in here to watch them. At first there were hundreds of them, but as the nights have

passed their number has grown smaller. Look!” he said, “There goes another one!”

I glanced back out of the window, to see a pack of the vampires leap through the air and attack another of their own. The vampire went down in a flurry of shadows as it frantically thrashed its arms and legs about. Within seconds it had fallen still, and the others gathered around it like a pack of wild hyenas that had made a kill.

Not wanting to see any more, I turned away, sliding my back against the wall to sit on the floor. “You know we’re not the only people hiding out in this town, don’t you?” I said to Potter.

Joining me on the floor, Potter said, “Who else then?”

“Ravenwood, for starters,” I told him.

“How do you know that?”

“Hunt told me Ravenwood had escaped with half of the DNA code that they had developed,” I answered. I sat and told Potter about everything that I could remember from my time at the facility. I explained to him that most of my memories of what had happened had come to me in nightmares or visions, as I had been constantly drugged. Potter listened with a grim look on his face as I recalled how I’d been treated by Phillips and Sparky at the zoo. He smiled knowingly as I told him how I’d figured out my escape from my cell, but his smile soon faded as I described my last nightmare to

him – the one in which the faceless man had said that he had let me escape so that I would bring Ravenwood and the missing part of the code to him.

“What did this man look like?” Potter pushed, his eyes the colour of an overcast sky bloated with snow.

“I’ve told you, I couldn’t see his face,” I said. “It’s always cast in shadow. It’s like he knows that I can see through the dark, so he has this way of blocking me out from *seeing* him.”

“But why would he do that?” Potter asked thoughtfully, then added, “Unless...”

“I’d already met him before – I would recognise him,” I said. “In my dream he said I’d seen his face because I could *see* everything.”

“So there was nothing that you recognised about this man?” Potter asked sounding frustrated. “What about his voice? You heard him speak in your dreams, right?”

“Sure,” I said, “but he always kept his voice low and shallow as if to disguise it in some way. But knowing that isn’t good.”

“What do you mean?” Potter asked, taking another cigarette and popping it between his lips.

“Don’t you see?” I said. “Whoever this faceless – *invisible man* – is, for him to go to such lengths to disguise himself from me means that he isn’t someone that I’ve met just once or twice – he is someone that I know

extremely well. So well, that just the briefest glimpse of his face or the tiniest sound of his voice would reveal his identity to me.”

Blowing smoke from the corner of his mouth, Potter turned to face me and looking me straight in the eyes, he said, “Got any ideas?”

“None,” I said back. And fell silent.

“What’s up?”

“Nothing.”

“You must think I was born in the early hours of this morning if you think I’m going to believe that,” he said, and moved closer. “Tell me what’s wrong.”

“Remember Murphy thought that there was a traitor amongst us?” I said, staring at him.

“Yeah?” Potter said thoughtfully.

“Well, Hunt thought the same thing. It was he who first gave Murphy the idea,” I pushed.

“So that’s where Murphy got the idea from,” Potter said with bitterness in his voice. “That Doc is just an old quack. What does he know?”

“But what if he was right?” I said, still looking at him. “What if there is a traitor amongst us – reporting back to this invisible man exactly what we’re planning, where we are heading next?”

Potter broke my gaze and sat silently for a moment. Then, with his head bent low, he whispered a name. “Isidor.”

“Do you know how crazy that sounds?” I said. “I mean do you have any idea what you’re saying?”

“Look, like I’ve said before, there’s just something about him,” Potter said, turning to face me again. “He just turned up out of the blue like that back at the manor.”

“He saved us,” I reminded him.

“I had everything under control,” he said.

“He told me that he came looking for his sister – Kayla,” I said not wanting to believe what Potter was saying. Then I stopped, and I felt as if I couldn’t breathe.

“What?” Potter asked, eyeing me.

But all I could think about was my dream, the one where Sparky went back to the manor and killed Mrs. Lovelace, then met the man at the top of the stairs. The faceless man that helped Sparky murder the half-breed children. What if Potter was right? What if it had been Isidor at the manor and once he’d finished helping Sparky, he had come to the summerhouse? It couldn’t have been Luke, Murphy, or Potter as they were with me, fighting off the vampires. So that did only leave Isidor.

“What are you thinking about?” Potter pushed, again sounding impatient.

“Nothing,” I lied. I couldn’t share my fears with Potter as I couldn’t be sure that I was right about Isidor. Potter disliked the guy enough without me provoking him. No, I wouldn’t say anything until I was sure. However much my heart ached to even think that Isidor might be the traitor, I knew that I would have to watch him, *see* exactly what he was up to.

“Okay, keep your thoughts to yourself,” Potter sniffed. “I’m getting used to that these days, but I’m telling you that kid has got more fiddles going on than the London Philharmonic Orchestra.”

“You don’t know that for sure,” I said.

“What I do know for sure,” Potter growled, “is if he is the bastard that’s been tipping this *invisible man* off, I’m going to personally nail his scrotum to the floor!”

“You have such a wonderful way with words, Potter,” I sighed.

“Thank you,” he snapped.

“That wasn’t meant as a compliment,” I told him. “Whatever happened to innocent until proven guilty? Didn’t we learn that in police training school? Isn’t that meant to mean something? Don’t we need some evidence?”

“I have evidence,” Potter said.

“And what’s that?” I asked. “Go on, enlighten me.”

“He’s a pain in the arse!” He snapped. “Good enough for you?”

“No!” I snapped back.

“I tell you something for nothing, Kiera,” he said. “You’re a beautiful-looking girl, but that Miss Marple thing you insist on doing don’t go with the posh French knickers you like wearing!”

“Why do you have to be so impossible sometimes?” I asked, and got up to walk away. But before I’d even reached the door, Potter had grabbed my arm.

“What about the other one?” he said.

“The other what?”

“Person hiding out in this town. You said there were two,” he reminded me.

“Nik,” I said, almost forgetting all about him.

“Nik?”

“He’s a Lycanthrope,” I told him.

“I didn’t think you were a fan of that particular species,” Potter said, drawing deeply on his cigarette.

“This one’s different,” I started.

“What do you mean, he isn’t a murdering son-of-a-bitch like the rest of them?” Potter grimaced.

“No, I think he’s done his fair share of killings, but like I said, he seems different.”

“Don’t you believe it,” Potter said, grinding his cigarette out on the office floor.

“Nik’s looking for redemption,” I tried to convince him. “He helped me, Isidor, and Kayla escape. I’m surprised you didn’t see him, he was here the day you found me.”

“Apart from Seth and Eloisa, there was no werewolf, sweet-cheeks,” Potter said.

“That’s strange,” I wondered aloud.

“Why?”

“I don’t know,” I said back. “Anyway, I thought you and Seth and what’s-her-face are the best of friends.”

“Don’t you believe it, sweet-cheeks,” Potter said, his voice low.

“What’s that supposed to mean? Aren’t I meant to be going down into The Hollows with Seth while you swan off with his girlfriend?” I said, trying to mask my bitterness.

Pulling me close, he whispered in my ear, “Seth ain’t ever going to make it down into The Hollows – I’ll see to that. And as for Eloisa, she won’t ever be coming back from that zoo, once I’ve rescued Luke.”

“What are you talking about?” I whispered confused.

“You don’t think I’ve forgotten what that scum did to Murphy, do you?” he said. Then letting go of my arm, he left the room.

“Potter!” I called after him. “What are you going to do to them?”

Without even so much as looking back at me, Potter continued down the corridor to his cell and closed the door.

Chapter Twenty-Nine

My sleep was restless and I spent most of the night rolling onto my side, onto my back, and then my side again. My stomach still lurched from time to time with hunger and my mouth and throat would turn dry. I knew it was my body still craving the red stuff – but it was easier. Would I have these cravings for the rest of my life? Potter told Isidor we would, and it would be those feelings that would keep us sharp – alive.

In an attempt to take my mind off the red stuff, I thought of Ravenwood. I had already figured out where he would more than likely be hiding out in Wasp Water. But what would happen when I found him? The man in my visions said that I would take Ravenwood to him, but how would I ever do that? I'd never lead Ravenwood and the code to my enemy. But who was that? I know Potter suspected Isidor, but I wasn't convinced – not yet.

Rolling onto my side again, I picked up my iPod and turned it on. Closing my eyes, I started to listen to *Shake It Out* by Florence and the

Machine and the line, *'It's always darkest before the dawn'*, couldn't have seemed truer at that moment in time.

I must have eventually fallen asleep, because I woke to find Kayla sitting at the end of my bed. Either my iPod had fallen out or she had taken it, because she was now listening to it. Kayla was dressed in the clothes I'd taken for her from the department store, and I could tell that she had showered and fixed her hair, as it now shone its usual brilliant red as it cascaded over her shoulders. Although her skin still looked pale, her eyes had more of their emerald sparkle and it made me feel happy to see her looking better.

Seeing that I was awake, she removed the earphones and said, "Potter says that we're good to go when you're ready."

"What time is it?" I yawned, rubbing the sleep from my eyes.

"Nearly nine," she smiled.

Pulling myself up onto my elbows, I looked at her and said, "What are you smiling at? What's so funny?"

"You," she chuckled. "You've got the worst case of bed-head ever!"

"I didn't sleep too well last night – so give me a break," I smiled back. "Where's everyone else – Isidor and the others?"

“They’re in the canteen having some tea and coffee before we set off for The Hollows,” she said. “Potter’s keen to get going.”

Swinging my legs over the side of the bed, I said, “I’m not going to The Hollows – not yet, anyhow.”

“But Potter...” Kayla started.

“Potter can think what he wants,” I said back, as I pulled on my jeans and top. “He doesn’t tell me what to do. He’s not my keeper.”

“Where are you going, then?” she asked me.

“To find Ravenwood.”

“Can I come with you?” Kayla asked.

“I wouldn’t have it any other way,” I said back.

“What about Isidor?”

Looking down at her sitting at the end of my bed, I said, “Sure, why not.”

“Good,” was all she said.

“You like him, don’t you?” I asked.

“Sure,” she smiled at me. “But just my luck though.”

“What is?” I frowned.

“The first cute guy to come along since, like, forever and it turns out he’s my brother,” she groaned.

“Too bad,” I grinned at her.

“Don’t I know it!” she grinned back.

Heading towards the cell door, I looked back at her and said, “Give me five and I’ll see you in the canteen – I’m just gonna take a shower. And tell Potter, I take my coffee strong and sweet!”

As I made my way down the cellblock to the showers, I could hear Kayla giggling behind me.

I stepped into one of the shower stalls, and removed my clothes. Turning on the water, I threw my head back and let it splash against my face and it felt wonderful. With my fingers, I started to untangle the worst case of bed-head ever. Then, very carefully, I felt for those little black bones that had been sticking out from between my shoulder blades. With my eyes screwed shut, I felt for them. To my relief, they had gone. I opened my eyes again and saw a shadow fleet past on the other side of the shower block. I reached up and turned off the water. Standing with my arms covering my chest, I listened. I could hear the sound of movement on the other side of the cubicle I was in. Keeping my breathing shallow so I could hear the slightest of sounds, I hurriedly pulled on my jeans and yanked my top over my head. My clothes clung to me and I felt uncomfortable in more ways than one.

Easing open the cubicle door, I peered out into the room, which was now empty. I opened the door leading to the passageway that ran between the cells and I could see by a set of damp footprints who had been spying on me. With my heart thumping in my chest, I raced down the passageway, following the footprints as I went. But as I reached the corridor that led to the canteen, the footprints had faded, the moisture evaporating into the air.

With my blood almost seeming to boil in my veins, I threw open the canteen door and rushed inside. I could see him sitting at one of the tables, sipping coffee from a mug. *How dare he?* I screamed inside and raced towards him. But no sooner had I taken my first step than I was upon him and knocking the mug away from his lips with my fist. Jack Seth looked startled as the mug flew from his hands, and hot coffee splashed against his face. His eyes blazed brilliant yellow as he pounced from his seat.

It all happened so fast, I think it had taken everyone in the room by surprise. All I could hear was the sound of chairs skidding backwards across the tiled floor.

“What was that for, you crazy bitch!” Seth snarled, his top lip rolling back to reveal his black rotten teeth.

“You filthy, freaking pervert!” I screamed, and clawed at his face. As my fingers flashed before my eyes, I could see that my fingernails were

no longer clear-looking and neat, but now long and ivory-looking, like claws.

Seth saw me reaching for his eyes, and snatched my arm away, twisting it down by my side. His grip was fierce like a vice, but with one lightning snap of my wrist, I had pulled my arm away as easily as if I were being held by a baby. I saw the surprise in his eyes at how easily I had gotten away from him, and he took a step backwards.

Leaping into the air, I took hold of his scrawny neck and launched him through the air. He spun away from me like a child's toy and smashed into the wall on the opposite side of the canteen. Plaster and brick dust exploded into the air, as the wall cracked beneath the force of him colliding with it. But Seth hadn't even hit the floor before he was coming at me, his eyes burning in their sunken sockets. He came towards me in a flash, and I stood my ground, back straight and arms and legs rigid. And in my mind's eye, I knew exactly what I was going to do when he reached me, I was going to...

Then as if being plucked from the air, Seth flew from the room as Potter clattered into him. They hit the side the wall with such speed and force that the whole building shook.

"What's going on here!" Eloisa suddenly roared as she pounced into the air, landing on top of a table, her nails making a clicking noise against its

surface.

“Why don’t you ask your lover over there!” I shouted back at her. “He was watching me take a shower!” And inside, I could see those images again of him hurting me, laying on top of me, and the thought of it made me want to puke.

“What the fuck are you going on about?” Seth growled as Potter fought to restrain him from coming at me again.

“Ever since I met you, you’ve been staring at me with those fucked-up eyes of yours!” I roared back. “Filling my head with disgusting images of how you want me – of how you want to slowly torture then murder me. We’ll I’m not having it anymore, you sick bastard. It ends now! It ends at this moment!” Then, before I knew what had happened, I was standing before him, as Potter held him back. I looked up into his crazy eyes and whatever he saw in mine made him flinch. It was only there for the briefest of moments, but it *was* there.

Leaning in so close that I could feel his hot breath against me, I hissed, “You *ever* look at me like that again, you won’t believe what happens next.”

Seth stared into my eyes and I refused to break his stare. Then smiling down at me, he ran his grey coloured tongue over his cracked lips. “I look forward to it, Kiera Hudson. Now, whoever you thought you saw

watching you, it wasn't me. I've been here the whole time. Your friends will testify to that."

"But I saw paw prints leading away from the shower block," I insisted.

Shaking his head from side to side, and not taking his eyes off mine, he said, "Not my paw prints."

"How can I be sure it wasn't you?" I snapped.

Then looking me up and down as if he were undressing me with his eyes, he licked his lips again with his dead-looking tongue and chuckled, "Kiera, if it had been me that had had the pleasure of seeing you washing yourself in that shower, you'd be dead now – I wouldn't have been able to stop myself."

"Okay that's enough, you sick pup," Potter snarled and pushed Seth away. "Why don't you do everyone a favour and go and die somewhere?"

Straightening the bandana around his throat, Seth smiled and said to Eloisa, "C'mon my dear, let's go and get some air, I need to cool down – perhaps a cold shower might sort me out."

"Yeah, why don't you go and do that," Potter yelled.

With my heart racing in my chest and my breathing coming out in short, sharp breaths, I watched Seth and Eloisa leave the canteen.

When they had gone, Isidor and Kayla came rushing across the room towards me.

“Where did you spring from?” Isidor breathed.

“Yeah, what just happened?” Kayla chipped in. “It was like one minute I was sitting there listening to your iPod and the next minute the werewolf dude was flying across the room.”

“I don’t know what happened,” I whispered, looking down at my hands, which had now gone back to their normal shape and size.

“You threw Seth across the room like he was made of straw,” Isidor said.

Looking at the three of them, I said, “I don’t know what’s happening to me.”

Then lighting a cigarette, Potter said, “You’re changing – that’s what’s happening.” Turning to Isidor and Kayla, Potter said, “Okay, the show’s over. Go and get your stuff, we’re moving out in five minutes.”

Without saying anything back, Kayla and Isidor looked at one another, then silently left.

“Help me, Potter,” I said looking at him.

“You don’t look like you need any help, tiger,” he said, and blew smoke from his nostrils.

“Please, just for once, can’t you stop the wisecracks?” I pleaded.

“I’m scared.”

Pitching out his cigarette, Potter came close and cupped my face in his strong hands. “There isn’t anything to be scared of, Kiera. I’ve got your back.”

“Someone was watching me,” I told him.

“But it wasn’t Seth this time,” he said.

“Then who else could it have been?”

“Didn’t you say there was another Lycanthrope hiding out in this town?” Potter reminded me.

“Nik?” I said. “Why would he be here? Why would he be watching me?”

“Maybe he wasn’t *watching* you – perhaps he was guarding you?” Potter suggested.

“Guarding me?” I breathed. “Guarding me from whom?”

“Whoever it is amongst us that’s the traitor,” Potter half-smiled, but I could tell he was being serious for once.

“Isidor, you mean?” I asked.

“Now why would you go and say a thing like that?” Potter said, removing his hands from my face. Then leaning into me, he kissed me

softly on the forehead. “Come on, tiger, we’ve got to get you below ground before sundown.”

“I’m not going down to The Hollows,” I told him. “Not yet, anyway.”

“You’ve got to,” he said, sounding alarmed. “You’ll be safe there.”

“Am I safe anywhere?” I asked him. And before he could answer, I said, “I’m going to look for Ravenwood.”

“But you don’t even know where to start looking,” Potter said, sounding frustrated with me.

“I know a good place to start,” I answered.

“Where?”

“Back at the facility,” I smiled.

“The facility?” he asked, raising an eyebrow. “What makes you think that he would go back there?”

“Do you remember that disc I downloaded at the monastery?”

“The one we all nearly died for while it was downloading – yeah I remember it,” he said dryly.

“Well, when you snuck up on me last night, I’d been looking at some files on it,” I started to explain. “Anyway, that facility has been closed down due to some kind of biohazard. I’m guessing that the biohazard is the infection that Hunt and Ravenwood spread amongst the half-breeds they

were developing. The infection probably spread amongst them, and the Vampyrus got scared enough to think that it would spread to them – that’s why they moved us to the zoo.”

“So why would Ravenwood go back if there is this potentially dangerous biohazard floating about?” Potter asked.

“Because he helped to create it and knows that it’s not dangerous to the Vampyrus, just to the half-breeds that are injected with the DNA code. See, it’s like this self-destruct button for the half-breeds. They grow so much – then wham – the infection kicks in and they die. We can’t die from it because our immune system will fight it off, but Hunt and Ravenwood were savvy enough to alter the DNA coding in the half-breeds so as not to be able to fight off the infection. So where is the one place that the Vampyrus won’t go back to?” I said.

“You’ve lost me,” Potter said with a frown.

Slapping my forehead with the flat of my hand, I cried, “The *facility*! Ravenwood knows that they won’t go back there for fear of becoming ill and dying – so he knows that’s the one place that he is safe.”

Staring at me, Potter said, “I’m coming with you.”

“What about Luke?” I said. “He needs to be rescued from that zoo.”

“Where is this facility?” Potter asked.

“I’m not sure, but from the diagrams on the disc, it looks as if it’s been built to look like some kind of airplane hangar,” I told him.

“The old Military of Defence place,” he said thoughtfully.

“How far away is it?” I asked him.

“A few miles away, just north of here,” he said. “Seth and I scoped it out a while back while we were searching for you. But the place looks derelict.”

“That’s where Ravenwood is hiding out,” I said. “I’m sure of it.”

“Well I guess we’d better get going then,” he said heading towards the door. “But you better be right about this, sweet-cheeks. We don’t have time to waste and Luke has even less.”

Catching up with him, I took hold of his hand and said, “Thanks.”

“For what?”

“For coming with me. Seth gives me the creeps.” Then briefly kissing him on the cheek, I made my way out of the canteen.

Chapter Thirty

We gathered on the front steps of the police station. If the town had been full of people like it would have been only weeks before, we would have made a very odd sight to them on this cold December morning.

The six of us stood beneath the bruised and battered looking sky, great dark clouds almost seeming to hang above us. The air was so cold, that within moments it had turned my nose and ears numb. I pulled the collar of my coat up about my neck and blew into my hands to keep them warm. Isidor and Kayla stood on either side of me, both were dressed in thick jackets and dark combat trousers and boots. Kayla's hair blew about her shoulders and Isidor's eyebrow piercing twinkled back at me. Over his back, he had the rucksack I had taken from the store and a mass of sharpened stakes protruded from the top of it. I guessed he must have been busy collecting branches from nearby trees and sharpening them over the last couple of days.

Jack Seth and Eloisa stood on the bottom step, both of them dressed as before, as if the cold didn't bother them. Seth looked at me and winked,

and I looked away. Eloisa's stare was as cold as the air that blew about us. Potter, dressed in a long, dark coat and jeans, explained to the team that the plan had altered slightly and that we were going to make a short detour via the old Military of Defence site. Then he and Eloisa will go in search of Luke, and the rest of us are to go below ground into The Hollows. Potter didn't explain to Seth and Eloisa why we were taking the detour and they didn't ask.

Following Potter, we made our way down the steps at the front of the police station and walked single-file up the street and out of town. The remains of the vampires that had been fed upon last night lay strewn across the street, and there was so little left of them, that if I hadn't of seen them being attacked, I wouldn't have known where the scattered pieces of bone and flesh had come from.

As we reached the end of the street, I looked back and was startled to see Nik slinking down the front steps of the police station and out onto the street.

I instantly called out to him but my words were lost in the wind that roared all around us.

"Did you say something?" Isidor shouted at me.

"No, it was nothing," I replied. I looked back once more only to see that Nik had gone.

As we made our way out of town, it started to snow, and ahead I could see the never-ending stream of abandoned cars snaking away into the distance. I wished that the snow came down faster so it would cover the windows of those cars we had to pass. I didn't want to see those disfigured and bloated faces anymore.

We passed a small children's park and the swings listed back and forth in the wind, the chains crying out on rusty hinges. Apart from the swings and the crows that squawked from nearby fields, the world was silent – too silent. We eventually left the deserted town behind us and Potter led us over many fields, which were fast turning white. Banks of hills lay ahead and it was difficult to make out their peaks as the snow that now covered them blended in with the colour of the sky.

In silence, we walked through fast-running streams and stomped through the thickening snow. Every so often, we would pass deserted farmhouses and barns, and from the outside, each one of them looked so snug and cosy. I had to do everything in my control to stop myself from suggesting to the others that perhaps we should take a break and warm ourselves inside. But I knew what might lay behind the walls, the victims of the Vampyrus and Lycanthrope and worse still, sleeping vampires who were waiting for the night to come alive again. It wasn't just the thought of those

vampires that kept me moving, it was the gathering clouds above us. They were so dark now, almost black, and the storm raging behind them was only hours away.

So we pushed on in silence, each of us lost to our own thoughts and plans. On several occasions, I glanced sideways at Isidor and wondered what he was thinking about. Did he have a plan? If so, what kind of plan was it?

With the snow falling harder and the wind turning colder, I thrust my hands into my coat pockets, bent forward and pressed on. All of us were now covered in a layer of snow. Just as I was beginning to wonder how much further I could go on without finding somewhere warm to defrost, Isidor stopped dead in his tracks and raised one hand in the air.

“Hang on!” he shouted over the roar of the wind.

“What’s up?” Potter asked as he turned and came back down the hill towards Isidor.

“I can smell something,” Isidor said, sniffing at the air, like a dog.

“Good for you,” Potter snapped. “Come on, we haven’t got time for _.”

“No, wait a minute!” Isidor insisted. “I can smell burning, like some kind of fire.”

“What, like some kind of campfire?” I asked him, wondering if I’d been wrong about Ravenwood hiding out at the facility and when in fact he was camping out in the woods that rose above us on the brow of a hill.

“Perhaps,” Isidor mumbled, shaking his head and sniffing at the air again. Then he was off, taking the lead.

“Wait up!” Potter shouted after him, but Isidor carried on like a bloodhound that had fixed on its prey’s scent.

With our feet crunching through the snow, we followed Isidor up the hill, Kayla panting beside me and the Lycanthrope following us from behind. With my cheeks flushed red with the cold and plumes of wispy breath seeping from my mouth and nose, I looked down into a large, open valley. In its centre was the hangar that I had seen in the diagrams. A tarmac road led away from the hangar, but it was too narrow to be a runway like I had originally suspected. But all the same, it was there to support large vehicles that had once come and gone from the hangar.

The whole facility was surrounded by fencing that stretched up into the sky and all of it was covered in razor wire. At each corner of the fencing stood search towers, but these looked to be unmanned and disused just like the rest of the facility. Inside the perimeter, set some way to the side of the hangar, was a cluster of tiny houses and I guessed that these were purpose-built homes for the staff who had once worked here. The place was pretty

remote and I couldn't imagine the commute to work each day to be easy one for some of them.

"There!" Isidor said, pointing down at the cluster of houses below. "See the smoke coming from that chimney?"

"Someone's at home," I said.

"Let's go and pay the good doctor a house call," Potter said starting off down the hill.

The road led directly to the gates of a large, sprawling military site which was flat and now covered in snow. Glancing back, I could see our footprints winding their way down the hill to where we now stood in front of the two large gates that towered above us. Attached to them was a warning in bright red letters which read:

**MILITARY OF DEFENCE PROPERTY
TRESSPASSERS WILL BE MET
WITH DEADLY FORCE!**

Or fangs and a set of giant claws, I said to myself. Despite the warning, Potter pushed against the gates, which swung open. Like the rest of the world, the site was eerily quiet, and the gates wailed on uncoiled

hinges. We made our way across the open area that stretched out in front of the hangar. I glanced over at it, and from ground level, the hangar looked huge. I could see that its vast doors were slightly open revealing a black slit of darkness, and it almost seemed to look at me like an eye. I couldn't remember being in there, tested and operated on, and despite the freezing cold, I shivered at the thought of what we might find inside. Turning away, I followed Potter and the others towards the house with the smoke that tumbled from its chimney.

A white picket fence circled the little house, which was smothered on all sides with brambles and moss which covered it like green, bony hands. A twisted, gnarled-looking tree stood in the front garden, and it towered over the house like a giant, misshapen spine. It cast a shadow over the house and created a feeling of great sadness. I glanced up at the tree and thought that I saw something moving through its knotted branches – but whatever it had been was now gone in a flurry of powdery snow.

Something spoke inside of me - that inner voice of mine that had guided me during my torment in the zoo, was talking to me.

There's something wrong, Kiera!

"Are you okay?" I heard someone ask me.

I turned to find Isidor standing next to me.

Nodding, I said, "Yeah, I'm fine."

Seth and Eloisa joined us at the gate.

“Seen any more werewolves?” Seth asked, and his voice was so expressionless that I didn’t know whether he was being serious or having a joke at my expense.

“Not yet,” I said back, “But you can be sure that you’ll be the first to know when I do.”

Hearing this, Potter smiled to himself. Then, swinging the gate open, he made his way up the path towards the house.

“Be careful!” I called out as the rest of us made our way after him.

Chapter Thirty-One

Potter pushed against the front door, but it was locked tight.

Brushing him aside, I said, “Not so fast.”

“What’s wrong now?” Potter groaned.

“Kayla, can you hear anything?” I said, turning to look at her.

Kayla came forward through the falling snow, and swiping her hair behind her ear, she turned her head towards the front door.

“Nothing,” she whispered.

“Now perhaps we can get this over and done with?” Potter moaned, reaching for the doorknob again. Then, looking at Isidor and me, he said, “Or perhaps Sherlock Holmes and Doctor Watson want to have a snoop around?”

Ignoring him, I said, “Someone has been here and it wasn’t long ago. They flew here – so that makes whoever it was a Vampyrus. They were male and known to Doctor Ravenwood. He knew them well, so well that he trusted them.”

“How do you know all that?” Eloisa asked, staring at me with her brilliant eyes.

“There are no tracks leading to and from the house, apart from ours, that is,” I told her. “But there was a set of footprints in the snow just in front of the door. So whoever it was, flew here and landed just outside the door.” Pointing down to the footprints, I added, “They are too big to have been made by a female, and they haven’t yet been covered by fresh, falling snow so they were only here a short time ago. They’ve gone now, or Kayla would have heard them. Even if they weren’t moving, she would’ve heard the blood running through their veins.”

“But how can you be so sure that this Doctor Ravenwood was friends with this Vampyrus – that he trusted him?” Seth asked with a sneer.

“The door is still intact,” I said. “Whoever came here, came here for a reason and they wouldn’t have gone away if Ravenwood hadn’t have let them in. They would have, more than likely, broken the door down. It’s quite easy for me to surmise, then, that Ravenwood knew this person. Ravenwood is on the run – in hiding – he wouldn’t have just opened the door to anyone. No, it was a friend, someone he trusted.”

Slowly clapping his hands together, Potter said, “I like your style, Sherlock,” then glancing at Isidor, he added, “And what about you, Watson?”

Fixing Potter with a stare, Isidor said, “I can smell blood.”

Hearing this, Potter brushed Isidor aside, stepped up to the front door and without any hesitation smashed his fist into one of the wooden panels. His hand cut through the door as if he were tearing through a sheet of soggy paper. He eased his arm through up to his elbow, twisted it slightly, and then the sound of the lock being released could be heard from the other side. Potter withdrew his arm, and gently pushed open the door with his fingertips.

Without apprehension, he marched inside the house. I started after him and as he was about to step into the hallway, I grabbed hold of his arm.

“Be careful,” I said and looked into his dark eyes.

He looked down at my hand, and then looked back at me. “So you keep telling me,” he smiled and shrugged my hand free. The others followed us inside and closed the door behind them.

We stood in the gloom of the hallway and the only sound breaking the silence was our breathing. To Kayla, that sound must have been deafening. I glanced about. There was a staircase to our right and I peered up into the darkness. Potter followed my gaze and looked up. He stared back at me and his eyes were as black as the landing above us.

“Wait down here,” he told us.

Without giving anyone a chance to object, he began to stride up the stairs two at a time.

Isidor wandered away from me and pushed open a door which led into a lounge. Looking down, I saw a trail of blood leading from beneath the door, and I feared what might be waiting for us on the other side. But before I had a chance to say anything, Isidor went inside. He disappeared from view and I waited. No sound came from the room, so I carefully peered around the edge of the door and looked inside.

Isidor was looking at a body that lay face-down on the floor. Beneath the body was a worn-looking rug, with frayed and turned-up corners. A set of bay windows shed a slither of milky light into the room. It was furnished with comfortable chairs and a sofa. There were chocolate brown bookshelves stuffed with leather bound tomes and a large coffee table that had sheets of paper scattered across it. A fireplace was carved into the wall, and behind the grate were lumps of coal that glowed hot and red, sending a spiral of smoke tumbling up the chimney.

Isidor turned to face me as Kayla and the two Lycanthrope entered the room. Seeing the body on the floor, Kayla gasped, and clapped a hand over her mouth.

“Are you okay?” I asked her.

She nodded, not taking her eyes off the body sprawled before us.

“This couldn’t be the work of a Lycanthrope,” Seth said smugly, “His injuries don’t look that bad.”

“He’s dead, isn’t he?” Potter asked as he strolled into the room and lit a cigarette. “I’d say that was pretty bad.”

“Maybe he collapsed?” Isidor said, eyeing the body.

Toeing the body with the tip of his boot, Potter rolled the figure over and said, “Yeah perhaps you’re right, Watson. Maybe Ravenwood hit the corner of the coffee table as he went down, and ripped half of his face off and throat out!”

“He was killed by a Vampyrus,” I whispered, dropping to my knees to examine the floor. I brushed the tips of my fingers over the rug that Ravenwood was stretched across, and ran them around the edges of his body. His face was torn open from the top left corner to the bottom of his ear and I could see his teeth grinning back at me. An opening ran from beneath his chin to his navel. The open cavity didn’t smell as much as I feared, as his intestines had been taken or more than likely, eaten. Glancing up Isidor, I could see that he had covered his mouth and nose with his hands.

“Well?” Potter asked.

“He wasn’t attacked here, not in this room anyway,” I started, as I ran the palms of my hands down over Ravenwood’s open eyes and closed them. “He crawled in here from another room in the house, the kitchen probably, but his killer thought that he had left Ravenwood for dead in the

kitchen. Ravenwood crawled in here after the Vampyrus had left. His attacker was right-handed, about six-foot-one in height, but no more than six-two. The killer didn't come here to find the code, he came here to give me a warning – he wanted me to know that, again, he was one step ahead of us. He knew we would come here for Ravenwood. And I can see where Ravenwood hid the last part of his code.”

“How do you know all that stuff?” Kayla asked.

“She’s making it up,” Seth sneered.

Without looking at Seth, I said, “Ravenwood didn’t die here because there is very little blood on the rug and no blood splatter marks on the walls or ceiling.”

“The good-old blood splatter book,” Potter said, the cigarette dangling from the corner of his mouth. “I’m pleased to say I missed that spellbinding class at training school.”

“The size and severity of his injuries show that there would have been blood, and lots of it, but there is hardly any here. The blood leading from the door and up the hallway is undisturbed. If he had been killed in here, the killer would have surely left some footprint or trace as he exited the house.”

“They could have flown out?” Isidor suggested.

“Wingspan,” I said back, shaking my head. “The room is too small and the hallway too narrow. No, he was definitely killed in the kitchen. Ravenwood was struck on the left side of his face, and the tears in the flesh show that he was attacked from the front – therefore his killer was right-handed.”

“Let me guess,” Potter cut in, “you know the killer’s height by the spread between each of the footprints?”

“You’re learning, but there are no footprints, remember? Now pay attention,” I said. “When people write a message on a wall, they write it at eye level, so this leaves a good indication as to the height of whoever left the message.”

“What message?” Kayla asked.

“That message!” I said pointing to the wall, cast in shadow by the open door. At once, they all turned around and looked at the message that had been scrawled in blood across the wall.

In a breathless voice, Kayla read it aloud. “Kiera, I got to the Doc first – now bring me the code!”

“What does that mean?” Isidor asked, as we watched the bloody letters drip down the walls.

“It means what it says,” I whispered. “He’s telling me that he knows my every move and that he knows I’ll take the code to him.”

“But you won’t, will you?” Kayla asked, looking at me, her eyes wide.

“Not intentionally,” I said thoughtfully.

“But if this Vampyrus killed Ravenwood in the kitchen, why leave the message in here?” Eloisa asked me.

“By leaving it here, behind the door, he is telling me that he knows how my mind works. The killer knew that I would search the house, leave no stone unturned. That’s my nature. So he hid the message behind the door. It’s also his way of informing me that he got away – disappeared without revealing himself. It’s his way of making contact with me, but not directly. He’s trying to taunt me.”

“Okay, enough of the psychology,” Seth sneered, “You said you could see where Ravenwood had hidden the code. I can’t see it.”

“That’s because you look – but don’t *see*,” I said. “If Ravenwood was able to crawl out of the kitchen, why didn’t he go to the front door to get away and find some help? That would be the natural thing to do, right? But he didn’t, he came in here and sprawled himself face-down on this rug. Remember how his arms were spread out, almost as if it was his dying wish to protect something – to conceal it with his body?” Then, kneeling down again, I pointed to the turned-up end of the rug. “See this? It’s been rolled back, and often, as the corner has failed to roll flat again. And if you look

really closely, you can see that the colour of the floor beneath the rug is exactly the same shade as the rest of the floor. If the rug had been here for many years, wouldn't the colour of the floor beneath the rug be lighter?"

Taking hold of the corner of the rug, I said, "Ravenwood put it here recently to hide something." Then, pulling it back, I revealed a hatch that had been cut into the floor.

Chapter Thirty-Two

I peered over Potter's shoulder and could see a set of wooden stairs leading down into darkness.

"I wonder what's down there?" I whispered.

"Why are you whispering?" Potter whispered back.

"Dunno," I shrugged, and followed him down into the pitch black.

There was a wall to my right and I could see a banister attached to it. I gripped hold of the banister and moved down. The stairs creaked out beneath us as the others followed down behind. At the bottom, I nearly collided with Potter's shoulder as he suddenly came to a halt in front of me. For a moment there was silence, stillness, nothing. Then I heard a click as Potter pulled on the light switch that hung from the ceiling just above him. My new surroundings appeared before me in the dim glow of the naked light bulb.

My throat made a shallow wheezing sound as I sucked in a mouthful of air in shock at what had just been revealed to me. Along each wall of the

basement stood metal shelves from floor to ceiling. On each of these shelves sat guns, in neat rows, gleaming in the light of the bulb.

“Whoa!” I whispered, as I approached the racks of guns.

As I drew near to them, they didn’t look like the guns I had seen in the old black and white westerns that my dad had forced me to watch as a kid. These guns were bigger, powerful, and more deadly – like the guns those vampire-cops had shot at us.

“What is this place?” Kayla asked, eyeing the guns.

“Some kind of armoury, I guess. This is part of a military base after all,” I said.

“But this just looks like a regular house,” Kayla frowned. “Why so many guns?”

“Maybe whoever lived here, thought that one day they might need them,” Isidor said.

“Against what?” Kayla pushed.

“Us, probably,” Potter half-smiled.

Isidor came forward and stuck out his hand to touch one.

“Don’t touch,” Potter snapped.

Isidor immediately withdrew his hand and stuck it in his trouser pocket.

“They’re not toys,” Potter said looking at the racks of guns.

“Lighten up, Potter,” Seth said picking up one of the weapons.

“These things are heavy.”

“They could also be lethal in the wrong hands,” Potter said, swiping the gun from Seth and placing it back on the shelf.

“Look, Potter, if you’re heading back to the zoo with Eloisa to rescue the boy, Luke, you’re gonna need something to protect yourselves with,” Seth spat.

“I’m a Vampyrus and she’s a werewolf for Christ’s sake – what more do we need to protect ourselves with? Besides, we didn’t come here to arm ourselves – we came for the code.”

“Does anyone even know what this code looks like?” Kayla asked.

“No is the simple answer...” I started.

“If no one knows what this code looks like, then this whole detour is just one big waste of time,” Eloisa said. “I mean, we don’t even know where to -” but before she’d had a chance to finish, the basement was filled with the sound of pounding.

I turned around to see Potter consumed by a cloud of dust as he forced one of his arms into the brick wall.

“What are you doing?” I asked, crossing the basement.

“There’s a chamber beyond this wall,” he said.

“How do you know that?”

Looking over his shoulder at me, he said, “You’re not the only one around here that can figure things out. See those old bags of half-used cement and that pile of bricks?”

I glanced into the corner of the basement and smiled.

“This wall has been built recently,” he said with some pride. “See, I’m one step ahead of you, sweet-cheeks!”

The dust began to settle and I could see that Potter’s arm was bleeding. At the sight of his blood, my stomach lurched, and I felt my throat turn dust-dry. I swallowed hard and looked away. It was then that I noticed Isidor sniffing the air as he absorbed the fragrance of the red stuff that seeped from the cuts along Potter’s forearm. He caught me looking at him and covered his nose with his hand. But it was Kayla who concerned me the most. Like me and Isidor, she had seen Potter’s blood, and she now stood mesmerised as she watched it drip onto the floor. I watched as she parted her lips and wetted them with the tip of her tongue, and I doubted she even knew that she was doing it.

Potter’s arm disappeared through the wall up to his shoulder and at last the blood was hidden. Almost at once, Kayla’s eyes flickered and she glanced around the room as if waking from a dream.

“Are you okay?” I asked her.

“Sure,” she smiled back.

But I knew she wasn't okay, just like Isidor wasn't okay. I knew how the sudden sight of Potter's blood had made me feel inside. The silky redness of it and the way it had glided down over his wrist, dripping in thick streams onto the dusty floor had made my stomach somersault as if I hadn't eaten for a week. The cravings were nowhere near as bad as before, but it was a reminder that I still craved the red stuff.

Potter turned his head to one side and I met his black gaze. He wasn't looking at me; he seemed to be concentrating on something that had grabbed his attention on the other side of the wall. I could hear the sound of his claws tearing and scratching and it sounded like long fingernails being dragged across ice. Then without warning, Potter jumped back from the wall, bringing most of it down before him. Bricks clattered to the ground all around us, sending up billows of dust. I covered my nose and mouth as some of it got into the back of my throat and stung my eyes. As the dust and debris settled, I saw Potter's uncovered arm again. He saw me looking at the streaks of red that ran from his wrist to his elbow, and covered them with the sleeve of his coat. He then kicked the rubble away that lay at his feet and peered into the hole that he had made in the wall.

"There's something in here," he said, shoulder barging the remainder of the bricks away and disappearing into the space that he had discovered.

I looked at Kayla and she raised her eyebrows and shrugged. Within moments, Potter stepped back into the basement holding three glass tubes of thick, pink-red liquid.

“You three look as if you could do with some of this,” he said, handing out the tubes of Lot 13.

Kayla snatched it from his hands, and removing the stopper with her teeth, she spat it away, tilted her head back and poured the Lot 13 into her mouth. It dribbled like glue from her lips, and she wiped it away with her fingers, which she then licked clean.

I wasn’t sure if taking Lot 13 was the answer to our cravings. By taking it, weren’t we in some small way feeding the habit? Wouldn’t it be better to just get the stuff completely out of our system – to be rid of it forever? I looked across at Isidor and he was slowly removing the stopper. Like me, I could tell that he felt unsure about drinking it.

“I know what you’re thinking,” Potter said looking at me. “But Kiera, those cravings won’t ever go away. You’re going to have to live with them for the rest of your life – we all are.”

“But what about when Lot 13 runs out?” I asked, looking down at the tube of pink slime. “What happens then?”

“You go beneath ground, to The Hollows, until the feelings subside,” he said. “But seeing as we’re not in The Hollows – down the

hatch it goes!” Then, flicking the stopper away with his thumb, he raised the test tube to his mouth and poured its contents down his throat. He shook his head as if just swallowing a large glass of whiskey and wiped his lips with the back of his hand. “What you waiting for?”

Isidor looked at me and shrugged, then raising the test tube to his mouth he started to drink. I watched his Adams apple bob up and down in his throat as he swallowed Lot 13.

Handing the glass tube back to Potter, I shook my head and said, “No, I’m not going to be a slave to anyone or anything. I’ll find another way of dealing with my cravings.”

“Kiera, you don’t understand -” Potter started.

“I said *no*! What’s the matter with you – are you deaf?” Pushing him out of my way, I climbed through the hole in the wall and stepped into the chamber beyond it.

Chapter Thirty-Three

There was a room hidden behind the wall. It looked like a poky laboratory of some kind and reminded me of the science labs at college. The room was lit from above by a series of florescent lights that flickered on and off like lightning. One moment the laboratory was brightly lit, the next it was thrown into darkness. Either way, I could clearly see what lay hidden behind the wall.

There were two metal work benches running horizontally down the middle of the room. Each was covered in an array of test tubes, Bunsen burners, microscopes, glass beakers, and a whole assortment of other equipment. Along the walls, were shelves crammed full of books, microwaves, plastic boxes, and rows of tubes containing Lot 13.

The others followed me into the secret laboratory and Seth made a whistling sound as he looked around the room.

“Someone has been keeping themselves busy,” he said.

“What is all this stuff anyway?” Eloisa asked, but no one answered her.

I watched Potter cross the laboratory, and start taking down handfuls of the test tubes that contained Lot 13. “Give me your rucksack,” he said to Isidor without looking at him.

Isidor handed it over, and Potter filled the bag with as many of the tubes as he could. Handing it back to Isidor, it made a clinking sound as the bottles jiggled about inside. Kayla went to the work benches and started to thumb through notebooks and sheets of paper that had been scattered across them. Holding up a sheet of paper that was covered in undecipherable scribbling, Kayla said, “Hey, Kiera, could this be what you’re looking for? Could it be the code?”

“How would she know?” Seth sneered. “She’s already admitted that she hasn’t a clue what this code looks like.”

“It could be staring her straight in the face and she wouldn’t see it,” Eloisa added.

Without looking at either of them, I whispered, “I do see it!” Looking over Kayla’s shoulder there was a small alcove set into the wall. Beneath it there was a comfortable-looking armchair, a small electric heater, a coffee table, and an old fashioned lampstand. This setting looked at complete odds to the rest of the laboratory. It was like somebody had a made comfortable little rest area, where they could take a break from their

scientific experiments and relax with a good...book! And it was that which I could see resting on the arm of the flea-bitten armchair.

With my heart racing in my chest, I hurried around the work benches and made my way into the snug little alcove. I snatched up the book, and before I'd even turned it over in my hands I knew what it would be. I looked down at the cover and read the title on the front.

The Wind in the Willows

Frantically, I thumbed through the pages, and it was identical to the one that I had in the zoo. But that was the problem, there didn't appear to be any numbers or odd-looking shapes and symbols on any of the pages of this book, either.

"What's wrong?" Kayla asked, coming to stand beside me.

"This is the story, the book your father read to me as I slipped in and out of consciousness," I told her, as I skipped through the pages hoping that something, some sign would jump out at me. "I thought the code was hidden within its pages –but just like the copy I had in the zoo, I can't see –"

Then I saw it, a message written on the inside of the dust jacket. Taking the book in my hands, I sat in the armchair and read the message.

Hello Kiera,

If you are reading this, then my good friend, Doctor Hunt was right in his theory that you would escape your cage and find this book. I should have been here to greet you – that was our plan – but my time is short, I know that. It is only a matter of time – days or hours – before I am found.

So I'll try and explain everything here and I hope in some way this will help you on your journey that lies ahead. I knew after meeting you at the manor that you were special, but I could also tell that you had no idea how special you are. Did this surprise me? No. Neither did it surprise Doctor (Lord) Hunt as we both knew that there is still so much that you do not know – so much that has not yet been explained to you.

Some of the Vampyrus history was explained to you in The Ragged Cove by our friend, Luke Bishop, but I don't believe at the time that even he understood your significance. To be honest, I don't think any of us did. I know that Luke cares for you deeply, and I believe that, in part, this was why he held back some of the truth from you. He told me that you might have been frightened and he didn't want to lose you.

Luke was right in what he told you – the Vampyrus have lived beneath ground for thousands of years – too many to remember. But we were not here first- nor were the humans for that matter – we evolved together. But as we grew and spread across the Earth, the Vampyrus and the

humans fought over the planet for thousands of years, until eventually a truce was made. It is written in legend that the gods were so displeased with how our two races had almost destroyed the planet that they had given to us, they decided to separate the Vampyrus and humans. They banished the Vampyrus underground and the humans above ground.

You may think that the Vampyrus got a bad deal – but believe me, Kiera, when I tell you that The Hollows are majestic and stooped in mystery, a beautiful world just as glorious as above-ground – if not better!

The truce lasted many thousands of years and it was as if the humans and the Vampyrus forgot about each other – in fact they did. It was as if to each other, neither existed. But as time passed from one generation to another, a Vampyrus was born who was named Elias Munn. Some say that he wasn't born at all as he cannot be traced to any other members of the Vampyrus race. Legend says that, as a boy, he got lost in the many caverns and tunnels in The Hollows. For weeks he wandered, hungry and cold until by chance he happened upon a tunnel that led above ground. To his amazement, he discovered a whole new world above the one he had lived his short life. He kept this discovery a secret and over the following years he would sneak above ground and discovered that, free of The Hollows, he looked like the creatures that lived above him. Gone were his wings, his black bristling fur, claws and fangs. So enchanted by this new

world he had discovered, he made a life for himself and eventually fell in love with a human female. They loved one another deeply, until one fateful day he made a mistake. He revealed his true identity to her. She was overcome with revulsion and fear at the sight of him, she ultimately rejected him. Driven mad with hurt and despair, Elias Munn plunged his fist into her chest and tore her heart out, screaming that if he couldn't have her heart then no other man could. Even though she lay dead at his feet, Elias ate her heart to make sure that no other would ever have her heart again.

From that moment on, the gods cursed him for taking a human life and breaking the truce. But it wasn't only Elias they punished; they cursed the entire Vampyrus race. Because he had eaten human flesh – we were all cursed with the thirst for it. It was the gods' final attempt of stopping us from venturing above ground. Within The Hollows the cravings fade. But those of us with good hearts can resist human flesh for a time above ground, before needing to return to The Hollows. Those with hate and fear in their hearts can go only hours, at the most, days, before they need to return to The Hollows. But the gods' plan failed as Elias, bitter and twisted with hate for the humans because of his lover's rejection, encouraged other like-minded Vampyrus to go above ground and feed, which brought about the creation of vampires.

So, over the centuries, there have been outbreaks of vampire attacks above ground. Fearing that humans would once again remember the Vampyrus and come in search of us, bringing war to The Hollows – the elders and lawmakers sent teams like Murphy, Luke, and Potter to hunt down this bloodthirsty Vampyrus and bring him back to The Hollows.

But Elias Munn is rumoured to have become immortal from the blood that he drank from his lover's heart. He has never aged since that day. No one now knows his true identity or name, as over the centuries he has adopted many different guises. It is he who now threatens the fragile peace that exists between the humans and Vampyrus. But it was prophesied that if the humans and the Vampyrus couldn't live together in peace, the gods would send a 'half and half' – part human and part Vampyrus – a half-breed to settle the conflict once and for all. The gods would let that half-breed decide which race should survive and which should perish. But the half-breed wouldn't come alone – there would be two others sent to help and guide this half-breed as their journey would be hard and long and fraught with many battles and dangers.

So, if you were hoping to find a code, a series of numbers or words hidden amongst the pages of this book, then you are mistaken. Kiera, you are the code! You are the half-breed who has been sent to decide which of our two races will survive while the other perishes. Myth and legend says

that the gods believe that only you can be impartial as you are the best of both of our races. Kiera, the gods are leaving it up to you to decide which race lives and which one dies. The Vampyrus know this and that is why they had you locked up in that zoo. They wanted to strip you of your humanity – the human part of you. They wanted you to become an animal, to think like an animal, get you addicted to human flesh so you would see that race as nothing more than animals to feed on.

Doctor Hunt and I knew we had to get you away from there before they broke you completely. He wanted you to save his two children, the half-breeds that have been born, to help and guide you. He didn't want their humanity taken away – it was all that was left of their mother – the woman that he loved and who was murdered. But we were being watched.

Everything we said or did was being monitored. So many times Doctor Hunt wanted to tell you what was happening – what they were trying to do to you. Hunt had heard about your gift – your ability to see things – to work situations out by seeing what everyone else failed to notice. So he was convinced that if he gave you enough clues, enough subtle hints, even in your almost catatonic state you would be able to piece them all together.

So he came up with a plan. Doctor Hunt would read you books in which the heroes escaped. Time and time again, he read you those chapters about Mr. Toad escaping from the prison and Peter Rabbit fleeing Mr.

McGregor, hoping that you would take the bait and figure out your own escape. Hunt also needed you to make an emotional connection to the books, in the hope that if you ever saw one of those books again, it would remind you of the times he spent reading to you and the message that he was hoping you would see. He hoped that if you ever saw this book again, it would trigger something within you. That's why he got Nik to bring a copy to you in your cell. I wasn't convinced, but if you are reading this now, then you must have escaped and you must have picked up this book the moment you saw it, and my dear friend and colleague, Lord Hunt was right about you.

Hunt figured out who you were and your purpose after studying your DNA in the facility. Your DNA almost blew our minds. We'd never seen anything like it. I don't have the time to explain what we discovered, but believe me, Kiera, when I tell you that you are going to be incredible!

But what now? The Vampyrus have samples of your DNA, but as you know, Doctor Hunt had it corrupted with the infection that came from the werewolf's bite. The Vampyrus will continue to try and create other half-breeds like you, Kayla, and Isidor, but as you well know, they will grow ill and die. It won't take long for the Vampyrus to realise that they have been deceived and what they have to work with is useless. So for now, go to The Hollows. You will be safe there. Let your friends, Luke and Potter guide

you. Seek out a friend of mine called Felix Coanda. He is expecting you. Coanda will be able to help you. I'm sorry that I won't be alive to help you myself. But go quickly, Kiera, because he will come for you. Hunt believed that someone already close to you is a traitor – I was never convinced of that. Maybe he was right and I didn't want to see it.

But be careful, Kiera, of who you befriend and love on your journey, for it is said that if Elias Munn can get the half-breed to love him, as a father, or a brother, or a lover, then just like his first love – he would have taken your heart as his own and he will be given the power to choose which race lives and which race dies.

I have nothing more to say and I know that I will be dead very soon. Therefore, whatever decision you make won't affect me – but, Kiera, it will change you. Whichever race you decide to live, will be the species that you solely become. You will no longer be a half-breed – you will either be a human or a Vampyrus. As for Kayla and Isidor, your decision will permanently change them, too.

I do not have to tell you that the burden on you is a great one. The fate of two entire races lies in your hands. The decision to destroy an entire race is not an easy one – so choose wisely, Kiera Hudson.

Doctor Thaddeus Ravenwood

Trembling with fear, anger, or maybe revulsion, I clawed the pages that Ravenwood had written on from the book. I screwed them into a ball with my hands.

“What’s wrong?” Potter asked. “What did it say?”

Without looking at him, I held out my hand and said, “Give me your lighter.”

“Why?” he said.

I looked at him and his face was a mask of confusion. “Just give me the lighter!” I spat.

Rummaging in his trouser pocket, he handed me the Zippo lighter and said, “Kiera, what did the message say?”

Ignoring him and with a trembling hand, I held the lighter to the corner of the pages and watched them start to burn. If I destroyed them, then perhaps those words had never been written and the burden would pass me by.

“But what about the code?” Kayla asked, watching me drop the ball of burning pages to the floor.

“There is no code!” I shouted at her, and at once regretted it.

“So what was the goddamn point in coming all the way out here?” Seth barked.

Looking at him straight in the eyes, I raised my finger and said, “Don’t even start on me, Lycanthrope! I’m so not in the mood for you!”

“But Kiera,” Isidor said, stamping out the remains of the blackened pages, “You said we needed the code.”

“How many ways have I got to say this?” I yelled at him. “There is no code – I’m the freaking code!”

Unable to say another word, I raced from the laboratory, through the basement, and up into the house. Ravenwood lay face-up on the floor.

“Why me?” I shouted down at him.

I stepped over his corpse and ran from the house. The sky was almost black with clouds and the snow fell harder now in thick, white torrents. With my breath escaping my mouth in wispy streams, I headed through the snow. On the other side of the garden fence, I saw something big move behind the tree that I had seen earlier.

“Who’s there?” I called out.

There was a howling sound, but I couldn’t tell if this was the wind of a wolf close by.

The movement came again. I headed towards the tree and as I got closer with my heart pounding in my chest, I saw who was hiding there.

“Nik?” I whispered. “What are you doing here?”

Without saying a word, he met my stare with his brilliant yellow eyes, then he was gone, bounding away until I lost sight of him in the falling snow.

Chapter Thirty-Four

“Who were you talking to?” someone asked over my shoulder.

I spun round to find Potter standing behind me. “No one, I guess,” glancing back through the snow in the direction that Nik had bounded away.

“What’s going on?” Potter asked, and placed one hand on my shoulder.

Brushing it away, I said, “I need some time alone.”

“Why?” Potter pushed. “Has it got something to do with what was written in that book?”

“Please, Potter,” I begged, staring into his eyes which were as dark as the clouds above us. “I just need some time.”

“But that’s something we don’t have,” he said. “I need to go after Luke and you need to get to the -”

“The Hollows,” I finished for him. “You’re not the only one who says I should be down there.”

Shaking snow from his jet-black hair, Potter looked up into the battered looking sky and said, “It’s going to be night soon, and with this

storm, I don't think any of us will be going anywhere – it wouldn't be safe. Besides I have something I need to do before I set off to rescue Luke.”

“And what's that?” I asked, and for the first time ever in Potter's company I felt the smallest pang of suspicion. But I strangled it deep inside of me.

Looking at me through the falling snow, Potter said, “You're not the only one around here who has secrets they don't want to share.” He then turned and headed back towards the house where the others gathered in the doorway.

“Where are you going?” I called after him.

“Like I said, it's too dangerous to travel tonight,” he called back.

“We go at first light.”

I caught up with him, my boots crunching in the snow. Taking Potter by the arm, I said, “Okay, but I don't want to stay in that house. Not with Ravenwood.”

As if searching my eyes with his, he said, “We'll stay in the hangar.” Then he was gone, making his way across the snow-covered front yard, towards the facility that loomed in the distance.

Looking at the others huddled in the doorway, I called to them and said, “This way!”

Wind screamed across the open plain that lay before the giant hangar, and all of us pulled our clothes tightly together to protect ourselves from the driving snow. Seth and Eloisa didn't appear to be bothered by the snow and they followed us at a distance, walking upright as the bitter wind blew hard at them.

We reached the facility doors, which loomed high above us. They were slightly apart down the centre and a strip of yellow and black tape flapped in the wind. Across the tape were the words, **"KEEP OUT. BIOHAZARD"**. Undeterred by the warning, Potter tore the tape free and slipped between the gap in the doors.

Before following him inside, Kayla gripped my arm and said, "Kiera, this is where we were kept, right? Where they did those tests on us?"

Clawing my fringe from my eyes, I looked at her and said, "I think so."

"Then should we really be going back in there?" Isidor spoke up. "Look it says to stay out – Biohazard."

"There is no hazard to us, Isidor, I promise," I tried to reassure him. "The Vampyrus think there is a virus that's going to kill them, but there isn't – not really. It's the infection that your father took from my leg and

spiked the DNA formula with. It kills the half-breeds that the Vampyrus are trying to mass produce, but not us.”

“Are you sure?” Kayla asked, not sounding convinced.

“I’m sure,” I told her and slipped through the gap in the doors.

The facility was vast, seeming to stretch away into the distance for miles. Emergency lights flickered overhead. I could see that stairs led away immediately to my right up to a metal landing that lined the inner walls of the hangar and branched off into different rooms and corridors.

“Does any of this seem familiar to you?” Potter asked.

“Not at the moment,” I whispered back. “How about you two?” I quizzed, looking at Kayla and Isidor. They both shook their heads as they glanced about.

Jack Seth and Eloisa stepped in from the cold, and both stood brushing the snow from their hair and clothes.

“Another detour?” Seth asked Potter.

“Just for tonight,” he said. “The storm is too bad and it will be night soon.”

“Are you sure they’re the only reasons?” Seth pushed.

Looking away, Potter said, “What other possible reasons could there be? Now let’s have a look to see if we can’t find somewhere to bed down for the night.”

I looked at Seth and Eloisa and they shared a knowing glance with each other.

Potter led us up the stairs and through a maze of corridors and passageways. Pipes ran along the walls and some of them hissed steam in short, smoky bursts. The corridors were lit from above by a series of neon lights and water dripped from the ceiling and ran down the walls. The facility looked as if it had quickly fallen into disrepair.

Stopping abruptly, Potter turned to face the wall. He pressed a series of buttons set into a panel on the wall next to a door. A red light flashed on and off, barring us entry to whatever lay on the other side of the door. Sucking in air, Potter sighed, rolled up his sleeve and smashed his fist into the panel. Sparks shot from behind it, then the door slid up and opened.

Turning to face us, Potter said, "Follow me," and then slipped through the gap he had opened.

The door slid closed behind us with a hiss. I looked around to discover that we were now standing in a room that was oblong in shape. Down the length of one of the walls were two windows, which both looked out into a large glass container filled with water.

Potter glanced at me, raised an eyebrow, and then led us to the first viewing window, where we all peered into the murky water on the other side of the glass. I immediately jumped backwards with fright and had to

stifle a scream. Behind the window floated a white *thing*. Initially it looked human with two arms and two legs. But it was its face that was all wrong. It looked like a disfigured version of Isidor.

The head of this half-breed, although similar in appearance to Isidor, was bloated and misshapen, elongated and stretched. It had two black eyes that swivelled blindly in two sunken sockets. Its mouth was huge and open like a flapping gash. But this was nothing compared to the umbilical cord that snaked from an open wound on the crown of its head. The cord coiled upwards and was attached to an underwater panel that flashed with a series of lights.

“What is it?” Seth asked, and I caught a smile tug at the corners of his mouth as he glanced at Isidor.

Knowing that Seth was probably taking some perverse satisfaction from this, Isidor swallowed hard and walked closer to the window. “I’m surprised you don’t recognise it,” he whispered, as if fearing that he might wake the half-breed on the other side of the glass. “It’s meant to be me.”

“This must be one of the failed attempts at breeding a copy of Isidor from his DNA,” I spoke aloud.

I looked through the glass at the half-breed and watched as its jaws flapped loosely open and closed beneath the water. I couldn’t tell if this was

a deliberate act on behalf of the creature or not. I hoped not. I hoped that it was dead and wasn't suffering in some way.

Potter remained silent, and turning his back, he moved away from the window and came to rest in front of another set of glass panels. Again, it looked into an underwater chamber and inside this one floated what appeared to be a human girl. I gazed at her and she looked as if she were asleep. This time though, I had no difficulty in recognising who it was floating behind the glass. It was me, aged about eight-years-old.

On seeing the girl behind the glass I began to tremble.

"What's wrong?" Potter asked, brushing my hand gently with the tips of his fingers.

Yanking his hand away, I pointed at the girl floating behind the glass and shouted, "That's me! That's me as a child!"

"What?" Kayla asked looking around at me.

Isidor was still staring blankly in at his deformed half-breed, his head tilted to one side. I knew that, just like me, seeing this other version of himself had disturbed him.

Seth seemed unmoved and said to me, "So this was you as a child? Cute!"

"Back off, Seth!" Potter ordered. "Can't you see Kiera's upset by this?"

“I was just admiring the Vampyrus’ creativity,” Seth smiled and winked at Eloisa.

“You call that thing in there *creative*?” I snapped at him. “That’s cruel. Whatever that might be in there is – was – living. It would have had feelings and emotions. How dare the Vampyrus do this to her – to *me*!”

“That’s like the Kayla-thing Isidor killed in that room at the monastery,” Potter said.

“Kayla what?” Kayla suddenly said. “What are you talking about, Potter?”

“Sorry, did someone forget to mention it, but there was a half-breed who looked just like you at this monastery we came across,” Potter started to explain. “Well, she had less hair than you and she was...”

“Potter!” I shouted at him. “Don’t you have any tact?”

“The girl needs to know the truth,” Potter said back. “You know the kid is like sixteen – you can’t protect her for the rest of her life.”

“What are you both talking about?” Kayla said, forcing her way between us.

“See that girl in there,” I said pointing to the eight-year-old me floating in the water. “That was just what I looked like as a girl. But what’s important, Kayla, is that in there *isn’t* me. That’s something the Vampyrus have tried to breed from my DNA.”

“So there are things out there that look like me?” Kayla asked, searching my eyes for the truth.

“Yes. But however much they try, they will never be able to make another me or you – we’re unique – and those things are just worthless copies.”

“It’s alive!” Eloisa suddenly said, and for the first time since meeting her, I could sense fear in her voice – but then again, maybe it was revulsion I could detect? I followed her bright yellow stare as she pointed at the younger-me floating in the water. The girl had opened her eyes and was staring at me. Although she looked like me in almost every way, her eyes were not hazel like mine but cold and black. Her skin was corpse white and wrinkled from being submerged in the water for too long. Her jet-black hair fanned out in the water like a mermaid’s fin. Kicking her legs, she swam towards the glass and looked at me. It was then that I noticed that it wasn’t just her legs that she used to propel herself through the water, but a set of fins – no – wings that grew from her back. Raising her one hand, she tapped slowly on the glass and the sound of her knocking sent gooseflesh down my spine. As if captivated by her stare, I inched towards the glass. With the tip of our noses almost touching, I felt an incredible wave of sadness come over me. I pitied her – I pitied me – but wasn’t that the same thing?

The girl opened her mouth as if to smile, but her lips turned upwards forming a cruel grin. I could see a row of razor-sharp teeth protruding through her gums. Then, without warning she began to smash her head into the glass as if trying to break it with her face.

“She’s alive!” Kayla shrieked, jerking backwards and away from the glass.

Shaking his head, Potter said, “Not alive like us. She doesn’t have feelings or senses.”

“How can you be so sure?” Kayla asked, not able to take her eyes off the glass.

“You try smashing your face in like that, and see if you feel it! She just exists,” Potter said, as he flipped a series of switches that were fixed to the wall by the window. “But not anymore.”

No sooner had he turned off the switches, the water drained out of the tank, like a bath having its plug removed. Sensing that she was in danger, the girl behind the window began to swish about, clutch at the water with her claws. As the last of the water drained from the tank, the girl collapsed onto her side. Drawing her knees up to her chest, she gasped several times, closed her eyes and fell still.

Potter turned away from the window and I followed. I couldn’t bear to look upon her – *me* – any longer. In my mind, I kept telling myself that

she wasn't *me* – she was a monster created in a laboratory like '*Mary Shelly's Frankenstein*'. The girl had been a creature without a soul, just like the mutant back in the monastery. Potter had been right in turning off this girl's life support. She had no right to life. But who was I or any of us to make that decision? Who had given us the power to play God? And then I thought of the choice that I would soon have to make and I almost had to stuff my knuckles into my mouth to stop myself from screaming.

Kayla, Seth, and Eloisa followed us across the room. As we reached the door that led from the chamber, I looked back to see Isidor still standing by the glass and looking at the boy who floated behind it. Isidor stood only inches from the glass. He had his hand pressed flat against it as if trying to make contact with the creature on the other side. Then to my surprise, Potter headed back towards him. He slowly raised his hand, flipped off the switches on the wall next to the tank. Then, placing his arm around Isidor's shoulder, he guided him from the room, and as they went, I could see the silver streaks of tears on Isidor's face.

Chapter Thirty-Five

We sat together in a large dining hall which I guessed had been used by the staff at the facility. Kayla and I finished the remainder of the tinned fruit I had taken from the supermarket. That seemed so long ago now. So much had changed, and my head and heart were trying to play catch-up. However much I tried not to think about Ravenwood's letter to me, it kept worming its way to the front of my mind. All I could think about was the decision he had left me to make.

I do not have to tell you that the burden on you is great. The fate of two entire races lies in your hands. The decision to destroy an entire race is not an easy one – so choose wisely, Kiera Hudson.

Over and over again those words kept going around and around in my mind, like a broken merry-go-round that couldn't be stopped. I thought that if I burnt that message, then those words would fade away like ash on a breeze, but if anything, it had only seared those words into my mind like a brand on a farm animal.

Isidor sat alone at one end of the table. He wasn't eating. He sat and stared at the blank wall in front of him. Potter had taken one of the bottles of Lot 13 and was drinking from it. He rolled one down the length of the table towards Isidor, but Isidor just let it roll on by.

"You need to keep your strength up, kid," Potter said, but Isidor just kept staring at the wall. Part of me wanted to go to him and talk to him about what I had read in that message left by Ravenwood. I wanted to tell Kayla, too. But, I knew in my heart that it wasn't the right time. How could I talk to them rationally about our importance if I didn't really understand the consequences of it myself? No, I would wait – get everything set in my own mind before I burdened them with it. So, getting up from my seat, I took one of the opened cans of fruit and went to him.

Hooking my finger into the can, I plucked out a slimy, crescent-shaped peach slice and popped it into my mouth. "You know, although these things are bright enough to light up the dark, they taste good."

Isidor ignored me.

"Isidor..." I started.

"They had no right," he suddenly said, his voice soft but firm.

"Sorry?" I said back.

"Phillips and the others had no right to take my DNA, to operate on me, do tests on me, just so they could make that deformed-looking creature

back there,” he said.

“They’ve done it to the three of us,” I said. “I know that doesn’t make it any easier, but you don’t have to go through this alone.”

“What do they want from us?” he whispered, not taking his eyes off the wall, as if deep in thought.

“We’re special, Isidor, but you already know that,” I said. “This man – Elias Munn – I think that’s his name or it used to be – believes that he can copy us, take our uniqueness and harness it in some way. But the thing is, Isidor, that isn’t you back there and it never will be. I know it’s hard, but just think of it as a bad piece of sculpture. It might bear some faint resemblance to you or even look just like you – but it can never be you.”

“I guess,” he said turning to look at me. “I hadn’t thought of it like that.”

“Isidor, if there is one thing that I’ve learnt on this journey, it’s that whatever happens, all you can do is be true to yourself,” I said, “You can’t ever be more than that.”

With a faint smile, he said, “Thanks, Kiera.”

“What for?” I asked him.

“For being you,” he said. “Now where are those peach slices?”

I pushed the can towards him. “How are your cravings?” I asked him.

“Okay,” he said, pushing some peach into his mouth. “That Lot 13 Potter gave me back at the house has taken the edge off it. What about you?”

“I’m coping,” I lied, eyeing the tube of Lot 13 Potter had sent rolling down the table. “I don’t know if Potter was right.”

“About what?” Isidor asked me.

“That we’ll have to take Lot 13 for the rest of our lives,” I said.

“Well, he was right about one thing,” Isidor said.

“And what was that?” I asked him, curious.

“It does help if you’re angry,” he said looking at me. “It does help if you hate the ones who have hurt you.”

“How do you figure that out?” I asked, glancing back at Potter who sat some seats away with a cigarette dangling from his mouth.

“Because I’m not going to stop until I’ve taken Phillips’ heart out!” Isidor said.

I looked at him and it was as if he had lost that boyish look of his. He appeared older somehow, and in his once blue eyes, I could see pain. But it was more than that; it was like he had said – it was hate.

Feeling tired and wanting to be alone so I could think about everything I had learnt from Ravenwood’s letter, I left the others sitting in

the dining hall and went to look for somewhere to sleep for the night. My whole body ached with tiredness, and my head thumped with a dull thud.

I wandered along the empty walkways and corridors, and as I did, I had snapshot memories of the facility with its plain white walls and sterile floors. I came across a row of rooms and each one of the doors had a circular window set into them, just like the one from my dreams. I remembered again looking through the window as Isidor had stared in at me, his face haunted and scared looking.

“*Kiera!*” Isidor had screamed. “*Help me!*” he had begged and banged weakly against the window. “*We have to get out of here, Kiera!*” and it was almost as if his screams were still echoing off the walls and down the corridors in the desolate facility.

Stopping in front of one of the doors, not knowing why I picked that particular one, I pushed it open and went inside. There was a bed set against the far wall and the blankets had been pulled back. There was an upturned chair and it made me think of Doctor Hunt sitting next to me as he read from those books. Righting the chair, I noticed something under the bed. I crouched and picked it up. I looked down at the book in my hands and didn’t know whether to laugh or cry. The book was ‘*Peter Rabbit*’. I thumbed through the pages and looked at the watercolour pictures of Mr.

McGregor brandishing his rake as he chased Peter Rabbit across the allotment.

“Go on Peter, run!” I whispered aloud. “Don’t let him catch you!”

Closing the book, I placed it on the bed that I had once occupied. Knowing that I would be too uncomfortable ever sleeping in this room again, I closed the door behind me and looked for somewhere else to rest. I climbed down the stairs to another level and found myself in another passageway. Just like the others I’d searched, there were doors leading off of it. Pushing against one of them, it opened to reveal a narrow room with a small bed. There was no bedding, but there was a pillow. Stepping into the room, I closed the door behind me. Along the opposite wall sat two small lockers. One of the doors was ajar and I pulled it open. It was empty but attached to the inside of the door was a faded photograph of a young woman holding a smiling baby.

“Who’s that?” I asked aloud.

“What does it say on the front of the locker?” someone asked. I looked up to see Potter standing in the doorway.

“What are you doing here?” I asked him, startled by his sudden appearance. I felt a little angry that he was here when I just wanted to be alone, but another part of me was glad, too. I swung the locker door closed and read the name that had been stencilled across its front. It read: ***Coanda***

I recognised the name as being the person who Ravenwood said I should seek out in The Hollows. I said to Potter, “Who is Coanda?”

“The person who used to own that locker, I guess,” he said. “Why, is there a problem?”

Still not ready to discuss what I’d read in that message from Ravenwood, I shrugged and said, “No, there isn’t a problem.”

Closing the door behind him, Potter came towards me. “I think there is a problem,” he said.

“What makes you think that?” I asked, looking away.

Taking my chin in his hand, he gently turned my face back towards him. “Please, Kiera, talk to me.”

“Why, so you can turn it into some kind of joke?” I snapped at him.

“That’s not fair,” he said, taking his hand away from my face.

“You’ve changed.”

“I’ve changed?” I scoffed. “What about you?”

“What about me?” he said, lighting a cigarette.

“You’re always so freaking cranky,” I said.

“Is that it? And I thought you were being a stroppy-cow because you were struggling with how you felt about me,” he smiled.

Dropping onto the bed, I said, “See, that’s exactly what I mean! You never take anything seriously unless it involves smashing a door down,

tearing up some vampires, or kicking some werewolf's arse."

"I take a lot of things seriously, Kiera," he said, and his smile had faded. "Just because I don't go around all day long weeping and wailing, it doesn't mean I don't care."

"Look at the way you were with Kayla back at the police station," I reminded him. "There was no need for that."

"Listen, sweet-cheeks, just in case you haven't noticed, we're in serious fucking trouble here," he snapped, blowing smoke through his nose. "You're not doing that girl any favours by being soft with her. This ride we're on is going to get a whole lot worse before it gets better! If she doesn't toughen up, she's gonna get herself killed, or worse."

"What could be worse than that?" I said.

"Getting *you* killed," he shouted back at me.

"I can look after myself," I yelled back.

"Not while you're watching her back," he said, his voice lowering but still remaining firm. "And then there's Isidor."

"So you do know his name then?" I bitched.

"I know his *name* but I'm not prepared to see it etched on a gravestone. Because believe me, Kiera, that's exactly what's going to happen if someone doesn't have the bollocks to take his head out of his arse. Jesus, that boy wanders around in a trance most days. So he's good

with his crossbow, but that ain't gone help him against what's coming. That boy needs to man-up, because I'm not going to sit back and watch him get himself killed, or anyone else for that matter."

"So you do have feelings?" I snipped at him.

"Feelings!" Potter almost roared at me. "You have no idea about how I really feel!"

"So tell me!" I shouted at him.

"I love you!" he bellowed at me and his eyes turned black. "Happy now? I love you, okay? I love you so fucking much that it hurts! It's driving me insane! I loved you from the moment I saw you doing your Miss Marple impression in those woods back at The Ragged Cove. But I could tell you were sweet on Luke and hey, why not? He's the good-looking one, right? I mean, I'm just the hired muscle. I'm the one who gets everyone else out of the shit. But I couldn't help my feelings, I'd never felt like that before. So yeah, okay I stole a kiss from you in the gatehouse – big fucking deal! But you know what? That was the biggest mistake of my life, because that one kiss from you drove me out of my tiny freaking mind! So, I'm sorry if I give the boy a hard time and ain't too gentle with the girl, but I'm not going to sit back and watch you risk your life just so you can blow their noses and wipe their arses!"

I looked at Potter and he seemed almost out of breath after his rant. Once he had finished, he put out his cigarette and lit another one. Standing, I looked at him and said, “Potter, I had no idea...”

“Ah, forget it,” he said, waving me away with his hand. “I shouldn’t have said anything. Besides, I’ll be moving out at first light in search of Luke. Once I’ve rescued him, I’ll bring him to you in The Hollows and you won’t have to see me again.”

“What does that mean?” I asked, my heart skipping a beat at the thought of him leaving.

“I don’t want to get in the way of you and Luke,” he said. “I know how you feel about him.”

“Luke’s my friend...” I started.

“And Murphy was mine, but you didn’t catch us swimming nude together in a lake!” he snapped.

“You know about that?” I gasped.

“Yeah, but don’t go getting your posh French knickers in a twist. I wasn’t spying on you, I was looking for stuff to make a fire with in the overhang,” he said.

“Why didn’t you tell me before?” I asked, still reeling from his outburst.

“What, so you would think I was some kind of pervert who went spying on -” he started.

“No, not that!” I cut over him. “Why didn’t you say how you felt about me?”

“Did I really need to say anything, Kiera?” he said, taking a puff on his cigarette. “For someone who’s meant to see stuff – you see diddly-shit. How many times have I saved Isidor’s bacon because you asked me to? You know I might like a good scrap but Kamikaze missions aren’t my idea of fun. How many times have I got you out of the shit? Christ, I stood on the bonnet of a speeding car while homicidal vampire-cops sprayed me with their machine guns! How much more have I got to do before you’ll see how much I love you? I thought getting your car out of the snow back in The Ragged Cove would have done the trick – but you’re obviously a hard nut to crack!”

“I’m sorry,” I said, going to him. “I never meant to...”

“I don’t want your apologies, Kiera,” he said, his voice softening.

“What do you want?” I asked him, looking into his eyes.

“I want to know what it is you listen to on that goddamn iPod the whole time,” he smirked.

Taking the iPod from my pocket, I handed it to him and said, “Why don’t you take a look?”

I watched Potter scroll down the list of songs with his thumb. “I don’t suppose you have ‘*I’m your man*’ by Wham, do you?” he smiled.

“No,” I smiled back.

“Oh, okay, what about this?” he said, removing the earphones so we could both listen to the song that he had chosen. Placing the iPod on top of the locker, he took me in his arms as ‘*Just the way you are*’ by Bruno Mars started to play.

The music filled the tiny room, and Potter brought his lips close to mine. Slowly, we started to sway against each other as if sharing a dance. Although his lips hovered just above mine, he didn’t kiss me. I listened to the words of the song that he had chosen, and closing my eyes, I kissed him. We turned around and around to the music and it felt as if I were at a prom instead of in a hangar.

The song swept me away to another place, and I let Potter take me there as he held me in his arms. Those feelings of nervous excitement and fear washed over me again, like they always did when we were together. My stomach fluttered, and this time it wasn’t the cravings making it summersault. My skin prickled and my heart raced. Entwining his strong hands in my hair, he kissed my face and then in my ear he whispered, “What I really want, Kiera, what I’ve only ever wanted, is you.”

Easing me down onto the bed, the song continued to play, and at that moment in time I felt a feeling of such intense happiness, that I didn't want to let him go, because I believed that if I did, that happiness would go with him. Tugging at each other's clothes, I ran my hands over his chest and stomach, up his back, and through his hair. The last time that we made love, we had been manacled in the caves below the mountains. This time was different – I felt free to explore him and for him to explore me. With the gentle voice of Bruno Mars singing in the background, we made love; and unlike in the caves, our love-making wasn't rushed and desperate. This time it was gentle, caring, and seemed to last forever.

We lay facing each other on the narrow bed, and held each other. The music had stopped long ago and all I could hear was the sound of our breathing as it fell in time with each other.

“So, what's your secret?” he asked me, his voice just a whisper in the dark.

“What do you mean?” I asked, although I knew exactly what he meant.

“What was written in that book?” he brushed my hair with his fingertips.

“Have you ever heard of the name Elias Munn?” I asked.

He was silent for a moment as if contemplating his answer. “That story is just a myth,” he said. “Is that who Ravenwood believes is behind all of this?”

“Yes,” I told him.

“But that’s like saying Father Christmas is real,” he whispered. “The story of Elias Munn is a fable – a ghost story the Vampyrus tell their kids to spook them – it’s nothing more than that.”

“Do you know the story about the half-breeds?” I whispered.

“No, I’ve missed that one,” he said.

So, as we lay in the dark next to each other, I told him what was written in the message left by Ravenwood. At the end, Potter lay quietly for several moments, then said, “Kiera, I don’t know how much of this is all true, but it just sounds like a fairy tale to me. I’ve heard loads of different stuff about the humans and the conflicts that they had eons ago, but I’ve never heard one about a half-breed that has to make a choice between the Vampyrus and the humans. I mean, how does that work, exactly? What if you chose now? What if you just snapped your fingers and said, “I want all Vampyrus to die”, is it gonna happen? I don’t think so.”

“Maybe it’s not that easy,” I said. “Perhaps there is some kind of test – something I have to do first.”

“Like what?” he replied. “Run the hundred meters? Come first in a fancy dress competition? Win the X-Factor? The whole thing sounds ridiculous if you ask me.”

“Putting it like that, it does sound a bit odd,” I said, running my fingertips across his chest.

“Kiera, Statler and Waldorf were just a couple of crazy old men...”

“Who?” I asked.

“Hunt and Ravenwood – you know Statler and Waldorf?” he said.

“Who are they?”

“The two old men from The Muppet Show,” he said, sounding bemused that I had no idea who they were. “They are just like Hunt and Ravenwood – to crazy old men.”

“Hunt wasn’t crazy,” I said.

“No?” Potter whispered. “Then why did he give his son away as a baby? Why did he send his daughter to those schools where she was bullied? Why did he experiment on them, for crying out loud? I’m telling you, Kiera, the guy wasn’t too tightly wrapped.”

“He was trying to find a cure,” I said.

“It sounds to me that his work was more important to him than anything else,” Potter said.

“But he helped me escape,” I insisted.

“Oh yeah, I was forgetting – a kids book about some toad with cross-dressing tendencies is just the thing you need when trying to escape. I must have missed that episode of Prison Break!”

I rolled on to my back and looked into the darkness. Although I was glad I’d confided in Potter and he had put things into perspective like only he could, I still felt unsure and didn’t think that Hunt or Ravenwood would have lied to me. Whatever the truth, once I was in The Hollows, I would seek out this Felix Coanda. After all, the very room I now lay in had a locker with that name on it. Turning my head against the pillow to face Potter, I said, “So, what about you? What’s your secret?”

“I’m not sure that I have one,” he said.

“Yeah, you do,” I said, and pinched his arm.

“You’ll find out what it is tomorrow,” he said. “I can’t tell you what it is now.”

“Why not?” I asked him.

“Because you would only try and stop me from doing what it is that I have to do,” he said.

“You’re scaring me now,” I whispered and rested my head against his firm chest.

“There’s nothing to be scared of,” he hushed, folding his arms around me. “I’m just doing an old friend a favour.”

“Has it something to do with Seth and Eloisa?” I whispered. “You said that Seth wouldn’t be coming with me into The Hollows and Eloisa wouldn’t be coming back with you and Luke from the zoo.”

“Wait until tomorrow,” he said. “Everything will seem clearer then.”

“Have it your way,” I said, yawning, now too tired to press him on the point any further. I closed my eyes, and the steady sound of his heartbeat soon had me drifting off to sleep. As I was about to slip into unconsciousness, Potter whispered, “I love you, Kiera – do you love me?”

“I’m not allowed to fall in love,” I mumbled. “Ravenwood...”

Chapter Thirty-Six

...grabbed hold of my right leg and I wailed out in pain. It was dark and I was outside. I could see the facility I had fled from on the other side of the field. I could hear the sound of running and the gnashing of pointed teeth in the undergrowth all around me.

The wolves, they're coming after me!

I looked down at my leg and could see a long, open wound running the length of my shin. The blood which poured from it glistened black in the dark. There was something silver and metal-looking in the cut.

I must have tripped and ripped my leg open on some barbwire fencing and some of it had got entangled in the wound.

To look at the gaping hole sent splinters of pain through my body. My stomach began to lurch and the urge to throw-up was almost impossible to resist.

The sound of woofing came, and out of the darkness came hundreds of brilliant yellow eyes. I dug my fingers into the long grass and tried to drag myself away from them, but in every direction I turned, a hundred pairs of those evil eyes came out of the darkness at me.

My leg continued to burn with pain and my head began to feel woozy. The world began to seesaw around me and my vision began to blur. I looked back at my leg and willed it to stop hurting. In the glare of the moonlight, I could see the metal winking back at me.

Then something huge and powerful came striding towards me. It had a large black skull and meaty forearms. It made a series of deep grunting sounds and then appeared to grow in size. I peered at it and realised that whatever it was, wasn't growing in size but standing up on two muscular legs and spreading a pair of giant black wings. It then began to beat its chest with two solid fists and roar into the night.

"Get back, you filthy wolves. She's mine!"

I could hear the surrounding wolves begin to whine. Some were less brave than others and I heard them scampering away into the grass, but others stayed.

"She's ours!" one of the werewolves protested.

The beast looming before me swung a huge, powerful arm into the air as a warning and bellowed:

"Get away I tell you! She's mine!"

The last of the werewolves bounded away, and as they did, the creature roared after them:

"Back to the facility and remove any trace of what's gone on there!"

My mind swam in and out of consciousness and the pain from my leg devoured me. I then felt myself being roughly picked up and held tightly against a mass of coarse, wiry hair. Before the blackness finally consumed me I opened my eyes again and found myself peering into the face of a terrifying-looking Vampyrus.

I wanted to scream but the sound was drowned out by...

...the door to the room slowly swung closed. I rolled onto my side expecting to find Potter, but he had crept away while I'd been asleep. I got out of bed and hurriedly put on my clothes and boots. I eased the door open an inch and peered through the gap to see Potter walking away down the corridor. Without making a sound, I slipped out and closed the door behind me.

Potter walked some way ahead and I pressed myself close to the wall where the shadows fell and followed silently behind him. He walked confidently and with purpose as if he knew exactly where he was going and what he was going to do once he got there. Was this the secret that he had spoken about? If so what was it? I intended to find out.

From the shadows, I watched as Potter climbed the stairs down to the wide, open area on the ground floor of the hangar. He stopped before the giant sliding doors as if waiting to meet someone. The doors were still

slightly open and outside all I could see was the night sky and a crust of a moon. The snow looked as if it had stopped for the time being.

I tiptoed halfway down the stairs to a small landing, and crouching down, I tried to make myself as small as possible. I waited only a few minutes until a long stretch of a shadow fell across the hangar floor. I knew who that shadow belonged to; I had seen it before when spying on Murphy in that derelict farmhouse.

Seth appeared below me and approached Potter. At first they didn't speak, they just looked at one another. Potter spoke first, but I was too far away to hear what it was that he was saying. I wished that I had Kayla with me, but I sensed that I didn't have time to go searching for her now. Leaning forward, but not too much for fear of them seeing me, I strained to hear what they were saying to one another. Every so often, a snippet of their conversation would float back towards me but it wasn't enough to truly understand what they were talking about. Although they showed no emotion in their voices, I could see that the conversation had grown heated by the way they gestured at one another with their hands.

So, crawling on my hands and knees, I inched myself along the walkway above them, and stopped when I had reached a discreet place but could hear their voices.

“You can’t stop me from going to The Hollows,’ Seth said. “Eloisa and I are in as much danger as you and your friends.”

“Well go and find somewhere else to hide,” Potter snapped.

“There is no other place, the town has been sealed off!” Seth barked. “You know we can’t escape from here.”

“Not my problem,” Potter replied. “Murdering scum like you doesn’t deserve the protection of The Hollows.”

“I didn’t kill those women,” Seth insisted. “It wasn’t me who tortured them.”

“You seem to be forgetting that I caught you at the crime scene of the twelfth victim,” Potter hissed. “You were leaning over her body with blood all over your muzzle.”

“Murphy wasn’t convinced,” Seth said, and smiled.

From my hiding place, I could see Potter tense as Seth said Murphy’s name. Then, stepping closer to Seth, Potter said, “You might have fooled Murphy but you’re not fooling me. You took advantage of a grieving man. Murphy had just lost his daughters, he wasn’t thinking straight. If he had of been, he would’ve never come to you for help in the first place.”

With that crazy look in his eyes and the sinister grin playing on his lips, Seth looked down at Potter and said, “Murphy believed me. He trusted me.”

“Yeah, and look where it got him,” Potter growled, going toe to toe with Seth. “You tricked him, led him to Phillips who ripped his heart out! I’m not as trusting as Murphy. Do you really think that I would’ve let Kiera go with you into The Hollows – a perverted serial killer who gets his kicks out of murdering children and women?”

“You don’t have a choice, Potter,” Seth sneered. “You can’t stop me.”

“No, it’s you who doesn’t have the choice,” Potter said, unfastening the front of his shirt. “Leave now voluntarily and go find some other place to hide or you don’t leave at all.”

“Don’t you threaten me…” Seth started, but then, without warning Potter reached out with breathtaking speed and reached for Seth’s throat. Seth was just as quick and seized Potter’s arm. Both of them stared blackly into each other’s eyes.

“Only one of us can go forward,” Potter told him.

“Then it shall be me,” Seth said.

Realising that Seth wouldn’t give in to his demands that easily, Potter broke his arm free and threw his arms out to his side. His back arched as he rolled his head back and his wings unfurled from his back. Seth wasted no time in dragging his claws across his own face as he ripped his flesh away and his wolf’s head appeared from underneath. His baseball

cap flew away, along with his long, flowing coat and jeans. As if reading each other's mind, both sprang into the air within a fraction of a second. Potter roared and Seth howled as they collided with one another. I flinched backwards as lengths of black wolf hair sprayed into the air as Potter ripped at Seth with his claws. The werewolf released a howl that was so deep, it sounded like thunder. With his lips rolling back, Seth lunged at Potter and buried his teeth into him. Both were equal in strength and speed and each tried to tear the other apart. Potter rolled back one of his muscular arms and drove his claw straight at the werewolf's colossal skull. There was a sickening crack of a sound and Seth shot backwards through the air.

"You cannot go forward from here," Potter warned him, racing through the air in a blur of black shadows.

"Why you and not me?" Seth barked, landing on all fours on the floor of the hangar.

"Because I know you're a killer and you betrayed Murphy," Potter boomed as he raced through the air towards Seth.

"If there is no reasoning with you, Potter, then you must die just like Murphy did," Seth barked at the top of his voice. He then suddenly shot forward, raking at the air with his giant black paws.

Seth caught Potter, who stumbled backwards momentarily in mid-air, but that was all the werewolf needed to come racing forward, his jaws

open and teeth gnashing. Potter was just as quick, and ducking out of Seth's way, he dropped out of the air, rolled across the shiny surface of the hangar's floor, and sprang to his feet. Seth came at him again and they fought each other. They rolled over and over, a blur of black fur and wings. They struck out at each other with such speed and ferocity that they became a blur like the rotary blades of a helicopter in flight. The sounds of their claws ripping and teeth tearing echoed off the metal walls of the hangar as the two of them leapt, spun, and dived at each other.

Sparks flew up from beneath the werewolf's claws as he skirted across the floor of the hangar. The light from his eyes glittered and he came racing forward again. He thrust Potter backwards again and he flew through the air, smashing into the side wall of the hangar. Potter seemed to hover momentarily in mid-air, then rocketed back towards the ground, leaving the wall battered and bent out of shape.

Seth ducked and skidded around as Potter came screaming forward, lashing out at the wolf with his claws. They crashed into one another and more sparks flew into the air as they skidded down the length of the hangar.

"You can't win!" Seth howled.

"Neither can you!" Potter roared back.

"Then we both die!" Seth barked and pounced at Potter again.

Potter sprang into the air to meet him head on, his wings pointed like arrows behind him. Their arms whisked through the air as they sliced at each other. Blood sprayed from Potter's chest, and I slapped both hands over my mouth to stop myself from screaming. Their arms locked and they clashed heads as they tried to bite lumps from each other's faces. Both pushed fiercely against each other. But they were equally matched – and I feared that perhaps Seth had been right, both of them would die.

From my hiding place, I knelt and watched as Seth suddenly whipped his giant tail from behind him, lashing Potter across his back. There was a crunching sound, then Potter collapsed onto the floor. He reached out with his arms as Seth came forwards, brandishing his razor-like teeth and snarling. I stared at Potter and he looked beat. Slowly, he lowered his arms, his shoulders sloped and he dropped his head. I wanted to scream at him to get up, to fight back, but my throat was locked and I felt as if I was suffocating. Then, to my amazement, he dragged himself into a sitting position and crossed his legs in front of him. He tilted his head back as if exposing his neck for Seth to bite.

Seth seemed to wait several moments before coming forward again, as if he suspected a trap of some kind. Potter remained still, his head back, throat exposed. Seth finally sauntered forward, brandishing his teeth and snarling. Before I'd even had a chance to register what had happened,

Potter had snatched hold of the werewolf's giant head and twisted it violently to the right sending Seth spinning through the air. Before Seth had a chance to react to what had happened, Potter launched himself off the ground and had him in a headlock. Seth tried to bark, but all that came out was a series of coughing sounds as Potter tightened his arms around the wolf's throat. Seth kicked out widely with his back legs, his claws making a scraping sound across the floor and his huge, fleshy tongue rolled from the corner of his mouth.

“You helped kill my friend Murphy and if I leave you alive, you'll kill Kiera, too,” Potter growled into one of Seth's pointed ears.

Seth began to make a final struggle and he kicked out wildly with his paws, as Potter tightened his grip further.

The wolf made a panting sound, and his eyes started to close, and just when I thought that it was over, something huge and grey came leaping into the hangar through the gap in the open doors. Glancing down, I gasped at the sight of Nik standing over Potter as he gripped Seth on the floor.

“I killed those women,” he yelled at Potter. “It was me you and your friends were chasing back then. I was the one who butchered and tortured all of those women, not Jack Seth!”

Chapter Thirty-Seven

“What are you talking about?” Potter growled, refusing to release his grip on the dying werewolf. “Who in the hell are you?”

“My name’s Nik Seth,” he barked at Potter, “And it was me who committed those murders, not my father.”

“I don’t believe you!” Potter growled, as blood ran from the claw marks which now covered his body.

“It’s true,” Nik howled. “Jack Seth is my father. He discovered it was me who was killing those women. He tried to stop me, but I couldn’t be stopped, not back then. He followed me one night as I picked up another woman from a bar and headed back to her apartment. We went to her room, and as she got undressed, I took my skin off and revealed my other self to her. She wanted to scream – God how she wanted to scream – I could see it in her eyes. But she looked into mine and I had her. She was transfixed by my stare and I could do anything I wanted to her, and believe me, I did. But my father knew that you were hunting me down and were close by that night. He reached me first and told me to go so he could be in my place when you, Murphy, and Luke came crashing through the door. My father

took the blame for those killings, but I didn't go unpunished. He cursed me, leaving me captured in the wolf's form until I redeemed myself. He never wanted me to entice a woman away again, place her in a trance and then kill her. He knew, looking like a wolf, I'd never be able to trick another woman to go with me again."

"How do I know you're not lying?" Potter said, as Seth stopped twitching in his arms and fell still. "Any son of Jack Seth's has got to be lying scum."

"It's true," a voice said, and I looked down to see Eloisa walk across the hangar floor towards Potter. Her long, blond hair bounced beautifully about her shoulders and her eyes glimmered like crystals. "Jack took the blame for his son; he took his place in the cells down in The Hollows."

"So you're this wolf's mother?" Potter said.

"I'm not his mother," Eloisa smiled with her perfectly formed lips. "Nik's mother died when he was just a baby. I am Jack's lover, that is all."

Potter stared into her eyes, then slowly released his grip on Jack. He stood, then looking down at the wolf, he rolled the giant beast away with his foot.

"Father," Nik howled, then licked Jack's face with his giant tongue. "Wake up, father. I've done good this time."

Seth made a gurgling sound in the back of his throat and lifted his head an inch off the floor. Nik licked his father's face again. "Father, wake up, please," he said. "I want you to see that I've done good for you."

Seth's mighty flanks began to heave up and down as he started to draw air through his snout. Potter stood and looked down at the wolf, then at Eloisa. Then, Seth was getting up, staggering onto all fours. He sniffed the air and looked at his son.

"What are you doing here, boy?" Seth woofed.

"I came to save you," Nik barked softly.

"I told you I never wanted to lay eyes on you again," Seth said. Now get out of my sight." Then looking at Potter with his yellow eyes, he added, "It looks like your friend, Murphy, was right about me all along."

Without saying a word, Potter walked directly towards Eloisa. She smiled at him and her eyes twinkled. Potter's face looked grim and his eyes a dull black. Then, so quick if I'd blinked I would have missed it, Potter shot his arm out and thrust his claw into Eloisa's chest. It all happened so fast that Eloisa still had that smile on her face as Potter ripped out her heart. She looked at him as if to say something, but all that came out of her mouth was a thick jet of black blood. Eloisa fell forward, crashing face first onto the floor of the hangar.

With her heart still beating in his fist, Potter walked back to Seth. Holding the heart out in front of Seth's huge face, he said to the wolf, "You might not have murdered those women, but you helped take the heart of somebody I loved." Then, dropping Eloisa's heart on the floor in front of Seth's giant paws, Potter looked into the wolf's eyes and said, "I guess that makes us just about even."

I couldn't believe what I had just seen and those words from Ravenwood's message swam sickeningly in the front of my mind.

"... Elias Munn plunged his fist into her chest and tore her heart out..."

"No!" I screamed over the edge of the walkway. "Potter, what have you just done?"

No sooner had those words left my mouth, Isidor and Kayla came running down the stairs above me. "What's happening?" Kayla called out.

Potter glanced over his shoulder and saw me standing on the walkway above him. Within an instant, he had flown up to join me.

"What did you just do?" I gasped.

He looked into my eyes and said, "You asked me last night if I had feelings. Murphy was my friend – like a father to me – and I loved him. Do you really think that I'd let his death go unpunished?"

“But you just ripped her heart out,” I said still in shock at what I’d just witnessed.

“And they took Murphy’s,” he said flatly.

I looked into his eyes and they looked dead and heartless. “You’re scaring me,” I told him, blinking away the tears that were standing in my eyes.

Coming closer, Potter said, “Now go straight to The Hollows and wait for me. I’ll come back with Luke, I promise.” Then leaning in, he kissed me on the cheek and at the same time, he whispered in my ear, “It’s not me you have to be scared of, sweet-cheeks.”

He turned away, leapt over the edge of the stairs and landed on the ground in front of Seth. Leaning forward, he said something to the werewolf, then strode purposefully between the gap in the hangar doors and out into the dawn.

I looked over my shoulder at Kayla and said, “Did you hear what he said to Jack Seth?”

Kayla looked at me and nodded.

“What did he say?” I snapped at her.

“If Seth harmed as much as one single hair on your head while he was gone in search of Luke, he would rip his heart out with his teeth and...” Kayla stopped.

“And what?” I demanded.

“Potter said that he would eat Jack Seth’s heart,” Kayla shuddered.

Chapter Thirty-Eight

With my head spinning, I made my way down the stairs to the ground floor, Kayla and Isidor close behind me. Eloisa's body lay to one side, and a thick pool of blood trailed from beneath her. I looked away. Seth was twisting and contorting from a werewolf back into human form. His limbs almost seemed to stretch as if made from putty and his head looked as if it was being sucked in on itself. When he had completed his metamorphosis, he looked down at his son.

"You're not welcome here," he hissed.

"But I saved your life," Nik yelped like a lost puppy.

"And took countless others," Seth said.

"So have you," Nik suddenly snarled. "You have murdered hundreds."

"Not for many years," Seth shouted back. "I've been trying to redeem myself – to lift the Lycanthrope curse."

"You seem to have a funny way of showing it," Isidor suddenly cut in.

“And what’s that supposed to mean, boy?” Seth turned on him.

“Betraying Murphy like you did beneath the mountains,” Isidor said standing firm against the serial killer. “He was our friend and he trusted you.”

Glancing over at Eloisa spread face down on the floor, Seth said, “And it looks like I’ve paid for that too.”

Nik came forward, his giant tail swishing behind him. “But I have changed, father,” he said. “It’s not only your life that I’ve saved. I helped Kiera escape from her cage and her friends, too.”

“It’s true,” I said to Seth. “Your son helped me – I think we helped each other in some strange way. We were both fighting our cravings for human flesh together. Nik could have killed me at any time, believe me, he had plenty of opportunities. But he didn’t. Instead of killing me, he helped me and my friends. And even when I’d escaped, he kept watch over me and guarded me. I think it’s time you lifted the curse.”

“Don’t tell me what I should and shouldn’t do with my son!” Seth roared and spittle flew from his lips. He then came towards me, his eyes spinning in his sunken eye sockets like two burning planets.

Before he could reach me, Kayla had stepped into his path. “I so wouldn’t do that if I were you,” she hissed. “I heard what Potter said to you before he left. So *back-off*, wolf man!”

“Potter doesn’t scare me,” Seth smiled grimly.

“Oh, no?” Isidor said, coming to stand next to his sister. “It certainly smelt like Potter scared you. You don’t just talk shit – you smell of it!”

Seth looked at Isidor, and for the briefest of moments I thought that his eyes were going to pop from those sunken sockets. Without giving him the chance to reply, Kayla quickly added, “So as far as I can see, Jack Seth, you have two choices. You can either crawl back under whichever rock you came out from, or you can keep your freaking face shut, get in line, and follow Kiera into The Hollows.” Then, in a spray of shadows, she was hovering in the air just inches from his emaciated face. “Because I promise you, one more threat – just one more – and you won’t have to wait for Potter to come back and eat your heart out, I’ll hit you so freaking hard that it will explode out of your arse!”

Without saying anything, Seth smiled and turned to walk away. I couldn’t believe the change in Kayla and Isidor. Maybe Potter had been right after all; perhaps what they needed was to toughen up. However harsh he had been to them, it had changed them. For the better? I didn’t know. But they both seemed ready to confront whatever lay ahead for us.

Nik bounded after his father, and almost seeming to yap at his heels, he said, “Please, father, lift the curse.”

“No! Not ever!” Seth roared at him. “I took the blame for you – I’ve done what any father would do for their son, but now you are on your own.”

“But it isn’t just your life that I’ve saved,” Nik barked. “I’ve come with some news – news that could end all of this today.”

Hearing this, I went to Nik, and said, “What news? What are you talking about?”

“The invisible man,” he started, “the one who’s behind all of this has made a mistake. He’s visiting a site not too far away from here. He wants to oversee the site the Vampyrus are building to stage their attack against the humans.”

Isidor and Kayla came rushing over, and Seth stopped dead in his tracks and looked back at his son.

“How do you know this?” I asked him.

Looking at his father than back at me, he said, “I tortured two of the Vampyrus that had come to prepare the way for him. I’m sorry father, but it was the only way. I had to kill them.”

Seth grunted and looked at his son. “Go on, what else do you know?”

“Not much,” Nik said. “Only that he is coming above ground. I know where he is going to be, so this is our chance to take him and end this today.”

“Where is this site?” I asked him.

“About two miles from here,” Nik said. “It’s set between two mountains.”

“We should wait for Potter to return,” I said.

“It will be too late by then,” Nik said, looking at me. “We only have one shot at this.”

“I don’t know...” I started.

“If no one is going to rip my throat out for speaking,” Seth said and glanced at Kayla, “I think Nik is right. We should go now and end this. Look on the bright side, once this is all over, you’ll never have to see me or my kind again.”

“I hate to agree with him,” Isidor said, “But I think he’s right. We should go – it might be the only chance we ever have of defeating this invisible man.”

“Elias Munn,” I said.

“Who?” Kayla asked.

“That’s his real name,” I said looking at them. “That’s what this invisible man is really called. Whether he still goes by that name now, I don’t know – but his true name is Elias Munn.”

“How do you know that?” Kayla asked me.

“Ravenwood wrote it in that message he left for me,” I explained.

“What else did he say?” Isidor said.

“I’ll tell you another time,” I said. Changing the subject, I looked at Nik, “How long will it take to get to this place between the mountains? Remember, there’s a storm blowing out there and we’re vulnerable in the open from Vampyrus attacks during daylight.”

“We don’t have to travel above ground,” Nik woofed.

“How come?” Kayla asked him.

“There’s a tunnel that leads right from this facility to the site,” he barked. Then turning to Seth, he added, “See, father, I haven’t let you down this time.”

“We’ll see,” Seth almost seem to sneer.

On hearing Nik mention the tunnel, I remembered the diagrams I’d seen on the computer disc. There had been a tunnel leading away from the facility but it didn’t show where it ended. Looking back at the opening, I hoped that perhaps I might see Potter heading out across the fields, but all I could see was snow. Potter told me to go straight to The Hollows, but he hadn’t known about Elias Munn making a visit to a site that was only two miles from here. If Potter were here, he wouldn’t have wasted the opportunity to attack Munn while he was vulnerable.

Looking at the others, I said, “Okay, what are we waiting for? Let’s get moving.”

Chapter Thirty-Nine

The entrance to the tunnel lay hidden under a mountain of rubble in the basement beneath the hangar. There was a ladder that led down into utter darkness, which didn't pose a problem to me, but the others wouldn't have been able to see their own hand in front of their faces. Isidor found some torches in a workshop at the rear of the hangar and shared them out.

Holding onto the ladder, I climbed down into the hole. At the bottom, just like Nik had said, was a tunnel. It was high enough for us to stand up in, although Seth had to walk stooped forward so as not to strike his head against the roof.

Torchlight splashed across the walls of the tunnel as we followed it. The sound of water dripping could be heard all around us, as well as the noise of rats scurrying around at our feet. We hadn't gone far when Nik snatched one of the rats between his jaws and swallowed it. My skin crawled at the sound of the rat's bones crunching and snapping between Nik's mighty jaws.

After some time, I could just make out a pinprick of white in the distance. Speeding up, we rushed on, knowing that the end of the tunnel was now in sight. We found another set of ladders, and switching off our torches, we started to climb. We found ourselves at the edge of a tree line. Hiding amongst the trees, I could see a large, open area spread between the feet of two mountains. The area was uncovered and searchlights flooded the ground beneath the darkening sky. Snow fell all about us.

Kayla yanked my arm and we squatted by the base of a large tree. “What now?” she asked.

Peering into the distance, I could see some rocks jutting from the uneven ground. “Let’s make our way over to those rocks. It will give us cover while we take a closer look.”

The snow was falling so heavily, I hoped it would offer us some camouflage as we made our way across the open ground to the rocks.

“Are you ready?” I asked the others as I looked back at them. Even though we were sheltered by trees, flurries of snow had still managed to cover them, and they sat looking at me, shivering. Seth had his baseball cap pulled low over his eyes, and its beak was covered white. Nik’s fur was silver-white and it was hard to distinguish what was his coat and what was snow.

Facing front again, I said, “C’mon, let’s go.”

With the wind screaming all around us and our clothes pulled tight, we hunkered down and made our way across the bleak, open area towards the rocks. It seemed to take forever, and by the time we had reached our new hiding place, my hands were numb and almost purple in colour. I couldn't remember ever feeling so cold and I couldn't stop my teeth from chattering. The clouds above us were black and they lumbered across the sky shedding their snow and turning the day into night.

We peeked over the lip of the rock and stared in disbelief at what lay in the valley set between the mountains. There were hundreds of vampires shuffling back and forth. Not only could we see vampires, but to our shock, we could also see row upon row of humans and a handful of Vampyrus keeping watch over them. From our hiding place, we could see a gigantic crater in the ground at the centre of the valley. All around this huge hole were trucks, which trundled back and forth full of stone, rock, and earth. I could see humans – some as young as about ten – were manacled at the feet and joined together in a huge chain-gang. They looked pale, undernourished, and exhausted. I wondered how long it had been since they had last eaten or rested.

For as far as I could see, there were rows of people tied together with heavy chains, digging mindlessly at the rock that surrounded the crater. I watched as some of the people collapsed to the ground, too weary to stand

up again. Seeing this, a Vampyrus would step from the side, yank the human from the ground, and toss it to the vampires to feed on.

“Looks like they’ve got somebody else to do the dirty work,” Isidor said bitterly.

Kayla made a move away from our hiding place, and I yanked at her arm.

“Don’t, Kayla, you’ll be seen!” I whispered.

“I just want to get a better look, that’s all,” She complained.

There was a line of military-type trucks parked nearby. “Okay, we’ll move closer, but be careful,” I warned.

We headed towards the trucks. We virtually crawled along on our bellies, and, on reaching one of the trucks, we rolled underneath it. From here, we were so close now, that I could see the feet of the vampires passing us by.

With my heart racing in my chest like a trip hammer, I peeked from beneath the truck. There were chains hanging from some sort of pulley, which was fixed high above the centre of the crater. Attached to these chains were large metal bathtubs. One end of these chains disappeared down into the hole and the others were fed via the pulley to a large metal wheel that was being turned slowly by a group of mindless-looking humans. I could see the wheel they were forcing around was very heavy.

Even though ten of them had been employed to turn it, their eyes were nearly bursting from their skulls under the strain of pushing it.

As they turned the wheel, more of the metal bathtubs were fed down into the hole while others rose from it. These were full of more rocks and earth. When they reached the surface they tilted upwards, emptied and went back around again. The pile of rocks were then shovelled up by the humans and loaded into the back of the trucks. The vehicles then made their way to the rear of the crater, where they disappeared into the night and the falling snow.

“See, I was right,” Nik whispered, as he lay squashed under the truck, his snout resting on his paws. “They’re digging a hole in the earth so deep and wide that the Vampyrus can flood the country in minutes.”

“I don’t believe it!” Isidor said.

“Your eyes aren’t deceiving you, boy,” Seth breathed. “Although, even I didn’t believe that they would go this far.”

Then before I knew what was happening, Kayla was squirming out from beneath the truck.

“Kayla! Where are you going?” I hissed as quietly as I could.

“To rescue these people!”

“But that’s not why we came...” But she was gone. “Why me?” I asked myself with a sense of despair. Potter had had a bigger influence on

her than I'd first thought. But he wasn't here now to pick up the pieces. I lay there for a moment more, contemplating what I should do next. I couldn't let Kayla go on her own. So, I rolled out from beneath the truck and went after her.

I crept around one of the army vehicles to find Kayla peeking over the top of the bonnet. I sneaked up behind her and looked over her shoulder. She immediately turned and shoved me in the chest.

"There's a vampire coming! Get down!" she breathed.

We crouched beside one of the vehicle's colossal wheels and I prayed the vampire would walk by without discovering us. I closed my eyes and waited for a cold, bony hand to fall on my shoulder. But it never came. As soon as the vampire had passed by, Kayla was back on her feet again. She weaved her way through the vehicles and piles of rocks until we were only a few feet away from the massive wheel, which was being continuously turned by those people. We came to rest against a large rock, which protruded from the ground like a gigantic tooth.

"Kayla, I know you want to help these people, but this is crazy," I whispered.

"I'll think of something," she said, looking over the rock at the people. I looked back and could see that the others were still hiding beneath the truck.

“Kayla, we don’t even know how *we’re* gonna get outta here, let alone rescue a load of half-starved people!”

But Kayla made no reply. She was on her feet again and scurrying over the rocks. I crouched down, and moving like a crab, I scuttled over to the wheel. Kayla reached one of the people, an emaciated looking boy of about thirteen and gently took hold of his arm.

“Hey,” she whispered at the boy.

He didn’t respond. He kept his head down and continued to mindlessly push the wheel round and round.

“You want to get out of here, don’t you?” Kayla almost seemed to plead with him.

I found it upsetting to watch Kayla desperately try and get a response from this boy. Kayla shook the boy again and said, “Please! My friends and I could rescue you!”

Moving closer to Kayla, I placed my hand gently on her shoulder, and said, “Kayla, he can’t hear you. Look at him, whatever they’ve done to him, he’s not like a normal person anymore...he’s a shell.”

Kayla pushed my hand away and said, “I want to help these people.”

“But Kayla...” Before I could finish, the boy spoke, ever so faintly, but he had said something.

“What did you say?” Kayla asked.

“Help me,” he said.

Hearing his cry for help, Kayla bent down and picked up a rock, which filled her whole fist. She brought it up above her head and I could see she intended to try and break the chains which held the boy prisoner. Kayla swung her arm down and I thrust my arm out, grabbing hold of her wrist before the stone crashed into the metal chain. Kayla looked at me and tried to break her arm free.

“No Kayla!” I warned her.

“Get off me!” She hissed, her eyes fixed on mine. “I’m setting this boy free.”

“Now’s not the right time...”

“Let go!” and again she tried to wrestle her arm free from my grip.

“Kayla, if you try and rescue the boy now, you will alert the Vampyrus, and none of us will ever get out of here. Let’s just do what we came for, find this Elias Munn and then come back and rescue him...we can come back and rescue them all!” I pleaded with her.

Before Kayla could respond, my arm was gripped from behind. I wheeled round to see a Vampyrus, just inches from me.

“Who said you could stop working?” it screeched. Looking down at our legs and seeing they weren’t manacled, he screamed at the top of his voice, “Intruders! Intruders!”

I looked quickly about and could see that the other Vampyrus, who were standing within earshot, had stopped what they were doing and were looking at us. Kayla brought the rock she was holding down onto the top of the Vampyrus' head. I heard a sickening thud as it collapsed onto the ground, where it lay twitching.

"I'll come back for you, I promise!" Kayla told the boy. Then Kayla turned to me and said, "Here we go again!" and a part of me wondered if she was looking forward to slaying some vampires and Vampyrus.

Kayla darted away from the wheel and ran alongside the empty tubs, which were beginning their ascent back to the top of the pulley. As she drew level to one of them, she jumped in. Kayla looked back at me and shouted, "I thought you wanted to get out of here!"

Glancing over my shoulder, I saw a group of vampires running towards me, their eyes burning red and their fangs drooling. Not needing any encouragement, I turned and ran as fast as I could towards the tub that Kayla had jumped in. But it had started to rise and move away from the ledge of the crater.

Kayla lent out of the tub and shouted, "C'mon Kiera, run!"

I drew level with it and took hold of Kayla's hand, which she dangled over the edge. She wrapped her fingers tightly around my wrist and yanked me up into the tub. Looking over the rim as we began to rise, I

could see the vampires jumping into the tubs that were close behind us, desperate to sink their teeth into us.

I pointed down at them and shouted, “They’re coming!”

In the distance I heard sirens begin to wail, and I suspected the Vampyrus were alerting Elias Munn to the mayhem, which was now unfolding around the crater. The tub behind us was about six feet away and although it couldn’t get any closer, the four vampires that had managed to clamber into it were now desperately trying to reach for us. They waved their arms about frantically and snatched at the side of the tub that Kayla and I were in.

“Hungry!” they moaned.

One of the vampires managed to take hold and put all of his weight on that end. The tub began to tilt down, forcing us to slide towards the awaiting arms of the vampire. It clawed at my legs and managed to take hold of my feet. The vampire tugged fiercely at me and I began to slide from the tub. I looked back at Kayla and she’d managed to take hold of the other end, stopping herself from falling towards the vampires like I had done.

“Get the fuck off me!” I shouted as the vampire continued to pull at me and I slipped further towards it. I looked down through the gap between the two tubs and screamed. Although we were only about twenty feet from

the rocky ground around the crater, I was now suspended above it, and it spiralled away below me. It looked so deep and black, that it could have almost reached the Earth's core. I couldn't even see the bottom, only darkness. All around the walls of the abyss there was scaffolding, which housed even more humans, digging and chipping away at the walls.

Realising that if I should fall I would certainly die, I began to frantically kick out at the vampire, who was pulling me from the tub. I then felt Kayla take hold of my arms and begin to yank me back towards her. It was like a bizarre game of 'tug of war' that they were playing, and I was the rope.

"Kayla, pull!" I screamed.

"I am!" she shouted back over the wail of the sirens and the shrieks from the vampires.

I lashed out again with my feet and struck the vampire straight in the face. Its head rolled back, and then snapped forward again. It was grotesque-looking, and had a badly stitched scar running from the bridge of its nose and right over the crown of its head. It looked as if someone had tried to stitch the vampire's head back together.

Kicking widely, I managed to break myself free. Kayla hoisted me back into the metal tub and I collapsed onto the floor of it.

"Get up, Kiera, there's no time for rest," she shouted.

I looked up and she was pointing at another vampire that was now making its way across the chain that linked the tubs together.

Don't they ever give up? I asked myself.

The vampire managed to take hold of our tub and it began to climb aboard.

It screamed at us, spit and drool splashing our faces. I pushed it backwards, but the vampire managed to take a hold of the edge of the tub and pull itself in. It loomed up and came towards us. As it did, the tub began to roll dangerously from side to side, like a small boat on a rough sea. Then an idea came to me.

"Kayla, hold on!" I yelled, as I took hold of the side of the tub and began to rock it from side to side.

The vampire began to wobble and I rocked the tub even harder and faster. I looked over my shoulder and saw Kayla gripping the side of the tub, her knuckles glowing white through her skin. Seeing that Kayla was safe, I rocked the tub back and forth as hard as I could. The vampire began to lurch from side to side, as it fought desperately to maintain its balance. I pushed the side of the tub again and again, and even though the night was bitterly cold and snow swirled all around us, sweat ran from my brow and into my eyes.

I watched the vampire stagger violently to the left, so I kicked out at it with my feet, almost spilling it over. The vampire flapped its arms wildly, then disappeared over the edge of the tub. I watched it spin and turn through the air as it fell into the crater. Over and over it spun. The vampire seemed to fall forever, the crater was so deep. Before it had even smashed into the bottom, it had disappeared from my view and into the darkness. Then, I heard the sound of screaming. Looking back, I could see that two of the Vampyrus had swooped through the air and were now trying to yank Kayla from the tub. Scrambling forward, I tried to reach for her. With a *booming* sound, the night felt like it was being torn apart as Isidor raced through the sky towards his sister. With his crossbow drawn, Isidor fired off a flurry of bolts, harpooning the Vampyrus through the head. Within seconds, they were spinning lifelessly away down into the abyss. Isidor winked at his sister and was gone again, chasing down more Vampyrus that had sprang into the air.

We had reached the highest point of the pulley and were now making our descent. The remaining vampires in the tub behind lent out and tore at the air hysterically. One of them stood up, as if getting ready to jump the six foot gap that separated us.

I looked down and could see we were now about ten feet away from the ground. Throwing a quick look over my shoulder, I could see the

vampire was just about to leap at us. I turned to look at Kayla, who was now standing in the tub, with her wings out. Wrapping her arms around my waist, she shouted, “Jump!”

Together we leapt from the tub and soared through the air. We hit the ground softly.

“Why didn’t you do that before?” I asked her.

“Kicking vampire butt was way more fun,” she grinned at me. Potter had a lot to answer for.

Within an instant, Kayla was heading back towards the trucks, which we had earlier used as cover. I sped after her. Sticking her head beneath the truck, she said to Seth and Nik, “I wouldn’t lie under there if I were you!”

“Why not?” Seth snapped.

“Because, I’m going to be moving it!” Kayla said as she climbed up the side of the truck, yanked open the door to the drivers cab and climbed in behind the wheel.

“What’s with the sirens?” Nik howled, and covered his ears with his paws.

“I think Kayla blew our cover,” I said, as the truck’s engine rumbled into life. Snatching a spade and pickaxe from two of the mindless humans

who were digging away at the rocks, I looked at Isidor as he landed beside me and said, “Get in the truck!”

Nik shot out from his hiding place and Seth followed. Over his shoulder I could see a crowd of vampires racing towards us at an incredible speed.

“Look behind you!” I shouted.

Nik spun around, his giant tail almost whipping me across the face. Seth looked back, and seeing the approaching vampires, he tore the flesh from his body in a series of quick movements. Within moments, he was no longer the emaciated figure that towered over me, but a giant wolf that bounded into the air and sunk his colossal jaws into the nearest vampire he could find. Turning back to the truck, I stopped and my heart leapt into my throat. On the other side of the crater, I could see another truck. Climbing into the back of it was my mother, Phillips, and Sparky. But there was another. This person’s head was covered with a long, flowing hood which hid their face.

“Elias Munn!” I breathed. Throwing the pickaxe and spade into the drivers cab, I climbed in.

“Do you know how to drive one of these things?” I asked Kayla, as she sat behind the steering wheel.

“No! Why, do you?” she asked.

“Why did you climb in here if you don’t know how to drive?” Isidor yelled at her.

“How hard can it be?” Kayla asked, as she yanked at the gear stick and stamped on the pedals with her feet.

The truck lurched forward and I slammed into the windscreen, smashing my head against the glass.

“You’re gonna kills us!” I roared.

“Hang on!” Kayla shouted, as she pressed her foot hard against the accelerator and we sped forward.

“Kayla, when Potter told you to toughen up a bit, I don’t think he meant to get yourself killed!” I yelled at her over the roar of the truck’s engine.

“Where are we going?” Isidor shouted.

“After that truck!” I hollered, pointing through the windscreen at the vehicle I’d seen Elias Munn climb into.

Kayla swung the truck violently around and started to race towards a large gate that had been erected on this side of the crater. She pulled and twisted the gear stick and the truck shook and shuddered as it made agonising grinding noises.

On seeing us approach, the two Vampyrus guarding the exit began to slide the gate closed, shutting off our escape. Kayla pushed down harder on

the accelerator and we sped towards the diminishing gap.

As we drew closer, the two Vampyrus let the truck with Elias Munn inside slip through, then raced to shut the gate. The gap now seemed too narrow for the truck to squeeze through.

“Kayla, we’re not gonna make it!” Isidor shouted.

But on we sped.

“Kayla, stop the truck!” I yelled.

Faster and faster we went towards the closing gap.

“Kayla....!” Isidor roared and threw his hands over his eyes.

With an ear-piercing sound of scraping metal and a flurry of sparks, we tore through the opening and out into the night. I looked over at Kayla in disbelief, only to find her chuckling to herself.

“You’re insane!” Isidor shouted and we began to laugh along with her.

Chapter Forty

We raced through the night, the windscreen wipers squeaking as they swept away the snow. The back end of the truck swung out as we skidded on the frozen road beneath us. The taillights of the truck in front of us glowed like two hot coals. The searchlights were sweeping frantically backwards and forwards. The siren was screaming and I couldn't ever recall feeling so alive. Then I heard the sound of thumping coming from the rear of the truck. There was a hatch in the cab that slid open so you could see into the cargo hold. I snapped it open, and a corpse-white hand shot from the back of the truck and clawed at my face.

"We've got vampires!" I shouted at Kayla, who seemed oblivious to the hand that was waving wildly about at us through the open hatch. Isidor ducked out of its way and screamed. Kayla glanced at it quickly, taking her eyes off the road and the truck lurched sideways, then righted itself.

I rammed the hatch closed against the vampire's wrist. An agonising scream followed, then the hand withdrew back into the darkness. With the hatch closed and fastened, I turned in my seat and as I did, something reflected back at me from the wing mirror. Staring into it, I could see a

vampire hanging from the side of the truck. It was inching its way towards the cab.

“Kayla, there’s a vampire hanging onto the side of the truck – and it’s coming towards us!” I yelled over the roar of the engine and the wailing of the sirens.

“Hang on!” Kayla shouted, yanking the steering wheel from left to right, sending the vehicle swerving violently across the road.

I turned to look in the wing mirror, praying that Kayla’s erratic driving had thrown the vampire free. But to my horror, it was already at the passenger window and reaching in at me.

It screamed, only inches away from my face. I could see its waxy lips rolled back, revealing a set of yellow-brown fangs which protruded from its crimson gums.

Reaching down between my legs, I snatched up the spade I’d grabbed during my escape. Holding it firmly with both hands, I began to repeatedly hit the vampire with it.

It screamed over and over again as I bashed it over the head.

The truck continued to lurch from side to side, as Kayla wrestled with its steering. We continued to speed along the road. I hit the vampire again and again until it lost its footing. It swung like a kite from the side of the truck as it desperately held on. Then, from over my shoulder appeared

the tip of Isidor's crossbow. The vampire's head snapped backwards as a stake slammed into the fleshy skin between its eyes.

It screeched one last time and disappeared from beside me and under the wheels of the truck. The vehicle shook as its wheels rolled over it.

I sat back in my seat and then all three of us screamed at the top of our voices. From out of nowhere, a vampire swung down from the roof of the cab and spread itself across the windscreen. Like the others, its face was hideous, a patchwork of purple and blue veins. The vampire looked at the three of us with its burning eyes and grinned. Its tongue then slithered from between its lips as the vampire licked the windscreen in one long, drawn-out movement.

"That's so gross," Kayla shouted and slammed on the breaks.

The truck lurched forward, catapulting the vampire from the front of the vehicle and into the night. Kayla then threw the vehicle forward again as she hammered on the accelerator with her foot.

The truck zoomed forward across the rough, uneven ground as we chased down the truck with Elias Munn inside. I knew that my mother was in there too, and the thought of seeing her again scared me. But I had to tell myself that she wasn't my mother anymore. Just like those half-breeds in the facility, she was just a rough sculpture of the woman she used to be. Then ahead, I saw two giant granite rocks sticking out of the ground. I

doubted that Kayla had seen them. The truck ahead swerved around them, almost tipping up on two wheels to do so.

Kayla raced towards them, refusing to slow down.

“Kayla we won’t make it! Kayla, stop the truck!” Isidor roared.

Kayla sat rigidly behind the steering wheel, her eyes fixed on the rocks ahead and her foot pressed firmly on the accelerator.

“Kayla, stop!” I hollered. The rocks loomed up before us and got closer and closer with every passing second.

Just as I thought we were going to smash straight into them, Isidor leaned over and yanked on the steering wheel, causing the rear of the truck to spin out. Then everything was upside down and I was being crushed against the roof of the cab as the truck flipped over and rolled across the ground.

Everything seemed to swim hazily past my eyes, as I shook my throbbing head. I looked up and could see the passenger door of the cab above me. Then there was the sound of moaning. At first, I couldn’t place where it was coming from. Gradually, I realised it was Isidor who was groaning, he was crushed beneath me.

I hoisted myself up, using the back of the seat and the dashboard for leverage. Leaning down, I took hold of Isidor’s arm and pulled at him.

“Isidor, we’ve got to get moving!” I shouted, my voice full of urgency. I looked up through the windscreen that was now facing me vertically and I could see a line of vampires running towards the truck. Glancing around the cab, I searched for Kayla but couldn’t see her anywhere. I pulled at Isidor again. “Get up!” I roared.

Isidor groaned and opened his eyes. I grabbed hold of the spade and pickaxe, and pushed my feet against the dashboard. Manoeuvring myself out of the passenger door window, I leapt off the side of the truck and rolled into the snow. It was then a strong smell of petrol forced its way into my nostrils. Realising that it must be leaking from the vehicle, I turned to look for Isidor. He poked his head from the side window.

“Hurry!” I screamed at him, fearing that the truck was going to explode at any moment.

Isidor tried to force his way through the window. “I’m stuck, Kiera!”

From above me, something swooped out of the sky so fast that it was just a blur. Then Isidor was being lifted out of the truck, as Kayla soared up into the sky with him in her arms. I watched as Kayla released Isidor, and then spreading his own wings, they both swooped back towards the ground.

“Is it me, or can you smell petrol?” I asked, as they landed beside me.

“Yeah, I can smell it too!” Isidor said pointing his nose into the air.

“Then run!” I shouted, sprinting away through the snow.

I ran as hard and as fast as I could, the searchlights now tracking my every step in their white glare. Suddenly, I heard a tremendous cracking noise, as if the sky were being torn apart. I was lifted off my feet and thrown forward in a blast of seething heat, as the truck erupted into a ball of orange and red flames behind me.

I hit the ground hard and landed on my back. Kayla and Isidor swooped above the flames that licked from the truck, which was now a raging pile of burning, twisted metal. I put my arm up to shield my eyes from the bright glow of the flames and blistering heat radiating from them. Several of the vampires that been running towards us were now charging up and down hysterically, flames licking their clothes, consuming them. But there were more of them, and they were racing straight towards us.

Getting to my feet, I could see that I had nowhere to run. The vampires were nearly upon me and I could see the taillights of the other truck disappearing into the distance. Bracing myself for their onslaught, I thrust my hand into my coat pocket and let the tips of my fingers caress Murphy’s crucifix.

Good old Jim Murphy, I smiled to myself and pulled out the crucifix. I held it out before me, and the approaching vampires appeared to falter. It wasn't much, but it was something and it gave me some extra time. Then the vampires were flying through the air. The night became filled with the sound of howling as Jack Seth and Nik bounded through them. With their gigantic paws, they knocked the vampires aside like scarecrows in a gale. They snarled and bit at anything that came too close to them, ripping limbs from the vampires as they went.

I didn't think I'd ever feel so grateful to see Jack Seth. More vampires appeared from behind me, and I spun round, brandishing the crucifix before me. The vampires seemed to cower, throwing their hands across their faces as the Lycanthrope took their chance. They raced forward, jaws open wide, tongues lolling out. Bounding through the air, they sliced through the vampires with their claws. From above, Isidor and Kayla swept through the sky and I could see that both of them had writhing vampires in their claws. With a quick flick of their wrists, they had torn the vampires in half, chucking their remains into the night. Then they were off again, searching out more vampires. Walking backwards, keeping the vampires in view, I tried to edge my way nearer to Seth and Nik who were busily devouring their latest victims. Blood covered their snouts and rosey bits of flesh hung from their whiskers. Then, as if from nowhere, a vampire sprang

through the air and landed on Nik's back. He howled in pain as the vampire sunk its teeth into his throat. Blood jetted from Nik's neck and his yellow eyes rolled in their sockets. But however hard Nik tried to shake the vampire free, it held fast with its fangs. With the crucifix clenched in my fist, I raced forward, and just like at the police station, I had travelled several hundred yards in the blink of an eye.

Leaping through the air, I pressed the crucifix into the vampire's forehead and at once it released its jaws from around Nik's throat. The vampire screeched and held its face in its hands as it began to crumble away between its fingers. Turning, I could see Nik, lying in the snow which was now red from the blood that pumped from his neck.

"Nik!" I screamed, racing towards him.

Dropping to my knees, I pressed my hand to Nik's throat, but his blood just pumped over my fingers. I knew that he was bleeding to death. His tongue jutted from between his jaws and he made a panting sound. Rolling his eyes so as to look at me, Nik said, "I tried to make amends, Kiera. I really tried..."

"Shhh," I told him, and stroked the fur along his flank.

"Tell my father that I'm sorry..." he started but stopped as something strange began to happen. As Nik lay dying in the snow, his body began to change shape, and the thick silver hair that covered his body began

to fall away. I watched his head twist as his long snout disappeared, leaving behind the face of a young boy. Just like he had described himself to me in the zoo, his hair was blonde and he had the face of a cherub. I stroked the bare skin that now covered his back, and like his father, he was long and incredibly thin. His ribcage and spine could be clearly seen through his skin. With the tips of my fingers, I brushed his fair hair from his brow.

Looking at me, he forced a smile and said, “At last Kiera, I’m free.” Then he closed his eyes and fell still.

From behind me, I heard a deafening roar. I looked back to see Jack Seth rising up on his hind legs. He howled into the night as if in agonising pain. “What have they done to my son!” he howled. Then dropping once more onto all fours he bounded over to Nik’s lifeless body. He licked his son’s face and yelped. “My son,” he howled again. “My precious son – look what they’ve done to you! Oh my God, Nikolaou, they’ve killed you.”

I watched this unexpected display of grief from Seth as once again, he licked his son’s human face with his long, pink tongue. “I’m so sorry, son,” he seemed to whimper like a dog that had been beaten too many times. “I would have lifted the curse. I was proud of what you did to save me, but my heart was too full of hate to show it.” Then rising again on his back legs, he howled so loudly that I thought my eardrums would burst. “What have they done to my precious boy!”

Dropping to the ground, he sent up a shower of snow, and came towards me. “Where is this Elias Munn?” he growled so deeply that his voice sounded like thunder.

“He went that way,” I said, pointing in the direction that I had last seen the truck heading.

Without saying another word, Seth bounded away into the night.

“Wait for me!” I roared and raced after him. My feet crunched through the snow, and I worked my arms like pistons beside me. I stared ahead, and concentrated on catching the truck with Elias Munn inside, the man who had caused so much pain. I thought of my mother sitting with him and my heart ached for her – it ached for my father, too. I had promised him that I would find her – and even though I had, I’d lost her. Blood surged through my veins, and with my heart pounding in my chest, I pushed on, faster, faster, faster! My legs became a blur beneath me as I ploughed through the snow, sending up a wake behind me. Then ahead, I could see the taillights of the truck in the distance, their red glow shining back at me. I saw something else, racing along beside the truck – it was Seth. I thrust myself forward, my feet now almost seeming to skim across the surface of the snow.

Ahead, I could see Seth racing along beside the truck as he slammed his giant skull into the side of it. The truck lurched over, its wheels raising

up off the ground. He struck it again and the truck almost skidded out of control. Faster and faster I went and with every heartbeat I got closer and closer. It was as if my feet were no longer touching the ground but treading air. I looked down and gasped, my feet really were no longer on the ground, but about seven feet above it. I looked back over my shoulder to see two shimmering wings protruding from my back. They stretched out on either side of me, black and sparkling as if showered with glitter. At the tip of each wing were those bony black fingers and they clutched at the air as if pulling me forward. I discovered that if I tilted my head up and placed my arms by my sides, I soared upwards. Looking down, I could see the truck snaking its way through the snow below me. Seth continued to race along beside it, smashing and crashing his great body into it.

On either side of me I felt a rush of air. I looked right and could see Isidor soaring beside me. I looked left and could see Kayla.

“You look beautiful, Kiera!” she yelled over the roar of the rushing wind and driving snow. “Awesome!”

I didn’t know how I looked or felt, but to be able to race through the sky was a rush and I could feel adrenaline thundering through my body. I lowered my head and immediately began to lose altitude.

“Let’s go and finish this!” Isidor bellowed at me. Then, with a grim look of determination on his face, he rocketed down towards the truck.

“See you later, alligator!” Kayla smiled as she banked left, then soared downwards.

“In a while, crocodile!” I yelled, racing after her.

With my wings rippling on either side of me like two giant sails, I raced back towards the ground. I swooped above the truck, and as I did, I saw Phillips and my mum soar out of the back and up into the sky. I watched my mother go, and half of me wanted to go after her. Kayla must have sensed my feelings, as she shouted over at me, “I’ve got her.” Then Kayla was gone in pursuit of her.

Isidor back-flipped through the air, and with a swift nod of his head in my direction, he soared after Phillips. Tucking my arms into my side, I aimed myself at the truck and dived towards it. When I was only feet away, a werewolf leapt from the rear of the truck and bounded away across the snow covered fields. I watched as Seth wasted no time in charging after Sparky.

That just left me and Elias Munn, who was still in the truck. Drawing a lungful of ice cold air, I shot towards the back of the truck. With my hands stretched out before me, I grabbed the roof and climbed inside. It was dark, but looking through the darkness, I could see a figure huddled in the corner. He sat, bent forward, on a bench that ran the length of the cargo hold. His face was covered with a hood he had thrown over his head.

With my heart beating so fast in my chest I thought it might just explode, I approached Elias Munn. I stood before him. Slowly, he raised his head so as to look at me.

He pulled back the hood and said, "Hello, Kiera."

"*Doctor Hunt?*" I gasped as I staggered backwards, my heart almost breaking as I looked upon his face.

Wolf House

Kiera Hudson Series One

Book 5

By

Tim O'Rourke

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This book is a work of fiction. The names, characters, places, and incidents are products of the writer's imagination or have been used fictitiously and are not to be construed as real. Any resemblance to persons, living or dead, actual events, locales or organisations is entirely coincidental.

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This book is dedicated to:

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Kayla Goehl
Kaycee Smith
Greta Malone
Shana Benedict
Sharra Courter Turner
Rachel B
Holly Harper
Jennifer Martin-Green
Karen Trout
Robin F. Fischer
Misty
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Caryn Cleveland
Chrissy Costello Godsey
Diana Stabler Butler
Carrissa Hopkins
Jennifer Bryson
Meesha R. Knowles

So glad you've enjoyed the books!

A special thank you to

Tom O'Rourke & Carolyn M. Pinard

Who both gave up their time to help with this book

At very short notice!

&

Lynda, Joseph, Thomas and Zachary

For putting up with me!

Authors note:

Of all my characters, Kiera and Potter have been the most talked about. From the many emails that I receive – most want to know more about them.

The first four books in the Kiera Hudson Series are all from Kiera's point of view and I think we know her well enough by now. But what about Potter?

So for all the Potter fans that want to know more about him, here is his story.

Potter hopes you enjoy it!

“Wolf House” (Potter's Story)

A 30,000 word novella

1

Kiera's words, "*You're scaring me, Potter!*" kept going around and around in my mind. Her voice had been scared and confused, and I hated the sound of it. Not just that, it was her eyes. They usually looked like a cornfield someone had set a torch to, gold and bright, almost ablaze – but as she had looked at me and said, "*You're scaring me, Potter!*" her eyes seemed darker somehow, as if they had lost their fire. There had been a tremor to her voice and that bothered me too. I didn't want her to be scared of me because she had no reason to be. She bugged the hell out of me most of the time with her little-miss-know-it-all attitude, but she was smart and I couldn't deny that. But, I guess in a perverse kind of way, I liked that about her. She didn't just have the sweetest cheeks I'd ever seen, she had brains too. There was a spark in Kiera, and that spark had ignited something inside me.

I'd never been great at expressing my feelings and writing fancy poetry – to be honest I was always thought that kind of stuff was bullshit. I mean if you love someone, you just love them, does it need to get any more complex than that? I don't think so. I'd never been into all that romancing

stuff. A girl either likes you or she doesn't, jeez, I'd known guys who had spent a fortune on wining and dining and still never scored a home run! The biggest bunch of flowers, the brightest diamond, and all the fanciest poetry in the world ain't gonna hide the fact that you're butt-ugly with the personality of an amoeba.

I'd told Kiera how I'd felt about her and I hadn't had to use any fancy words, I just told her how it was. I don't know if it's what she'd been expecting, I suppose other guys might have declared their undying love to her in another way – a more romantic way – but the Bruno Mars song was a stroke of genius on my behalf. I still think '*I'm Your Man*' by Wham would have been better, or even '*The Edge of Heaven*', but I guess it wasn't meant to be. Perhaps another time. But was there ever going to be another time for us – for me and Kiera?

I feared the odds were stacked against me. Not only was I going to rescue Luke and bring him back to her, I still didn't know exactly how Kiera felt for him. With the Brad Pitt of the team returning, would I stand a chance? Did Kiera feel for me the same way as I felt for her? I got a sick feeling in my gut when I wondered if I wasn't some emotional prop for her while Lukey-boy had been off the scene. Then I could hear Kiera's voice again, "*You're scaring me, Potter!*" and I pushed it away.

I must be going on some emotional shootout; either that or I'd completely lost the fucking plot! Why was I putting my life at risk to save the person I feared Kiera was truly in love with? And had I gone too far by killing Eloisa in front of her?

"You're scaring me, Potter!"

And I had scared her. I could see it in her eyes and hear it in her voice. But I couldn't go back and explain; I had to keep moving forward through the driving wind and freezing snow to rescue Luke. Why? Because he was my friend, just like Murphy had been. We had a history together. We'd shared a lot. Luke had been like a brother and Murphy like a father to me. Both of them had literally taken me beneath their wings. So, if by rescuing Luke and killing Eloisa in front of Kiera I ended up losing her, then that would be something I would have to live with, because I had reasons for doing both.

I couldn't turn my back on Luke and I couldn't let Murphy's death go without revenge. We had been a team, and I could remember way back when...

2

...the red traffic signal ahead glowed an angry red. The line of traffic in front began to slow, but Murphy sped up.

“Lights!” Murphy snapped, although it sounded more like “mights!” as he sucked on the end of his pipe.

I took the blue emergency light from the dashboard, and winding down the window, I leant out and stuck it to the roof. Flicking a switch, the light came on, lighting up the night in strobes of fluorescent blue.

“Do you want the sirens? Go on, Sarge, we’ve got to have sirens!” I smiled and stuck a cigarette in the corner of my mouth.

“Of course I want the bloody sirens!” Murphy barked.

Grinning from ear to ear, I hit the switch and then lit my cigarette. The *whoop-whoop!* sound of the sirens made my heart race.

The traffic ahead began to peel away and head for the curb as they cleared a path for us. Murphy lurched our unmarked cruiser left then right and pressed his boot hard against the accelerator. We sped through a STOP sign in the road junction and nearly collided with another car that snaked

across our path. Murphy slammed on the brakes and I shot forward, smashing my face into the windscreen.

“Christ almighty!” I yelled as I rocked back into my seat and snatched the now-crumpled cigarette from my mouth.

Rolling down the window, I roared at the driver of the other vehicle, “What’s the matter with you!”

The driver sat in his car and glared at me.

“Have you got shit in your eyes, or what?” I hollered at him again.

“I was driving here!” the driver shouted back.

“And can’t you see we’re the police here? Didn’t you see the big flashing thing on top of the car?” I roared. “Look where you’re going next time, Mr. Fucking Magoo!”

“Just leave it,” Luke said, poking his head from the backseat of the car.

“He could have killed us!” I said, looking back at him.

“These things happen,” Luke replied in his usual, unruffled manner.

“Not to me they don’t!” I shot back. “That jerk is dangerous – he shouldn’t even have a driving licence!”

Smiling, Luke sat back in his seat and said, “Potter, you’ve got a lot to learn.”

“And I s’pose you think you’re gonna be the one to teach me?” I asked, glaring at Luke, then back at the dumb driver.

Speeding away from the near-car wreck, Murphy growled, “Potter, just keep your face shut. I’m not interested in driving offences. We’ve just discovered that we might have a rogue Lycanthrope to catch. If you want to deal with traffic, go and get yourself one of those bright yellow jackets and spend the rest of your life prancing up and down at the nearest school-crossing!”

“But...” I started.

“No buts!” Murphy barked, gunning the vehicle faster and faster out of the town of Little Hope to its outskirts where the railway station lay. Without taking his eyes off the unlit road ahead, Murphy peered through a cloud of blue smoke that wafted from his pipe and said, “Don’t forget, wise guy, that if I hadn’t got you out of police training school, you’d probably be sweeping the streets or raking the tunnels back in The Hollows right now.”

“I was doing just fine at training school,” I snapped back, although deep down I knew Murphy had gotten me out of the shit. I was just about to be kicked out for putting three of my trainers in hospital. It hadn’t been my fault. They’d been trying to teach us some fancy new restraint techniques – arm locks and crap like that. I really didn’t mean to break their arms while practicing the new moves. It wasn’t my fault that I was stronger than most.

Looking at Murphy, I said, “I’m grateful to you for getting me out – but I didn’t mean to break those guys’ arms.”

“Break their arms!” Murphy coughed on a throat full of pipe smoke. “You nearly ripped them clean off!”

“Yeah, poor old Patterson’s arms looked like they belonged to that guy from the Fantastic Four by the time you’d finished with him,” Luke said from the back of the car.

“Okay! Okay! So I get a little enthusiastic from time to time,” I said. “But I’m a good cop and don’t need you two babysitting me all the time.”

“We’ll see,” Murphy said as he stopped the cruiser in the small car park outside the Little Hope railway station.

3

There were three marked police vehicles already parked outside the railway station and several officers in those fluorescent yellow jackets. I noticed some of them were already marking out the crime scene with reams of blue and white police tape.

Swinging the car door open, I stepped out into the cold November night. Although the town of Little Hope was situated on the remote west coast of England, the night was surprisingly dry for this time of the year. The sky was clear and star-shot, and a full moon hung above like a giant yellow eye, watching us.

Murphy and Luke climbed from the cruiser, and pulling the collar of my coat up against the crisp wind, I made my way towards the outer cordon that had been put in place to protect the crime scene. Grabbing my arm, Murphy stopped me.

“Listen, Potter, remember what I said, no wisecracks. Just listen, watch, and learn.” He stared at me with his piercing blue eyes and they looked hard and frosty, just like his short, silver hair.

“Whatever you say, Sarge,” I said, and looked at Luke who was standing just behind Murphy.

I liked Luke, but he was just a bit too straight-laced. I mean, he was a good guy and I knew he had been friends with Murphy for a while now. Had they been friends before coming from The Hollows, I didn’t know, but they had a solid friendship. Sometimes though, Luke tried to act like my big brother. I didn’t have a big brother and I didn’t want one or need one, not to mention, Luke was a couple of years younger than me. I was twenty-four for Christ’s sake, I could look after myself.

Luke noticed me looking at him and he gave me a friendly smile. “Let’s see what all the fuss is about,” he said, looking over at the taped-off railway station.

Eyeing us both carefully, Murphy said, “As we know from Chief Inspector Rom, a possible murder has occurred here at the hands of a Lycanthrope, so whatever happens, we have jurisdiction here. These cops aren’t going to be happy about us marching in and taking over. So let’s be nice about it, okay?”

Then, without saying another word, Murphy strode towards the ring of police tape, his pipe hanging from his mouth and his hands thrust into his coat pockets. I turned to make after him, when Luke suddenly pulled me back.

“He isn’t really mad at you,” Luke said. “It’s just his way of looking out for you.”

“Look, I never asked Murphy to be my knight in shining armour,” I said, lighting a cigarette. “If I’d been kicked out of the Force, I would have taken care of myself.” How true this was, I didn’t know. I guessed that I would have had a couple of choices. One, scrape a living above ground, or two, go back to The Hollows and listen to my father gloat about how he knew that I would never be able to survive above ground and how I’d screwed up again.

Luke must have detected some small trace of uncertainty in my voice, as he said, “The only way this works – how this *whole* thing works – is if we stick together and listen to what the Sarge says.”

“It’s just that he watches me the whole time,” I groaned, knowing deep down that Luke was right. “It’s as if he doesn’t trust me.”

“He trusts you all right, or you wouldn’t be standing here right now,” Luke smiled and brushed his jet-black hair from his brow. “Murphy’s been above ground longer than us and he knows the score. He knows how to deal with humans, how to fit in, how to go about unnoticed and not draw any unwanted attention -”

Luke was suddenly cut short by the sound of Murphy shouting from the entrance of the railway station.

“Wind your neck in, boy!” Murphy was yelling at a fresh-faced police officer who stood at the entrance to the station clutching a clipboard in his hands. “You don’t need my name, rank, or number for your list! I’m having access to this crime scene whether you like it or not!”

Glancing back at Luke, I raised my eyebrows and said, “What were you saying about not drawing attention to ourselves?”

Not waiting for Luke’s reply, I made my way between the parked police vehicles. As I went, an officer suddenly appeared from the rear of one of the cars. Holding out my hands, I gripped this person as they tripped and fell against me.

“Take it easy,” I said, pushing the officer off me.

They straightened themselves and peered at me from beneath a cap. It was then I noticed that this officer was female. Her pale skin flushed with embarrassment and she said, “I’m sorry about that. I really should look where I’m going.”

I looked at her and drew in a breath. She wasn’t beautiful but was way beyond just being pretty. There was something about her. Maybe it was her eyes; they sparkled back at me from beneath the peak of her cap.

“No, it’s fine,” I said, staring at her. “An honest mistake.”

“Okay,” she smiled at me, and walked away.

I watched her go, then my attention was drawn away by the sound of Murphy shouting again.

“Listen, sonny,” Murphy was saying, prodding the young officer in the chest with his finger, “I couldn’t give a rat’s arse who told you that no one could enter this crime scene unless I give you my details.”

“But I don’t know who you are,” the cop was blustering as Luke and I joined Murphy. In a way, I kinda felt sorry for this cop. I mean, three guys suddenly show up at the scene of a murder dressed in long, black coats, jeans, and boots, with no form of identification and then demand that they be given access to the body. If I were this cop, would I let us in? No way, I’d be telling us to go screw ourselves.

“You don’t need to know who we are,” Murphy continued.

“But -” the officer tried.

“You don’t hear real good, do you, sonny?” Murphy said, but before he could say anything further, a figure stepped from the shadows of the station entrance and came towards us. He was tall and lean, and the top of his head was almost hairless apart from a few wispy strands of black hair that fluttered in the wind. His face looked pinched and gaunt, with beady, black eyes that were set too close together. His eyebrows met in the middle like some vast caterpillar. He wore a black, pinstriped suit and he looked like something that had stepped out of a Tim Burton movie.

Eyeing the three of us as if we had just slithered from the nearest gutter, he turned to the young uniformed officer and said, “Is there a problem, Constable Drake?”

Sounding flustered, Constable Drake said, “These gentlemen are insisting that they are given access to the crime scene.”

“Really?” the half-starved-looking Uncle Fester smiled at us. “And who might you be?”

“You don’t need to know who we are,” Murphy told him.

“Go away or I’ll have you all arrested,” he sneered at us.

His attitude was starting to piss me off, so I said, “And what about you? Who in the hell are you anyway?”

Staring at me with his rodent eyes, he reached into his pocket and produced his police badge. Shoving it only inches from my face, I read what was written on it. *Detective Sergeant Harker*.

I looked over the rim of his badge and back at him.

With a look of superiority on his face, he said, “As you can see, I’m D.S. Harker. You do know what D.S. stands for, don’t you?”

“Dog shit?” I smiled back at him.

Detective Sergeant Harker’s eyes bulged in their sockets and for the briefest of moments I wondered if they weren’t just gonna pop right out of his face. I mean it was pathetic; couldn’t this Beetlejuice wannabe take a

joke? The way he was looking, anyone would think I'd just pissed all over him. But then again, I probably had.

Flabbergasted by what I'd said, Harker looked back at Constable Drake and said, "I want these men arrested."

"Arrested for what?" I asked with mock surprise on my face. "For saying dog shit?"

"Arrest them!" Harker screeched at Constable Drake who was passing the clipboard from one hand to the other.

Murphy suddenly reached out and grabbed hold of Detective Harker's arm. Turning slightly as to have his back to the uniformed officer, Murphy looked into Harker's eyes. Curling up his top lip, he gave Harker a grim smile and flashed the tips of his fangs at him. Harker blinked as if not sure what he had seen, and tried to pull his arm free of Murphy's grip. But he was held fast and couldn't break free.

"You don't need to know who we are," Murphy whispered with a smile, and his voice seemed to rattle in the back of his throat. "Now do me a favour, Detective Sergeant Harker, go and find something to occupy yourself with, while my colleagues and I here go and take a look at the crime scene."

Harker looked back at Murphy as if caught in a trance. It was like Murphy had performed some kind of David Blaine mind-bending trick on

him. Either that, or the fleeting flash of Murphy's fangs had totally messed with his head. Whatever the reason, as soon as Murphy released him, Harker looked at the young officer and said, "Constable Drake let these... these men in, I'm going to lie down."

"Lie down?" Drake asked, bewildered.

"Just let them in," Harker barked, heading away across the car park.

Frowning, Drake raised the police tape and said, "I guess it's all yours."

4

“That was impressive,” Luke said to Murphy as we followed him through the small booking hall and out onto the platform.

“Yeah, what did you do to him?” I asked.

“Dunno,” Murphy shrugged, re-lighting his pipe.

I watched Murphy glance in either direction up the platform. As I would have expected at a crime scene, the station was deserted. It was tiny with just one ticket office, a bike rack, and two platforms – one of which we were standing on. The second platform was opposite and they were connected by an underpass that ran beneath the tracks.

“This way,” Murphy said, and a small cloud of blue smoke seeped from his pipe and floated away into the night. Without speaking, Luke and I followed Murphy along the platform and down a short flight of stairs which led into the underpass. Even though it was dimly lit with a series of overhead lights, I didn’t need a spotlight to see the corpse lying face-up a few feet away. The underpass stank of urine and the walls were covered with graffiti.

Without hesitating, Murphy strode towards the body and stood over it, sucking on the end of his pipe. I looked down at Murphy's boots and could see he was standing in a black puddle of blood that was ebbing away from beneath the body. Luke made his way over towards Murphy, and I followed. The victim was male, about thirty-years-old, I guessed. His eyes were still open and they stared blankly up at the strip lighting which made a buzzing sound like a swarm of flies. His face was contorted and forever locked in a permanent state of fear. The victim's mouth was open, and his tongue lolled over his bottom lip like a purple slug. I could see that his clothes were nothing more than shreds of blood-stained material which hung from his body. Because of the little amount of remaining clothes, I could clearly see his naked torso – or what was left of it. The whole chest cavity and stomach was empty, his heart, liver, and lungs were gone, as if removed by a giant-sized ice cream scoop.

"Jeez," Luke said, as he bent closer to get a better look.

"What do you think did this?" I asked Murphy.

But before he had the chance to answer me, someone said from behind us, "I did."

We spun round to find Detective Sergeant Harker, Constable Drake, and the pretty officer who I had bumped into standing at the foot of the stairs leading into the underpass.

“I thought you’d gone for a nap,” I said, as he stared at us with his rodent-like eyes.

“What did you say?” Murphy asked Harker.

“I said, I did it,” he smiled. “I killed him.”

I glanced at Luke and his face had taken on a grim look as he stared back at Harker, then at me and Murphy.

“Why?” Murphy asked, taking the pipe from his mouth.

“To bring you here,” Harker said, the overhead lighting glinting off his bald spot.

“You know you really didn’t have to go to all the trouble of disembowelling that guy. There are such things as telephones,” I said. “You could have just called.”

“Be quiet!” Murphy growled. Then tapping the hot ashes from his pipe, he looked at Harker and said, “What’s the meaning of this?”

“You’re not exactly the easiest people to find,” Harker said, walking past us to go stand near the body. He looked down at it and said thoughtfully, “It’s such a shame that someone had to lose their life to flush you three out from wherever it is you hide, but let’s just put it down to a mere necessity.”

“A mere necessity?” Luke said in disbelief. “You’ve murdered someone.”

Glancing around, then to Luke, Harker fixed him with an icy stare and said, "I know, it's very sad, but his life was not taken in vain, I can assure you of that. Hopefully his death will save many more lives. Let's just say he was a sacrifice."

Taking a step closer to Harker, Murphy said, "Okay, I've had enough of your fun and games, how about you tell us what's really going on here before me and my friends tear you a new asshole."

"Don't try and threaten me, Murphy," he hissed. "Yes I know your name, I know all of your names, Vampyrus. You should be nice to me, because it is I who holds the solution to all your problems."

"Problems?" Murphy roared. "What problems?"

"Let's see," Harker said, rubbing his hands together. "How about murder?"

"Murder? What murder?" I snapped, taking a step closer towards him. I glanced at Luke and could see that he had hung back as to keep one eye on Drake and the pretty police officer who stood silently at the foot of the stairs.

"Why, the murder of this poor man of course," Harker said, steepling his fingers beneath his chin.

"Oh this is such a load of old bollocks," I groaned. "We don't have to stand here and listen to this crap."

Then, raising his hand as if to hush me, Murphy looked at Harker, and frowning, he said, “What are you talking about?”

“When the official police arrive, because let’s be honest, you’re no more part of the *official* police force than I or my colleagues over there are,” he said, “But when the genuine boys in blue arrive, they are going to find your bloodied footprints all over the crime scene.” Then bending down, he hooked a finger and ran it down the length of the corpse’s tongue. Standing, he reached out and dragged his finger down the front of my coat. Smiling he said, “And they’ll find the victim’s DNA all over Potter’s coat.”

“Why you sick son-of-a-bitch -” I started, but was cut short as Drake lunged forward at an incredible speed and pushed Luke hard in the chest. Before he knew what was happening, he was pinwheeling his arms and stumbling backwards, then forward. I watched in slow-motion as Luke fell face-first towards the corpse. As he went down, Luke stuck out his hands to break his fall, and I watched them disappear into the gaping hole in the corpse’s torso. Luke was up in a second, his hands covered in blood. But as he stood, he slipped momentarily and steadied himself by placing one of his hands against the wall of the underpass.

“Fingerprints in the victim’s blood as well,” Harker said, shaking his head slowly from side to side. “It just gets worse and worse. The evidence just keeps mounting against you guys. Forensics will have such fun!”

“You don’t really think you’ll get away with this, do you?” Murphy said, his voice low and calm. “We have friends, you know,” and I knew he was referring to Chief Inspector Rom, a Vampyrus who had managed to secretly work his way up the ranks of the police force.

“We all have friends in high places,” Harker grinned. “You don’t think the Vampyrus are the only ones that can infiltrate positions of power within the human society, do you?”

“What’s that supposed to mean?” Luke asked, wiping the victim’s blood from his hands.

“Some of us Lycanthrope are good at fooling humans too,” Harker beamed. “Why, only one of my species has recently been promoted into the House of Lords.”

“Okay, so we’re not the only ones who have managed to live undercover amongst the humans in the police force,” Murphy said. “But we have done this for a reason.”

“And what might that be?” Harker asked.

“To hunt down and kill child-murdering scum like you,” I told him.

“Apart from him,” he said, glancing down at the dead body, “I haven’t murdered for years. None of my pack has. We have been trying to live in the sleepy town of Little Hope in peace, hoping that if we do, the

curse that was placed upon us centuries ago will finally be lifted. We policed this town for many years and there has been peace here until...”

“Until what?” Murphy asked, his silver eyebrows making a V-shape in the centre of his brow.

“Until the children started going missing,” the pretty police officer said as she stepped forward.

“Constable Madison,” Harker cut in, “Please be quiet. I am quite able to explain the situation here. Thank you.”

I looked over at her, and she seemed to blush again, walking backwards into the shadows by the foot of the stairs. This was the second time I’d seen her blush and the rose-coloured tint only highlighted the prettiness of her face. But it didn’t matter how attractive she was, Constable Madison was a Lycanthrope and I knew what hid beneath that pretty face. Hadn’t Murphy told me once that female Lycanthrope had hairy tongues? Despite her obvious attractiveness, I had no intention of ever finding out.

“As I have already said,” Harker continued, “my pack has lived amongst the humans peacefully for many years in Little Hope, until recently, when a number of the town’s children have gone missing. As part of the police force for this town, we have investigated these disappearances, but to our horror, we discovered the bodies of these children hidden in an empty house in the remotest part of town. The injuries are such that it

became obvious to all that these children have been slaughtered by some wild animal. It hasn't taken long for rumours of werewolves to spread amongst the townsfolk. At the moment they are just rumours, but it won't be long before those rumours start to take hold and the official police and authorities start to investigate deeper into these killings. The site where the bodies have been found has already been named the 'Wolf House' amongst the residents of Little Hope."

"So why get us involved?" Murphy asked.

"Because you are hunters – that's what you do," Harker said, and now his smile had gone, replaced by a grim look of despair. "I need you to track this rogue Lycanthrope and kill it before its crimes bring attention to my clan, or worse, reveal our true identities."

"And remind me again why we should help you?" Murphy said.

"After all, aren't you trying to frame us for murder?"

"Find this werewolf for me and I will clear this murder away. It will be like it never happened," Harker said.

"And if we refuse?" Murphy asked.

"Then it will be you who is blamed, not only for this murder but the others too," Harker warned him.

"No one will believe that," Luke said. "Apart from your pathetic attempt to frame us for the murder of this poor man, you have no evidence

against us for the deaths of the children.”

“When the official police realise that you are not human, but Vampyrus, a freak breed of vampire bat which have wings, claws, and fangs, they’ll believe that you killed those children,” Harker smiled again. “In fact, I wouldn’t be surprised if they didn’t pin every unsolved murder that has occurred over the past fifty years on you.”

“And how are they ever gonna know that we are Vampyrus?” I said. “It’s not as if we don’t look human. We don’t go around brandishing our fangs and flapping our wings for the fun of it.”

“They will know when they carryout x-rays on good Sergeant Murphy here,” Harker beamed. “They’ll take one look at those x-rays and see that his bone structure is nothing like that of a human being.”

“Now why would they want to x-ray me?” Murphy growled at him.

“So they can find the bullet,” he said, snatching a gun from his waistband and shooting Murphy with it.

5

The pop of the gun firing in the underpass was deafening and I couldn't help but flinch backwards. The smell of gunpowder was overwhelming. Everything seemed to happen at once. Murphy spun around on the spot as if doing some weird Michael Jackson move and Luke shot forward in a spray of shadows, catching the Sarge in his arms before he hit the floor.

Blood pumped from Murphy's right thigh and he covered it with his hand. His already-pale skin seemed lighter, if that were even possible, and beads of sweat covered his brow.

"What the fuck have you done?" I barked at Harker.

"Back off, Potter," Harker snapped, pointing the gun at my head, "or I'll be decorating the walls of this underpass in a delicate shade of gray matter!"

Despite his warning, I made towards him. Harker shook his head slowly from side to side, holding the gun steady and said, "Get back in your pram, Potter. I mean what I say," as if to prove it, he fired another shot. I

felt the bullet whiz past my right cheek and explode into the wall behind me.

“You won’t have that gun forever, Harker,” I warned him, “and the moment you drop your guard, I’ll drop you.”

“If you think your threats intimidate me, Potter, you must think I was born yesterday.” Harker smiled.

“It’s a shame you weren’t, as we could have started your personality from scratch!” I spat. Then looking back over my shoulder, I could see Luke had rested Murphy on the floor.

“You won’t get away with this,” Luke said, glaring up at Harker.

“I already have,” Harker beamed, and I so much wanted to rip that smug look from his face.

“If you think this is going to persuade us to help you catch your rogue Lycanthrope, Harker, then you’re crazier than I thought,” Murphy groaned as he applied pressure to the wound with his hands. I could see streams of black blood seeping through his fingers.

Shaking his head, Harker stared down at Murphy and said, “You’re not going in search of this wolf, you’re just insurance.”

“Against what?” Murphy breathed as he gritted his teeth in pain.

“Potter retuning with the body of the wolf that’s been killing all the children of Little Hope,” he said.

“You must be smacked up to your tits on drugs if you think I’m going to help you,” I barked. “I’d rather stick pins in my eyes.”

“Maybe another bullet may make you reconsider,” Harker said, waving the gun before Murphy. “Let me see, where should I put the next one?”

Covering Murphy’s body with his own, Luke raised his hand in the air and said, “Okay, Okay! We get the message. What’s the plan?”

“Plan? You’re not really going to help Sweeny Todd over there, are you?” I choked, looking at Luke but pointing at Harker.

“I don’t think we have much of a choice,” Luke shot back with a grim look in his eyes.

“Listen to your friend,” Harker said, looking at me with his rodent-like eyes. “Now, this is what I want you to do...”

“I don’t take orders from scum like you,” I hissed at him.

“Listen to him, Potter,” Murphy groaned in pain.

I looked down at Murphy and his blue jeans now looked black from the blood that continued to flow from the gunshot wound. His face glistened with sweat and he shivered in shock. Drake and Madison stood just behind him, their eyes fixed on mine. In the flicker of the light from above, their eyes appeared to change colour, blue, green, yellow.

Turning, I looked at Harker and said, “This had better be good.”

Knowing that he now had my full attention, Harker lowered his gun. He didn't put it away altogether, but kept it pressed against his thigh. "You will go to the Wolf House with Madison and Drake," he started.

"Why them?" I cut in.

"To make sure that once you are there, you don't leave. But I also need to know that you've caught this werewolf," he said.

"What are you trying to say, that you think I'm dumb enough to dress up the first person I come across in a fur coat and try and pass them off as a freaking werewolf?" I snapped. "Give me some credit. Unlike you three jokers, I think I can catch myself a Lycanthrope."

"And your arrogance will be your downfall," Harker said. "Don't underestimate this wolf. We've tried to catch him for months but he has eluded us – kept one step ahead. This wolf is no fool."

"So what you're trying to tell me is that this crazed, homicidal child killer – *this piece of filth* – is mentally superior to you?" I asked with a wry smile. "He inherited the one and only Lycanthrope brain cell then?"

"Continue with your infantile remarks, if that's what pleases you, Potter," Harker said. "But you have three nights and three nights only to catch this 'piece of filth' as you so eloquently described him."

"Three nights," I scoffed. "Three hours should be enough!"

“Potter!” Murphy grimaced in pain. “Listen to him – he wouldn’t have stooped to this if he wasn’t desperate. Desperate men are dangerous! Desperate Lycanthrope are deadlier.”

“What wise words your sergeant has for you, Potter,” Harker said with that stupid grin of his. “You should listen to him. I’m not playing games.”

Knowing in my heart that he wasn’t, I said, “Why only three nights?”

“Unlike other Lycanthrope, this wolf is in some way affected by the moon,” he said.

“I thought all werewolves were controlled by the moon and had to dodge silver bullets,” I sneered.

“You’ve been reading too many fairy tales,” Harker sneered back. “However, this werewolf does seem to be affected by the cycle of the moon. The moon is full tonight and will be for the next three nights. This werewolf always kills on a full moon, so we suspect that tonight he will take another child to the Wolf House.”

“I don’t wish to point out the obvious, but why haven’t you just staked out this Wolf House yourselves?” I asked.

“Don’t you think that’s the first thing we did?” Harker grumbled. “I’ve had my best two officers, Drake and Madison, camped out at that

house for weeks and still this wolf eludes us.”

Looking over at Madison and Drake, I said, “Perhaps your officers aren’t all they are cracked up to be?” I noticed Drake shift uncomfortably on the spot and Madison just fixed me with her yellow stare. I hated to admit this to myself, after all she was a Lycanthrope and was involved in this plot to shoot Murphy, but she was *real* cute. As if being able to see into my mind with that stare of hers, she suddenly smiled at me, and I looked away.

“So what happens if I don’t return in three nights with this child-killing Lycanthrope?” I asked Harker as I lit a cigarette.

“Murphy bleeds to death, and you and Luke are arrested for the murder of this poor man,” he said matter-of-factly as he glanced once more at the corpse. “And once you are in official police custody, it won’t take them long to figure out what you truly are.”

“What if you’ve got me all wrong?” I asked him, blowing smoke in his face. “What if I couldn’t give a crap about the old man with the gunshot wound or Brad Pitt over there? Let’s say as soon as I get away from here, I tear Madison and Drake’s throats out and leave them swinging from the nearest tree by their entrails?”

Within an instance, Harker raised the gun and pointed it at Murphy. Just as quick, I leapt across the underpass and stood in front of my friends.

Laughing aloud, Harker lowered the gun and said, “You’ll come back with this rogue Lycanthrope – I bet Murphy’s life on it!”

Knowing that I was beaten – we all were – I looked down at Murphy who lay propped in Luke’s arms. “I’ll see you in three nights, if not before,” I said to them.

“Potter, remember what I told you,” Murphy gasped as he gripped his leg. “No heroics, keep your temper, and catch that son-of-a-bitch.”

“We’re counting on you,” Luke said.

I looked at the both of them and realised the responsibility that had been placed upon me, to save my friends and stop the slaughter of any more children. Was I ready for this? I had to be.

“However touching I find your goodbyes,” Harker cut in, “you don’t have much time. The clock is ticking, so to speak. I have evidence to gather at this crime scene – the evidence that you’ve left behind, that is, and whatever I don’t have, I will manufacture. You have a Lycanthrope to catch, Potter.” Then wagging his finger in my face like a pendulum, he smiled and said, “Tick-tock! Tick-tock!”

6

I helped Luke carry Murphy to one of the marked police vehicles parked outside Little Hope railway station. Even though the night was cold and crisp, Murphy felt hot and clammy in my arms. He winced and cried out as we hoisted him onto the back seat of the car. Luke climbed into the front with Harker.

Leaning into the back, I gently squeezed Murphy's shoulder and said, "I'll come back for you, Sarge."

"I know you will, Potter," he whispered with his eyes closed. "I know you can do this."

His obvious trust in me made me feel kinda strange. I couldn't ever recall anyone really trusting me before. My own father wouldn't have trusted me to look after the family pet let alone with his life. I wasn't sure how Murphy's faith in me truly made me feel. If I were to be totally honest, it rattled me a little. It rattled me because I didn't want to let him down; what he thinks is important to me. I didn't usually give a shit what people thought of me, but Murphy was different. I did care when it came to him. I

knew that I had to prove myself – not just to Murphy, but to my friend Luke too. If I could do this – if I could catch this Lycanthrope and save Murphy – then I would be their equal. I didn't want to be the new boy on the team anymore.

“You take it easy,” I told Murphy. Then closing the door I whispered, “I won't let you down.”

I watched as the car pulled away from the front of the station, leaving me alone with constables Drake and Madison. They were staring at me with their brilliant yellow eyes and I barked, “What are you freaking looking at?” Then I was gone, striding away across the car park to the unmarked cruiser.

“Where do you think you're going?” Madison called after me.

Without looking back, I shouted, “I thought you were in a rush to catch this relative of yours before he gets his claws into another kiddie?”

“We go on foot,” Madison said.

Turning, I looked at her and said, “Why?”

“Don't you think the killer would smell a rat if he saw a car parked outside the house?” Drake asked. “This is meant to be a stakeout you know – like, undercover?”

Walking back towards them, I looked at Drake and said, “Listen to me, kid, I don't know what it was like working for Harker, but I ain't taking

orders from you. The only person giving the orders out around here is gonna be me. Understand?”

“We are going to go on foot though,” Madison smiled at me with those eyes of hers. I wished she would stop doing that. It made me feel uncomfortable, like she was looking into my soul or something.

“Of course we’re going on foot,” I growled.

“Why were you going back to your car then?” Drake cut in and I couldn’t be sure if he was taking the piss or was he just a dumb arse.

Either way, I prodded him in the chest with a finger and said, “Look here, smart mouth, I’m getting pretty sick of you already. If you know what’s best for you, keep your trap shut and do as I tell you. I still haven’t forgotten how you pushed my friend into that corpse. So unless you want to end up like that body in the underpass, do yourself a favour and keep out of my face, okay?”

“Whatever you say, boss. You’re the boss, boss,” Drake said.

“See, there you go again!” I snapped at him.

“I’m not sure I know what you mean, boss,” Drake said.

“You even say *boss* like a wise arse,” I shot back at him.

“I don’t know what you mean b-” Drake started again.

“Did I say you had to call me *boss*?”

“It’s just that I thought...”

“Don’t think!” I barked. “Just do as I say and we’ll get along just fine.”

“Whatever you say,” Drake said.

I glanced at Madison and she was smiling. “What’s so funny?” I asked.

“Nothing,” she smiled back.

“Oh, I’m sorry,” I said. “I didn’t realise that I was some sort of freaking comedian. Let’s see if you think it’s so funny when another one of those dead kids shows up. Jesus, no wonder you amateurs haven’t caught this piece of scum yet – you’re probably all too busy sitting round cracking jokes and taking the piss to do any real police work.”

“You are funny though,” she half-laughed. “It’s just that when you get angry, your jaw goes all tense and your nostrils flare out at the sides.”

“Oh yeah, how very amusing,” I remarked. “I think you two clowns are funny – not *ha-ha* funny – but fucked-in-the-head funny! Now, if you two have quite finished doing your Laurel and Hardy impersonations, we’ve got a killer to catch!”

Without waiting for a reply from either of them, I walked away from the car.

“Wait up!” Madison called after me.

“For what?” I shouted back, pausing to light a cigarette.

“We need to get changed out of our uniforms,” Madison said.

“Why?” I asked, turning to look at her.

“We’re wearing fluorescent police jackets,” Drake cut in. “They’d stick out a mile on our stake -”

“You’ve got five minutes,” I said, blowing smoke into the night.

7

I'd smoked another two cigarettes by the time Madison and Drake finished screwing about with their kit. Climbing from a nearby police van, I could see they were both now dressed in all black and each had a rucksack thrown over their backs.

It was only now that they were out of their uniforms that I could see how tall Madison was. She strode towards me on legs that seemed to go on forever. She was as tall as me at six-foot-two and I wondered if, in fact, she was an inch or so taller. It was as if she had grown a few inches – they both had – in the short space of time that I'd been waiting for them. Without his police helmet on, I could see Drake had his hair in a crew cut, something a Marine would have. His black jacket and the way he had his combat trousers stuffed into his black military style-boots made him look like some Steven Segal wannabe. Although Madison was dressed identically, I couldn't help but notice, despite the fact that she was a Lycanthrope, how fit she looked. Without her police cap, a fountain of long, blond hair spilled onto her shoulders and down her back. Now that the bulky yellow police

coat had gone, I could see that she had a hot figure and legs long enough to wrap all the way around me. Even though I knew she was a werewolf, I couldn't help but notice how incredibly beautiful she was.

I buried any feelings that might be twitching inside me and reminded myself that she had once been a child killer just like the Lycanthrope we were heading off to hunt down and kill. And even if she hadn't have been a killer, she had a hairy tongue for crying out loud, and that was enough to put any man off.

They strode towards me. Madison asked, "Ready?" then fixed me with that stare and that smile of hers.

"I've been ready for the last half an hour" I snapped, throwing my half-smoked cigarette away.

"Then let's get going," Drake said, striding away into the night.

Madison and I set off after him as he led us away from the railway station and onto a road that twisted away into the dark.

"Wouldn't it be quicker to fly?" I asked Madison. "I do have wings, you know."

"We don't," she said back as she walked along beside me.

"How about wolfing-out or whatever it is you do? I mean you can run fast, right?" I asked her.

“Oh, yeah, I’m fast,” she smiled at me. “But it doesn’t work like that. I’ve got to be worked-up – angry or excited - before I change,” she said, her eyes twinkling as she glanced at me.

Was she flirting with me? I wasn’t sure – but either way I was going to play along. So I asked, “Like ‘The Hulk’?”

“The what?” she asked, sounding bemused.

“You know, the guy who turns into the big green dude when someone pisses him off?”

“I don’t know any big green men,” she said, and again I couldn’t tell if she was trying to be funny or serious.

“It doesn’t matter,” I told her, looking ahead into the dark.

There was a wooden gate ahead set into the stone wall that ran alongside this particular stretch of country road. Reaching it, Drake bounded over the gate in one leap and landed in the field on the other side. Madison and I followed. The field rose steadily higher as we made our way across it, and on the other side there was a small woods. The moon sat fat and round overhead, and the night was so clear that I could see grey mottled patches on its surface. Its pale, milky light lit our way across the field, and as we entered the woods, it shone through the trees in narrow shafts.

We walked in silence, and apart from the gentle stirring of trees in the wind, the only other sound I could hear was the occasional rustling of

leaves and brush as wild animals darted back and forth amongst the undergrowth. It took about half an hour of brisk walking to reach the other side of the woods, and as we did, Drake, who was ahead, raised his hand into the air for us to stop.

Standing next to him, Drake said, catching his breath, “We’re here.”

Looking ahead, I could see a clearing, and at its centre sat a small house. Immediately, I thought of the story ‘*Little Red Riding Hood*,’ and wondered if Grandma was at home. But the house didn’t look very welcoming. It was made from slabs of dark grey stone, and it leaned to the left, as if it were being pushed over by some giant invisible finger. The roof was thatched, but in places, the straw was non-existent, leaving holes that looked like giant, empty eye sockets.

I could see three upper windows which were smeared with grime and dirt. There were two windows on the ground level on either side of an ancient-looking wooden door. Wild ivy grew up and over the front of the house like a cancer. A cobbled path led to the front of the house, but most of it was covered with weeds and brambles. Now, I’ve never been a superstitious type, I don’t believe in ghosts, ghouls, or Father Christmas, but if there ever was a place that was going to be haunted, alive with evil spirits and demons, this was the place. It’s hard to describe, but it was like a *blackness* seeped from between the cracks in the stone from beneath the

front door and from the holes in the roof. It was like it was reaching out for me – trying to grab my heart and turn it cold – so cold that it would stop.

“Nice place, huh?” Madison said, nudging me gently in the ribs.

“I’ve taken vacations in nicer places. Not a lot nicer, but I’ve never seen anything like this before,” I whispered.

“The place is evil,” Drake said as if talking to himself. “The devil lives here.”

“I admit that the place doesn’t look overly-inviting – but the devil?” I said. “I don’t believe in him.”

Then looking me straight in the eyes, Madison said, “You will by the time you leave this place, Potter, believe me. You’ll know the devil is real.” This time that beautiful smile of hers had vanished, and the sparkle in her eyes had been replaced with fear.

8

To be honest, not much scared me. But this house was different. Scared was probably the wrong word; “on edge” is probably the best way to describe how I was feeling as we made our way up the overgrown path to the rickety old front door. There was a smell too. If there was ever a smell of rot and decay, then it was here, emanating from this house in waves.

Drake led the way, and Madison and I followed close behind. As we drew near to the Wolf House, I felt an overwhelming sense of sadness – a feeling that I had only ever really felt once before, and a fleeting image of a girl I had once known called Sophie passed across the front of my mind. I didn’t want to be reminded of her, so I pushed her face away along with the feeling of sadness.

Drake reached the door and looked back over his shoulder at us.

“Ready?” he asked.

“For what?” I shot back.

“I dunno. I’m just asking – are you ready?”

I glanced sideways at Madison and she shot me a quick look. “Oh for crying out loud,” I groaned. “We’re not a bunch of five-year-olds!” Brushing past him, I pushed open the front door. It seemed to make a crying noise as it opened, a sound similar to the ones I imagined the children who had died in this house had once made. If I thought the smell outside had been bad, the horrible odour that hit me as I pushed the door open was almost suffocating. It was rancid. Grimacing, I covered my nose with the back of my hand and stepped inside. Drake and Madison followed.

Moonlight crept in through the filthy windows but did nothing to light the place. Reaching into their rucksacks, Drake and Madison both produced flashlights. Switching them on, they splashed cones of white light across the floors and walls of the house.

“Don’t s’pose you’ve got a spare one of those?” I asked them.

Madison shook her head, and Drake replied, “Don’t you have one of your own? I thought you were a cop. All cops have flashlights, don’t they?”

“Not this one,” I grumbled, taking my Zippo lighter from my coat pocket.

“It’s standard equipment...” Drake started up again, but I couldn’t be bothered to listen to his whining and walked away.

Holding my lighter up, I moved across the small, poky lounge we found ourselves in. I hadn’t known what to expect, but it wasn’t what my

lighter and the torches were now revealing to me. The outside of the house looked in complete disrepair, but the inside looked surprisingly better kept. Although the place smelled like some maggot-infested shit-hole, the walls were covered in flower-patterned wallpaper. In some places, it hung from the walls in damp strips, revealing black patches of mildew that resembled giant bruises. Thick cobwebs swung from the corners of the room like drapes, and I could hear the distant sound of rats scuttling around beneath the wooden floorboards.

The room had furniture that looked as if it had just been yanked from a dumpster. It was old, dirty, and dusty, but still looked strong enough to support someone's weight. I could see a small two-seater sofa, two arm chairs, and a small coffee table. This was covered in so much dust that it looked like topsoil. On the table was a book, which had been left open but facedown so the cover was staring up at me. I glanced down and looked at the cover. It read, *Dark Enlightenment* by Kaycee Smith

"Who does the book belong to?" I asked. Both Madison and Drake shrugged.

Turning away, I waved the lighter in front of me and saw a small, wooden chair sitting in the middle of the room. *How had I missed it before?* I wondered. As I inspected it, it was way too small to be a chair that an adult would be able to sit comfortably in. It looked like one of those chairs

you see in toy stores – the ones that were made to look like a grown-up seat, but were sized especially for kids. Kneeling down, I held the Zippo towards the floor and could see an assortment of kid's toys. There was a soft bear, a well-loved Barbie doll, whose hair stuck out like springs on either side of her head, a red fire truck, a yo-yo, a Nintendo DS with a cracked screen, and a whole bunch of other kids' stuff.

“Who do these toys belong to?” I asked, picking up the Barbie doll which had fallen over. I sat it back up against the leg of the tiny chair.

“The children,” Madison whispered from behind me.

“What children?” I asked, standing and turning to face her.

“The children the wolf murdered,” she said, her eyes glowing yellow in the gloom.

“You're kidding me, right?” I asked in disbelief.

“Do you really think I'd joke about something like that?” she replied, sounding almost out of breath.

“What the fuck are they doing here?” I asked.

Madison looked to Drake as if in search of the answer and he said, “The wolf leaves his victims – the dead children – sitting in that little chair, as if waiting to be found.”

Hearing this, my heart skipped a beat and I took a step away from the chair. The thought of the Lycanthrope doing such a fucked-up thing

made me feel angry and sick at the same time. I mean, what sort of animal would do such a thing? But then again, this killer was an animal. I felt angry at Madison and Drake and even more so at that smug son-of-a-bitch, Harker, who had failed to catch this wolf and put a stop to his killing.

“I don’t believe this,” I said looking at them.

“It’s true,” Drake said.

“No, I don’t mean that,” I barked. “I mean you! You have the nerve to stand there and say ‘I thought all cops were issued with a flashlight!’ Fuck the flashlight, Drake. There’s more to policing than the fancy kit you get to carry around! It’s catching the scum that go and do crazy shit like this that matters! Look at you two standing there dressed up like a couple of James Bond wannabes – you’re pathetic. You haven’t got a clue. If this werewolf had been pulling this sort of shit where I come from, Murphy, Luke, and I would’ve ripped his freaking throat out by now!”

“It’s not that easy!” Madison came back at me, her eyes blazing.

“Don’t you think we’ve tried, Potter? You’ve got no idea what we’re dealing with here!”

“Well I know exactly what we’re dealing with,” I growled. “Some bastard werewolf that thinks he can get away with killing kids. Well, I’ll tell you something for nothing. I’m glad you shot Murphy, I’m glad that you think you’re gonna frame me and Luke for murder, because it will all be so

worth it to catch this animal, and nothing will give me greater satisfaction in showing you how the Vampyrus deal with murdering scum like you two!”

At first, neither of them said anything. Then, as if waiting for me to catch my breath, Drake smiled. “If you’ve finished, I think we’d better show you around the rest of the house. Time is against us.”

Before I’d had the chance to say anything back, Drake marched away towards a set of stairs that led up into the dark. Scowling at his back, I lit a cigarette and followed Drake and Madison up the stairs.

At the top of the staircase there was a small landing. It was narrow and ran the length of the tiny house. Off of it led four doors. Pushing open the first, Drake said, “The bathroom, but if I were you, I’d go against a tree in the woods.”

Peering over his shoulder, I followed the light from his flashlight as he waved it back and forth. There was a bath that was cracked and home to an infestation of spiders that scuttled in and out of the plug-hole. I could see a hand basin, and one of the taps dripped water, with an annoying *plink-plink-plink* sound. Above the basin was a mirror that was cracked in one corner. I looked at the toilet and could see what Drake meant when he suggested I take a whiz outside in the woods. The toilet lent to one side, and

it was caked in streaks of brown gunge that had spilled out onto the wooden floorboards of the bathroom.

“Nice,” I said, stepping back onto the landing.

Pointing to the three other doors, Madison said, “And these are the bedrooms. Which one do you want?”

“What do you mean which one do I want?” I asked, blowing smoke through my nostrils. “What are you trying to say, that one of them is the penthouse?” Pushing open the first door that I came to, I added, “This will do.”

“Your choice,” Madison said. “Make yourself at home if you can, we have three nights here.”

“Thanks for reminding me,” I grumbled. But she had gone and so had Drake as they disappeared behind the doors of the other two bedrooms on the landing. The door to my room swung closed behind me, and flicking on the Zippo with my thumb, I peered about the room. It was small and the ceiling angled down by the window, mimicking the shape of the dilapidated roof above me. The room was cold, so I pulled my coat about me. Grinding out my cigarette with the heel of my boot against the rough, wooden floorboards, I noticed a bed in the far corner. I say a bed, but it was more like a camp bed – something you would use on a hunting trip. It was one of those aluminium foldaway things and I guessed it had been brought here by

one of the Lycanthrope on one of their many failed stakeouts. There was a paper-thin mattress and a sleeping bag and both stank of mildew and damp. It was better than nothing, and after all, I didn't plan on sleeping much.

There was a small wardrobe, which I opened only to find some old clothes hanging from a small rail. There was an ancient-looking suit jacket that was threadbare around the cuffs and collar. I patted the pockets but they appeared to be empty. There was also a pair of trousers, which didn't match the jacket. On the floor of the wardrobe sat a pair of scuffed, brown shoes. The clothing and the shoes, like the rest of the house, smelled old and ancient. With clothes that were that old, I doubted even Murphy would have worn them.

Closing the wardrobe, I went to the window and peered out into the night. Wiping away a kaleidoscope of cobwebs, I looked down and could see a clear view of the overgrown path that led from the woods up to the front door. The windows were filthy, so, gritting my teeth, I twisted the rusty catch and opened the window to let in some fresh air.

Leaning against the window ledge, I sucked in mouthfuls of the cold night air. Then, looking down at the overgrown front garden, I blew out that lungful of fresh air and said, "What in the name of God is going on here?"

Standing amongst the brambles and weeds was the little chair I had seen in the room downstairs. And propped against it was that tatty-looking

Barbie doll.

9

I raced from my room, clambered downstairs and out into the front garden. With plumes of breath escaping from my open mouth, disappearing up into the night, I looked at the chair. It looked eerily out of place alone amongst the overgrown grass. The thought of what had previously been left sitting in that chair caused me to shiver. But there was something else. The long grass surrounding it had been bent over, as if it had been trampled on. Of course it would have been. Whoever had taken the chair from the house and placed it here would have left footprints.

I crouched down with my heart thumping excitedly in my chest and looked for my first clue. Brushing my large hands over the bent plaids of grass and broken thorns, I could clearly see track marks. But they were too big to be footprints; they were huge and pointed. They were giant paw marks. The wolf had been here, but how? Had it crept into the house and taken the chair during the short time we had all been upstairs?

I could see the huge paw prints led away from the tiny chair and into the woods. Then, just as I was about to turn away and go back into the

house to get Drake and Madison, I saw movement in the trees at the edge of the tree line. Without hesitating, I began to loosen my coat as my back began to twitch beneath it, my wings instinctively wanting to be free. Flexing my fingers, they stretched and lengthened until the long, black fingernails brushed against my knees. That taste of copper, which I always got when my fangs came through, flooded my mouth and I swallowed it.

Speeding forward, I stared into the darkness between the trees, and shouted, “Who’s there?”

My question was answered with a rustling of leaves and undergrowth ahead. Raising my claws and brandishing my fangs, I shot forward, every one of my instincts alive and on fire. Reaching the tree line, the movement came again – but this time towards me. Crouching with one of my claws in the ground and the other high above my head, I waited to attack.

Rolling back my lips, my fangs almost touching my chin, I locked my calf muscles like a sprinter on the blocks, ready to launch myself forward, when Drake appeared from the darkness between the trees.

Seeing me, he asked, “What are you doing out here?”

“That’s just what I was gonna ask you,” I growled, still holding my attack stance.

“Taking a whiz,” he said, yanking up his zipper. “Jeez, what’s with the fangs?”

Relaxing just a little, I stood up and looked at him. “Did you bring the chair outside?”

“What chair?” he asked, looking puzzled. “What are you talking about?”

“The chair!” I barked, pointing back over my shoulder.

I watched Drake peer over my shoulder, screw up his eyes, then open them wide. “How did that get out here?”

“You tell me, wolf man!” I said, not withdrawing my claws, just in case. I didn’t know this Drake guy and I now had reason not to trust him.

“I don’t know what you’re talking about,” he said, brushing past me and heading towards the chair.

I followed him, and as I did, Madison appeared in the doorway. “What’s all the fuss about?” she asked us. Then looking at me with my giant claws swinging below my knees and my fangs hanging down over my bottom lip, she added, “You look scary.”

Ignoring her, I pointed to the chair and said, “Who brought the chair out here?”

Seeing it for the first time, Madison looked quickly from left to right. “Who put that there?” she asked, sensing that she wasn’t in any

immediate danger.

“A Lycanthrope,” I sneered, looking at them.

“How can you be so sure?” Drake asked.

Pointing at the giant footprints, I said “What else do you think made them, some freaking mutant squirrel? There’s werewolf prints all over this area, and look, they lead from the chair back into the woods, where you just happened to be taking a piss,” I said.

“They’re not the only prints,” Drake said, staring at me. “Your footprints are here too, and they lead away into the woods.”

“Are you trying to be funny?” I snapped, turning on him.

“Are they your footprints?” Madison asked, stepping away from the doorway.

“Of course they’re my footprints,” I barked. “What do you think, I magically appeared out here?”

Looking at the chair and then back at me, she whispered, “Drake’s right though, it could have been you who brought the chair out here.”

Shocked by what I was hearing, I looked at her, opened mouthed and said, “Are you for freaking real? Why would I bring the chair out here?”

“You tell us,” Drake said. “We don’t know you, Potter.”

“Listen to me, Flake, or whatever your name is,” I hissed, “I found that chair exactly where it is now. So if I was you, I’d be careful what you go around saying, because I might just take you back into that wood and stick that chair where the sun don’t shine!”

“I was taking a leak,” Drake said, looking at me. “What were you doing out here?”

“You don’t hear real good, do you?” I said, snatching up the chair. “I saw it sitting out here and I came out...what am I doing? I don’t have to explain myself to you.” Then, taking the chair, I went back into the house.

“Where are you going?” Madison called after me.

“To do what you seem so incapable of doing!” I roared over my shoulder.

“And what’s that?” she yelled.

“Catch the *Lycanthrope* scum that moved this chair!” I shouted, entering the house.

I took the chair and placed it back in the middle of the room where I had first seen it. The toys lay on the floor and I pushed the fire truck gently with the tip of my boot. The lights on top of it flashed momentarily red, then faded as if the batteries had just run out. Slumping down into one of the arm chairs, I positioned myself so that I was looking directly at the chair.

Drake and Madison came inside and closed the door behind them. Without saying a word, Drake stomped up the stairs and disappeared. Thank fuck for that – I couldn't care if I never laid eyes on that turd again. Madison, however, walked silently into the room and I could see she had the Barbie doll in her hand. Reaching the chair, she stopped in front of it. Then, with the tips of her slender fingers, she straightened out the doll's hair and propped it against the leg of the chair.

With her head hung low and her yellow eyes cast to the floor, she walked past me, and as she did, I shot my hand out and grabbed her wrist. Madison gasped, and looked down at me.

“What?” she breathed.

“Do you really think I was the one who put that chair out there?” I asked her.

With her eyes glinting in the darkness, she looked at me and said, “Does it really matter what I think, Potter?”

Pulling her arm free, she looked away and headed for the stairs. “There are some old clothes in the wardrobe in my room,” I said into the darkness. “Who do they belong to?”

I heard her feet stop momentarily as she simply said, “I don't know.” Then she was gone, the sound of the staircase creaking beneath her boots.

I turned back to face the chair. My body began to loosen, as if the armchair was sucking the tension from me. I felt myself begin to relax, as my claws withdrew back into my fingers, and my fangs slid back into my gums, taking that taste of bloody-copper with them. The little chair sat just across the room from me and I watched it. I was going to stare at it all night long. If Drake and Madison were right, the wolf would return tonight carrying a child in its giant jaws and I would be waiting for it. I wasn't going anywhere.

10

She crawled up the bed towards me, the ends of her hair brushing against my chest. Her eyes sparkled and that smile of hers crept across her face. My heart raced and I breathed deeply. She brought her face over mine and I could feel her breath, warm against me. She lowered herself slowly and her lips caressed mine. She didn't kiss me fully, but I wanted her to. It was as if she were teasing me. My heart beat louder and faster and I think she could sense it. Unable to resist her any longer, I buried my hands in her hair and pulled her down on top of me. We kissed at last, and her skin felt warm against mine. Entwining our bodies as if we were one, I rolled her over and pinned her to the bed. Arching my back, I kissed every part of her face, neck, and chest. She released a gentle moan, and this just made my heart race faster still.

"I love you, Sophie," I whispered in her ear, kissing her neck. Now I could feel her heart racing. I could feel the artery in her neck swelling with blood as it pulsed through her. I could smell her blood just millimetres beneath her soft skin and I wanted it. I had never smelled anything so good before.

We had made love before, but never had it felt as intense as this. I hadn't been back to The Hollows now for several weeks and that itch – the one that told me I wanted blood - had grown worse. It was agony. I had discovered that tobacco eased it slightly. The need for the tobacco was sometimes stronger than my lust for blood and it masked those cravings, but not tonight. I pressed her flat against the bed and she writhed beneath me and gasped, but not out of fear. Not yet, anyhow.

“I want you, Sophie,” I groaned. “I want all of you.”

“Then take me,” she whispered against my chest, and I thought my heart was going to explode. But she didn't realise how I wanted to take her. I wasn't talking about making love to her, I wasn't playing a role in some kinky love game, I was talking about ripping her throat out and gorging myself on her blood.

My whole body shuddered and my back arched again, but not out of lust or desire, but because I could feel my spine stretching out of shape, making room for my wings that just wanted to be free. I felt my jaw lock tight as I fought to hide my fangs, and I gripped the bed sheets in an attempt to stop my fingers turning into claws.

Why hadn't I gone back to The Hollows? I knew why I hadn't, because I'd met her – Sophie. I'd become besotted with her. She had become my new drug; she had become the thing that I couldn't bear to live

without. But it hadn't just been me. Sophie had fallen in love with me too, except really she hadn't. She had fallen in love with what she thought was the real me. Sophie believed she was in love with a human just like her – but I wasn't human, I was a monster, a vampire bat – a Vampyrus.

Over the last several weeks since meeting her, there had been so many times that our love for each other had deepened and I'd wanted to tell her about the real me and show her the real me. She loved me, right? Wouldn't she, therefore, love me regardless? It was a decision that I'd put off for fear of being rejected. But tonight, as I wrestled with my lust for the red stuff, it was going to be a decision that was made for me.

Throwing her arms around my neck and wrapping her legs about me, she pulled me close and I couldn't fight it anymore. Crying out in pain, my back made a cracking sound as if every one of my ribs were breaking. I pulled myself from her, and kneeling, I threw my head back as my fangs shot from my gums and sprayed her with a jet of ice-cold blood. Clutching at the air with my hands, my fingers stretched as my curved, black claws appeared like a set of knives. With my heart pounding in my ears, I felt them twist as they grew into points. Then, the worst part: I could feel my nose changing shape, as if invisible fingers had been thrust up my nostrils and were yanking my head backwards. Wiry, black hair bristled from every part of my

naked body and then the pain was gone. I only felt joy and pleasure as my true self was set free and my giant black wings beat behind me.

Then, the sound of screaming took the pleasure away. I looked down at Sophie who had now crawled away up the bed, the sheet pulled up under her chin. Tears ran from her wide, open eyes, and I could see a stream of my blood running down her face, dripping onto the white sheet in rose-shaped patterns.

I held out one my giant claws towards her and her screaming became even more high-pitched.

“Sophie!” I said, but even my voice had changed; it was deep and sounded as if I were gargling on a throat full of gravel.

Covering her face with her hands, she sobbed uncontrollably and turned away from me.

“Sophie,” I tried again, “You don’t have to be scared – it’s just me, Sean.”

“Get away from me!” she shrieked, kicking out with her feet that were entangled in the bedding.

“Sophie, let me explain,” my voice boomed. But how could I ever begin to explain? How could I possibly even begin to tell her that I was a vampire bat and came from a world that existed beneath hers?

“I love you!” I said.

Peering back at me over the top of the sheet, I could see the fear, revulsion, and hatred for me in her eyes. “Get away from me!” she screamed, kicking out with her feet again. “You freak – you animal! Get out!”

“I love -” I begged.

“GET OUT!”

Jumping from the bed, where only moments before we had been making love, I went to the windows. Throwing them open, I climbed onto the ledge. I looked at her, two perfect blue eyes staring back at me, and to see such fear in them broke my heart.

“I’m so sorry,” I growled.

Leaping from the window, I spread my wings and shot into the night sky. I didn’t look back, not once. It would have hurt too much to do so.

The night was cloudless and cold, but the strong wind did nothing to dry the...

...tears that ran down my face. Sitting bolt upright, I brushed them away with the back of my hand. Cursing myself for falling asleep, I peered into the darkness and my heart almost stopped. Propped in that chair just feet away from me was a dead little boy.

11

He sat upright, his tiny frame dressed in blue and white striped pyjamas. He was no older than seven with white-blond hair that fell across his pale brow. His eyes were closed and he strangely looked at peace, as if asleep. Perhaps he wasn't dead? Maybe he was just sleeping, some sick trick played on me by this killer. Leaping from the armchair, I went to the boy. Taking hold of his shoulder in my hand, I gently tried to shake him awake. The boy fell forward into my arms and I could feel his cold body against me. Then, there came two noises in quick succession: One was the sound of something rolling across the floor beside me. Glancing down, I could see that a marble had fallen from the little boy's dead hand and was now rolling away across the wooden floor. The second noise was the sound of crying – but it wasn't the child in my arms who made it. I'd heard that sound before. Glancing around, I could see the front door slowly closing on its rusty hinges.

Realising that it was the wolf making its escape, I swooped the little boy up into my arms, gently laid him on the sofa, and raced towards the door. I yanked it open and just caught sight of a silver, bushy tail

disappearing into the darkness set amongst the trees. Tearing my coat free, I ran across the front garden and down the overgrown path towards the woods. The full moon was sinking low in the sky, and it looked mouldy-yellow, like cheese that had started to go bad.

Even before I'd reached the tree line, with my coat laying somewhere behind me, my claws were working like pistons beside me, my wings pointed upwards so as not to slow me down, like two giant sails. Racing into the darkness, I paused and listened. I heard the sound of running ahead of me, so I tore off in that direction. With my legs just a blur below me, I ran as hard and as fast as I could after the wolf. He wasn't going to get away from me. I couldn't let him get away.

Zippering between the trees, I caught sight of something large and silver ahead of me. It howled, the sound of it making the branches in the tree shake. Lowering my head, I propelled myself forward, gaining on the werewolf with every heartbeat. I could see it was huge, like a bear, but sleeker-looking. Its white fur glistened in the shafts of moonlight, which cut through the treetops as I darted towards it.

Ahead was a fallen tree lying across my path. Diving towards it, I used it in the same way a gymnast would use a springboard, hurling myself through the air at the wolf, which was now only feet away. With claws out and fangs bared, I rocketed towards the retreating wolf. It looked back over

its shoulder, and upon seeing me, spun round. Standing on its back legs, it swiped at me with one of its mighty paws. My chest exploded with pain as the wolf clawed at me. I spun backwards through the air under the force of the blow. Instinctively, I opened my wings to try and slow my fall, but my reactions weren't quick enough and I crashed into the trunk of a tree. It shook as if being yanked from the earth by its roots, and I fell to the ground beneath a shower of falling leaves and branches from above. I cried out as a bolt of pain twisted through my back like a corkscrew. Scrambling to my feet, I shook myself off and tried to get my bearings. Which way had the wolf fled? I turned around on the spot but couldn't hear or see anything; it was as if the wolf had disappeared.

There was a warm sensation across my chest, and I looked down to see an ugly gash. It was open and bleeding, and looked as if it had been made with a giant can opener. Blood ran from it, over my stomach and into my navel where it started to congeal.

Then, I heard something – the sound of running. But it wasn't a wolf; the footfalls didn't shake the ground like that giant beast had. With my head starting to feel woozy from where I had cracked it against the tree, the world started to seesaw in front of me. Fighting to keep on my feet and to protect myself from whomever or whatever was racing towards me, I reached out and steadied myself against the nearest tree. As my legs started

to buckle beneath me, I caught sight of Madison racing towards me. Her blond hair billowed out behind her like a mane, and she moved with the speed and agility that even a Vampyrus would have been proud of. Then I was falling forward. Reaching out with my claws, I took hold of something, but it wasn't a branch or any other part of the tree. Before the darkness took me, I glanced up and could see that I had grabbed hold of Drake's leg.

12

When I woke, my chest felt like someone had used a cheese grater on it. Opening my eyes, I tried to sit up, but someone gently pushed me back down again and said, “Shhh.”

Blinking, I looked up and could see Madison was kneeling beside the camp bed I was now lying on. I was back in my room, the one with the wardrobe and the spider webs. It was still dark, but I could tell that dawn wasn't far off. Instead of the room being in impenetrable blackness, it was filled with a gunmetal shade of grey light. Dust motes danced in the shafts of light that came in through the window.

“How did I get back here?” I asked, turning to look at her. *Jeez, she's beautiful*, was my first thought as I looked at her. When I first clapped eyes on Madison in the car park outside the railway station, my first thought was that she was more than just merely pretty. But as she now knelt beside me, she looked stunning. The early morning light sparkled off her blond hair and danced in her eyes. Her skin looked as smooth as marble and I had

to fight the urge to reach out and run my fingertips across her cheek. Her lips were full and blood-red and I so much wanted to...I looked away.

“Drake and I carried you here,” she said, and her voice was soft, not much more than a whisper. “You got beat up pretty bad.”

Winching in pain, I tried to get a look at my chest, and I could see three long cuts running horizontally across it. The cuts looked open and raw, and every time I took a breath, a bolt of pain knifed its way through me.

“Keep still,” she said, taking a damp rag from a bowl of water beside her on the floor. Then, very gently, she dabbed the cloth against the cuts on my chest.

I made a hissing noise between my teeth and closed my eyes against the burning sensation which spread out across my chest.

“Don’t be such a baby,” she said softly and I could tell that there was no malice in her voice.

“There’s no need for you to be doing this,” I told her. “I can take care of myself.” And as soon as the words had escaped from me, I knew that I’d probably spoken to harshly.

“Why do you have to be so uptight all the time?” she asked, continuing to clean the cuts.

“I’m not uptight,” I replied, opening my eyes and looking at her. The ends of her hair brushed my stomach as she leant over me, and suddenly, my dream of Sophie haunted me. I could see Sophie crawling up the bed towards me, her hair brushing against my chest.

Reaching out, I took hold of Madison’s hand and said, “Enough already.”

Glancing at me with her bright, yellow eyes, she said, “If I don’t clean it properly, Potter, it could get infected.”

“I’ll chance it,” I said, pulling her hand away.

Madison placed the cloth back into the bowl and I watched as the water turned a cloudy red with my blood. “At least let me put a bandage around it,” she said.

“A bandage?” I said, cocking an eyebrow at her. “Where did you get a bandage from all the way out here?”

“I brought it with me in that rucksack – along with the flashlight,” she half-smiled at me.

Seeing Drake’s smug-looking face in my mind as he had realised that I hadn’t brought a flashlight with me, I said, “So where is that obnoxious -”

“Drake’s okay,” she said, cutting over me. “He has a lot to learn, I know, but he means well.”

I watched as she unravelled a long, white bandage and asked, “How well do you know him?”

“Well enough, I guess,” she said, binding the bandage around one of her hands. “Why do you ask?”

“I’m not sure if I totally trust the freak, that’s all,” I told her.

Then, looking at me with surprise, she said, “You don’t trust Drake? Why ever not?”

“Whatever he thinks, I didn’t take that chair outside last night, and I think you know that too,” I said as she helped me up into a sitting position.

“But he was outside. I saw something moving in the woods, so I went to investigate. And who should appear from amongst the trees? Drake!”

Gently pushing me forward with the tips of her fingers so she could wrap the bandage about my chest, Madison said, “He said he was going to the bathroom.”

“Well he must have a bladder like a ninety-year-old,” I winced, as she pulled the bandage tight across my chest. “Because he was out in the woods again last night. He just appeared out of nowhere.”

“What are you trying to say?” she asked over my shoulder as she knotted the two ends of the bandage together. And as she spoke, I could feel her warm breath against my neck and my whole body stiffened. I couldn’t be sure if she sensed this, but she spoke again, her mouth just inches from

my left ear. “If you think Drake is involved in the killings at this place, you’re wrong,” she whispered.

The touch of her breath against my neck felt warm and my skin prickled. Again, my mind swam with those memories of Sophie whispering in my ear, asking me to take her. I gently shrugged Madison away.

“Are you okay?” she asked, coming to kneel beside me again. Then gently squeezing my shoulder, she added, “You seem so tense.”

Brushing her hand away, I said, “I’m fine, Madison.” And as I looked at her, I couldn’t help but notice that the shirt she was wearing was now open at the throat. Had it been like that before? I couldn’t be sure. But now, I could see down the length of her long, smooth neck. A silver chain hung around it and disappeared between her breasts.

“Do you want to have a look?” she suddenly offered, her voice soft, almost dreamy.

Realising that she had caught me looking down her shirt, I tore my eyes away and asked, “Sorry?”

Fixing me with her brilliant stare, she loosened another button on her shirt and placed her hand inside. However much I fought the urge, I glanced down at her long fingers as they disappeared between her breasts. I wondered what it would feel like to have my hand inside her shirt.

Screwing my hands into fists, I placed them beneath the sleeping bag I was

lying on. I looked back at her face and she had that smile playing on her lips and her eyes glistened. It was like she had placed me under some kind of spell.

“It’s beautiful, don’t you think?” she suddenly whispered.

“Huh?” I said, looking back at her hand, which she had now removed from inside her shirt. Dangling from the end of the silver chain was a crucifix. It was small enough to fit in the palm of her hand, but big enough to show the beautiful craftsmanship that had gone into making it. It was so detailed that you could clearly see the tiny figure of Christ stretched out upon it, the crown of thorns circling his head and the nails protruding from his wrists and ankles.

“My grandfather gave it to me,” she said, as if breaking the spell she had placed me under.

“Mmm?” I said, looking away from the crucifix and back at her.

“Don’t you think it’s just the most amazing thing?” she asked me.

As if finally coming back to my senses, I said, “It’s nice enough, but not my sort of thing.”

“My grandfather said it would protect me,” Madison mused, looking down as it glittered in the palm of her hand.

“From what?” I half-smiled, feeling myself again.

“Evil, I guess,” she grinned back, quickly placing the crucifix back beneath her shirt again. Fastening the top two buttons, she stood. “You should try and get some rest, Potter. We might have a long night ahead of us tonight.”

Taking the bowl and cloth, she headed towards the door. Once there, she looked back and said, “What is your name?”

“Potter,” I said back.

“Your Christian name?” she smiled. “I can’t keep calling you Potter, it’s not very friendly.”

Looking at her, I said, “I’m not here to make friends.”

“My first name is -” she started.

“I don’t want to know,” I told her, shutting my eyes. “Let’s just keep this professional.”

I heard the door creak open, then close again as she left my room.

13

I moved from one town to another with little direction. I'd left Sophie's life three months ago and hadn't heard from her since. At each new town, I wrote to her. I told her how much I loved her, if there was only some way she could accept me for who and what I was. In those letters I tried to convince her that I wasn't a monster. I'd give her my temporary address in the hope she would write back, or even better, come and see me. But I heard nothing. So on the very last day in each of the towns, I would check the mail, then move on again.

Even though I was only eighteen, I looked older and managed to get myself work as security on the doors of seedy night clubs. I worked in bars, picked fruit on farms during the summer months, and even had a go at being a short-order cook in some rat-infested motorway café. I kept pretty much to myself and didn't make friends. I wasn't there to make friends, just to make enough money to pay for lodgings and enough food to get by on.

I had no plan. I couldn't go back to The Hollows and face my father and his ridicule. I'd have to listen to how I was a failure, a 'big fucking

disappointment' as he used to say. But he was the disappointment. What had he ever amounted to? He spent his days sweating away in the mines beneath The Hollows, and most of the night too, if he could get the overtime. He was always so fucking angry at everyone and everything. And when he wasn't working, he was pissed on root juice and slapping me upside the head and beating on my mother. My mother left in the end, leaving us both behind. I was fifteen, I think. Never saw her again. Maybe she was living above ground and I hoped she was happier than I was.

No. Apart from the rare visit to The Hollows to sedate my cravings, I couldn't go home. I would rather die. So I moved on and on and on. But the work just became harder to find as the clothes I stood in began to look scruffier and dirtier by the day and my skin hung off my bones. Without money, I couldn't find lodgings and spent many nights sleeping rough. I fell in with a travelling band of hippies for a while, helping them set up for gigs that they performed at summer festivals, but it was all drugs and women and I didn't want anything to do with either. So I split one night and I took their van with me. I got about sixty miles before the gas ran out, but it was a place to sleep for a night or two before the cops picked it up sitting abandoned beside the road.

But the winter nights were the worst. The winters can be unforgiving in the North of England, and I spent many nights huddled against the wall

of some derelict farm house, outhouse, or any other kind of house I could find. But one night, my luck changed. I didn't realise it at first, but things got better for me. I smashed the small glass panel with my fist and the blood that seeped from my knuckles warmed my frozen fingers. Reaching inside the factory window, I lifted the lock, swung open the window and climbed inside. My first piece of luck was that I'd broken into a bed factory and oh what joy! A bed to sleep on! But the joy was short-lived as lights from a set of headlamps blazed across the factory windows.

Realising that I must have tripped an alarm, I sprang from the bed and peered through the window out across the empty car park in front of the factory. There was a police car out there and a cop stood beside it. He looked old with his silver hair glistening beneath the stars and a pipe hanging from the corner of his mouth. All the same, he was a cop and I couldn't risk getting caught in here. I'd be arrested for burglary, and that would mean being taken into custody and the risk of who and what I really was, was too great.

I raced across the factory floor towards a fire exit set into the far wall. Throwing myself against it, I spilled out into the night, tripping the fire alarm. Running as hard and fast as I could, I made my way around the opposite side of the building where the cop was. With my heart beating in my chest, I pushed on. Then, as if from nowhere, the cop was in front of me.

Pulling up sharp, I wondered how such an old guy had managed to get ahead of me so quickly.

Spinning around, I raced back in the direction I had come.

“Stop!” the copper called out.

“No fucking chance!” I yelled over my shoulder, and out of the corner of my eye, I could see that he was gaining on me.

For an old boy, he was fast. I knew if I didn’t do something to get away from him, he would have me and it would be game over. In a desperate bid to be free of him, I released my claws and ripped away my coat. I really didn’t want to do this, but what other choice did I have? I didn’t want him to see my wings or to see me fly away like some giant crow, but who would believe him?

With my wings unfolding from my back, I leapt into the air and within seconds, I was soaring high above the factory. I looked down, expecting him to be staring up at me wide-eyed and mouth open in shock, but I couldn’t see him. Spinning through the air, I back-flipped and then I saw him. Except he wasn’t standing in the car park scratching his silver hair, he was racing through the air towards me.

Just like me, he had jet-black wings that flapped like two giant sails on either side of him. His arms were tucked beside him, his head pointing down. He looked like some freaky missile as he shot towards me. This cop

knew how to fly, and I don't mean he knew how to flap his wings. He had speed and agility far greater than anything I'd seen before. Somersaulting away from him, he banked right, then came swooping towards me again. I shot away, but he was on me, snatching at me with his claws and dragging me out of the sky. For an old guy, he was immensely strong, and he threw his arms so tightly about me that I thought my spine would snap.

I struggled against him. He then fixed me with a pair of icy blue eyes and barked, "Keep still, boy, or you're going to ruin everything!"

"But -" I started.

"No buts!" he growled over the sound of the wind. "You're not the only goddamn Vampyrus living in secret above ground, so stop drawing attention to us!"

Then we were falling so fast through the air that I thought we were going to crash straight into the...

14

I woke with a start. I was having one of those dreams where you fall off the edge of a cliff and wake up just before you smash into the razor-sharp rocks below. Except I hadn't been falling from a cliff in my dream, I'd been falling through the sky with Murphy.

Looking around the filthy room and judging by the light that spilt through the grubby window, I could tell that I must have slept most of the day away, as my room was growing dark again. Annoyed at myself for sleeping so long, I knew I didn't have time to waste. I'd already been here one whole night and day and had found out nothing about this wolf. Another child had been murdered and Murphy and Luke were still being held hostage by Harker.

I sat up and winced at the pain in my chest. It wasn't as bad as before, and however much I hated to admit it, Madison had done a good job at cleaning the cuts and bandaging them. My coat was hanging off the wardrobe door, and I put it on. Running my hands through my black hair, I

straightened up. I left my room and clambered down the narrow staircase. My stomach grumbled with hunger and I needed some food.

Entering the poky living room, I could see the child's chair in exactly the same spot it had been the night before. I glanced at the couch, but couldn't see the body of the boy. Crossing the room towards it, I heard a noise behind me.

"Catch!" someone said, and I turned around to see Drake standing in the doorway of the kitchen as he tossed an apple across the room at me.

Snatching it out of the air, I asked, "Where's the boy's body?"

"Buried it," Drake said, taking a bite from the half-eaten apple he was holding.

"*It?*" I barked at him. "That was a little boy, not a slab of meat!"

"Whatever," Drake said, "He's gone now."

"And what gave you the right to bury that boy?" I snapped, gripping the apple in my fist. "Don't his parents have the right to bury him?"

"Harker doesn't want any more bodies brought back," Drake said flatly. "He doesn't want any more attention drawn to this place. He thinks it would be better if the kid's parents just thought the boy had gone missing – you know, like they never find out what happened to him."

Taking a step towards him, I hissed, "I couldn't give a monkey's fart what Harker thinks. That boy's parents have a right to know what happened

to their son.”

“Perhaps you want to go and dig him up then, and explain to his parents that their son was murdered by a werewolf?” Drake asked, taking another bite from the apple.

“Anything has got to be better than leaving those parents wondering for the rest of their miserable lives what happened to their child!” I spat. Then, grabbing his hand, I shoved the apple into his fist and said, “Keep the apple, I’d rather fucking starve than take anything from you.”

Not giving him the chance to say anything back, I yanked open the front door and stormed out into the front garden. Madison was standing near to the spot where I’d discovered the chair the night before. Hearing the door being yanked open, she turned and watched me cross the front garden and go into the woods.

When I’d gotten far enough away from Drake, I slouched against a tree and pulled a pack of cigarettes from my coat pocket. Lighting one, I inhaled deeply.

“What’s wrong?” I turned around to see Madison standing just a few feet away.

“Nothing’s wrong,” I snapped at her.

“Yeah, there is,” she shot back, moving closer still.

I didn't want to look at her, I couldn't look at her. There was something about Madison that made me feel uneasy inside. She reminded me of Sophie. Not in looks, as Sophie had thick, dark brown hair and green eyes; it was the feelings Madison somehow stirred in me that reminded me of Sophie. I hadn't had such feelings since that night I'd fled her bedroom. Just like I had found it almost impossible to keep my hands off Sophie, I was realising that every time I looked at Madison, she became more and more beautiful and harder to resist. Like on so many occasions I had ripped Sophie's clothes from her and we had spent hours making love, I was near to the point where I wanted Madison just as much. But somewhere in my heart, I didn't want her. I wanted to be as far away from her as possible. Her intense stare and the way she made me feel when she was close scared the shit out of me on some deep, hidden level. Was it because she was a Lycanthrope? Was it because I knew her to come from a race of serial killers – was that what was stopping me from having her? The whole hairy tongue thing had faded to the back of my mind and seemed totally insignificant when watching the way she walked on those long legs of hers, the way her hair fell about her shoulders, the way her eyes sparkled, the way her breath had caressed my neck in the bedroom...

“Keep away from me,” I spat, raising the palm of my hand out towards her.

“What?” she asked, sounding confused.

“Just keep away from me,” I told her again, shifting my position against the tree so I didn’t have to look at her.

Then I felt her hand gently squeeze my shoulder, as she turned me around to face her. She looked into my eyes and said, “What’s wrong?”

“I just want to be left alone,” I told her.

“That’s no fun,” she smiled.

“I haven’t come here to have fun,” I told her. “I’ve come to catch a killer.”

Leaning in close to me, she whispered, “Something is happening here -”

“I know, children are being murdered...” I started.

“No, I didn’t mean that,” she whispered, brushing herself close against me. “Something is happening between you and me – you feel it too, I know you do.”

“I don’t know what you’re talking about,” I lied as she looked into my eyes, her lips hovering over mine.

“I’ve never met a man like you before, Potter,” she whispered. “a man who has such a dark side. You could take me away from all of this.”

“From all of what?” I said, fighting the desire to kiss her.

“All this death,” she whispered, then pressed her lips against mine.

As if drowning, I felt smothered by a wave of intense feelings and emotions, like nothing I had felt before, and I was kissing her back. Her tongue felt like velvet in my mouth as she hungrily pulled at me. Then I was falling backwards as she pushed me down onto the ground. I fell onto the carpet of leaves and pine needles that covered the floor of the woods. She sprang on top of me, pulling open my coat and nipping the skin of my neck with her teeth. The trees seemed to close in all around us, shielding us from view, like we were in our own world.

Her soft hair fell across my face, and it felt so good. I ran my hands down her back and scratched at her with my claws. Leaning up, she threw aside her shirt, and the chain with the cross shone just inches from my face. She lowered herself onto me and her skin felt warm and soft. As I looked into her eyes, they were no longer that luminous yellow, but green – the colour of emeralds. I entwined my fingers in her hair, but it was no longer white-blond but dark brown, thick and curly. I looked at her face, but Madison had gone, it was Sophie I was making love to. I rolled her over onto the soft cushion of leaves and her breath felt hot against my neck as she said, “I find your dark side irresistible.”

To hear those words made my heart race as it was filled with joy. Sophie had finally accepted me for who I truly was, she had fallen in love with the real me – the monster – the vampire bat – the Vampyrus. I made

love to her and it felt like nothing I had experienced with her before. It was as if everyone and everything had disappeared. There was nothing left but only us.

How long we spent together shielded by those trees I do not know. We finally collapsed in each other's arms lying breathless together. However long it had been, the day had now turned into night and I could see the light of the full moon spinning through the treetops high above us.

The silence was broken by the sound of shouting. I recognised the voice. It belonged to Drake.

"There's been another one!" he roared. "Oh my god, there's been another one!"

"Another what?" I whispered against her chest, not wanting those stolen moments with Sophie to end just yet.

"Oh no!" she said, pushing me off her. But it wasn't Sophie's voice, it was different. It was Madison who was talking to me. "Potter!" she shouted. "Hurry up and get dressed. I think the wolf has been back!"

"What?" I mumbled, rubbing my eyes as she hurriedly pulled her clothes back on. "What's going on here? I thought you were...?"

"What?" she said, tucking her shirt into the waistband of her trousers.

I wanted to say, *I thought you were someone else – I thought you were Sophie*. But I couldn't. How had this happened? How had I ended up making love to Madison?

"I can't believe it," I breathed, looking at her.

"Neither can I," she smiled down at me. "I guessed you had a dark side, Potter, but you were something else!"

Then she was gone, racing back towards the house.

15

I pulled on my boots and trousers. *How had this happened?* I wondered. I'd made love to a Lycanthrope! Had I really believed she had been Sophie? Or had the love I still kept hidden for Sophie blinded me? But Madison was beautiful, right? Maybe I had wanted her, and my feelings of guilt for this had tricked my mind into believing that really I had been with Sophie. Whatever the reason – whatever had happened – Drake was yelling from the house that there had been another murder. Now wasn't the time to analyse my feelings of love, lust, or guilt.

Throwing my coat on, I raced back through the woods towards the house. By the time I got there, Madison was standing by the open front door and talking frantically to Drake who had a flashlight in his hands.

"What's happened?" She asked him.

"Where have you two been?" he asked her, looking at the both of us.

"Never mind that now," she said. "What happened here? What have you found?"

Stepping aside in the doorway and handing Madison his flashlight, Drake said, "See for yourselves."

Brushing past him, Madison stepped into the house and I followed close behind. As if knowing what to expect, she shone the cone of white light directly at the child's chair which was in the centre of the living room. She gasped and dropped the flashlight. It rolled away from her and I snatched it up. Aiming the light at the chair, I moved forward.

Just like the night before, there was a child sitting slumped in the chair. Clenching my jaw tight, and the sound of my heart racing in my ears, I reached out and lifted the child's head. The face of a girl looked back at me, her eyes blank but open. In them I could see the fear that had been captured. Red curls of hair spilt across her brow and down onto her shoulder in ringlets. She wore a Bratz nightdress which was covered in little purple stars. I lowered her head and took my hand from the base of her neck. It felt damp and clammy. Using the flashlight, I could see that it was coloured red with blood. Smearing my hand against my trouser leg, I realised that her hair wasn't red at all; her blond hair was stained with blood. Hunkering down, I could see she had something in her tiny clenched fist. Very gently, I unfolded her fingers and took the item from her hand. Holding it up in the light, I could see that it was a tiny pink shoe, and I

guessed it had probably come from one of her Bratz dolls as she had been stolen from her bed by the wolf.

Placing it along with the growing collection of toys by the chair, I stood up and turned on Drake who was standing by the open doorway.

“Where were you when this happened?” I asked him.

“I could ask you the same question,” he shot back, his eyes never leaving mine.

Glancing sideways, I looked at Madison and then back at Drake. “I was with Madison.”

“Oh yeah?” he smirked. “Doing what exactly?”

“We were checking out the woods for any clues that might have been left by the wolf from last night,” Madison lied, and for the first time since meeting her, I saw her pale face flush red. I felt her embarrassment and shame too; not because we didn’t want Drake to know what happened between us in the woods, but that we had been making out while another dead child had been brought to the Wolf House. But it was more than that. Murphy and Luke were depending on me to find this killer – Murphy had put his trust in me and I could hear myself saying to him as he lay bleeding, *“I won’t let you down.”*

But I had let him down; I let Luke down and the children the wolf had brought here. Perhaps my father was right. Maybe I was useless and

would never amount to anything.

“Checking for clues?” Drake asked, and I could hear the disbelief in his voice.

“It’s got fuck-all to do with you what we were doing in that wood,” I scowled at him. “But what is important is that we were both together – we have alibis.”

“What’s that s’posed to mean?” Drake asked, puffing out his chest.

“It means, numb-nuts, that it couldn’t have been either one of us who brought that dead little girl in here,” I snapped, “But you, on the other hand? We only have your word that you were out searching for us!”

“What are you trying to say?” Drake blustered. “That I killed that little girl and brought her here?”

“That’s exactly what I’m saying,” I spat, moving closer towards him.

Shaking his head, Drake looked at Madison and said, “Are you just gonna stand there and let him say that about me? I’m your friend! I’m a Lycanthrope, just like you.”

Staring back at him, Madison said, “I hate to say this, but Potter’s got a point.”

“Well he can shove his point up his freaking arse!” Drake shouted. “I ain’t a child killer!”

“Sorry but I thought all you Lycanthrope had been child killers at some time or another!” I growled.

“Ancient freaking history!” Drake shouted and spit flew from his lips. “I’m not going to stand here and listen to this shit!”

I saw him turn as if to leave, but before he’d even had the chance to reach for the door handle, I’d flitted across the room in a spray of shadows and barred his exit from the house.

“What were you *really* doing in the woods yesterday?” I hissed. “You weren’t taking a piss!”

“And you and Madison weren’t looking for clues,” he half-smiled. “Now get out of my way.”

Placing my hand firmly against his chest, I looked in his bright yellow eyes and said, “How come you were in the woods last night when I was chasing down that wolf?”

“I heard the howling and came after you,” he said. “I wish now that I’d left you to die.” Then, shoving me aside, he yanked open the front door and stormed out.

The door slammed shut with such force that the whole house trembled on its ancient foundation. “I’m watching you!” I shouted after him, but he was gone. Turning, I flinched backwards to find Madison standing directly behind me.

“Sorry, I didn’t mean to scare you,” she smiled.

Skirting around her, I made my way back towards the little girl in the chair.

“Do you really think Drake has something to do with this?” she asked me.

“You tell me,” I said without looking at her. “You and he are the same, aren’t you?”

“We’re both Lycanthrope,” she said, “and yes, we’ve both done our fair share of killing, but what Drake said was true.”

“And what was that?” I scoffed, with my back to her.

“We both stopped killing years ago,” she told me. “I don’t want to live like this anymore. I don’t want to be trapped by this curse. I want to be human again, not a werewolf.”

Looking back over my shoulder, I said, “I don’t trust him and to be honest, I don’t know if I trust you.”

Hearing me say this, the glow in her eyes faded and I was surprised to see that she looked hurt by what I said. “But what about what happened between us in the woods?” she whispered. “Didn’t that mean anything to you?”

“Nothing happened. It was a mistake!” I snapped at her.

Looking at me, I could see tears building in her eyes. “You bastard!” she hissed.

“I thought you liked me because I had a dark side,” I shot back.

“And you like me because of mine!” she shouted, screwing her hands into fists by her sides. “I could see it in your eyes the first time you saw me. There was a connection and you know it!”

“Dream on!” I barked back.

“I’ve seen you checking me out with all of your little side glances,” she said. “I’ve seen you staring at my butt. Your eyes nearly fell out of your head earlier when I unbuttoned my shirt to show you my necklace. And when I was dressing your wounds, I could feel your heart racing. I could see your body tensing every time I came near you. So don’t give me all this crap that you’re not attracted to me like I am to you. You need to let go, Potter!”

“Let go of what?” I sneered.

“Whoever it was that broke your heart!” she snapped back. “If she’d really wanted you, she’d be here right now, so stop chasing ghosts!”

“You have no idea what you’re talking about!” I said angrily, scooping up the little girl in my arms. But she was right. I did need to let go of Sophie – but not yet – not now.

I carried the little girl towards the door and as I went, Madison said,
“Where are you going?”

“To lay this little girl to rest,” I said. “That’s what Harker wants us
to do isn’t it?”

16

I carried the little girl in to the woods. I found the prettiest spot I could find, where the moonlight cut through an opening in the trees and bathed the ground in a pool of milky light. Laying her down on a pile of leaves, I set about digging her grave with my claws.

As I worked, I tried to free my mind of everything, but it was impossible. No wonder the wolf hadn't been caught; this place was messed up. It was like a world within a world where rules didn't apply and your sanity was pushed to the limits. How had I missed this little girl being brought to the house? Why had I let myself be seduced by Madison? But had she really seduced me? Could I really blame her? I had a mind of my own, didn't I? And however much I hated to admit it to myself, Madison had been right. I had been checking her out. I did find her attractive – there was something about her that kind of drove me crazy. But maybe that was good. Madison had said I needed to let go – let go of Sophie – and maybe I had already started to. After all, if my love for Sophie was as strong as it

had once been, would I have found Madison so attractive? Would I have slept with her? No, I wouldn't have.

But I *had* imagined that I'd been making love to Sophie, when really it had been Madison who I'd wanted. Wasn't that just the last fragment of guilt taking over as I let go of Sophie? Now that I had given myself to Madison, I could never look back at Sophie. That part of my life was now over.

With my claws caked in mud and earth, I dug away at the ground, the hole getting deeper and deeper. I had to pull myself together. I had one night left to catch this killer before the full moon faded and the cycle of killings stopped. But they wouldn't stop forever. At the beginning of the next cycle, the wolf would be back and by then, Luke and I would probably be in jail for a crime that we didn't commit and Murphy would be dead. Then who would be left to stop these killings?

I need to get my shit together and think of a plan. But what? This wolf was sly. He'd come into the house while we had been there, taken the chair, and placed it in the front garden. But why had he done that? Why take the risk? Because he wanted us to know that he could come and go without us being able to stop him. He was that confident. Then to creep past me while I was napping and place the body of that boy right in front of me; that really was taking the piss. And again tonight, he had the nerve to saunter in

and place the little girl in that chair and then slip away unnoticed. It was like he was always there, never too far away. That's why he had never been caught – because he had been there the whole time. He had been on those stakeouts, he had to have been. He needed to know where the others were at any given time so he could creep in and out. He was part of the team. He was Drake.

How would I prove it? How would I snare him? I'd have to catch him with a dead child dangling from his filthy jaws. But he would only be brave enough to do that if he knew where I was, if he had me in sight. That's how he had gotten away with it so far. He had known that I was in my room that night and it would only have taken him seconds to creep downstairs, snatch up the chair, and take it outside. He knew that I was sitting up all night in the living room with my eye on the chair, refusing to move until I caught the killer. He could have easily climbed from his bedroom window and raced away into the night. Madison had said herself how fast the Lycanthrope could run as wolves. He could have reached the town of Little Hope in minutes and been back again. On finding me asleep, he crept in on his paws and placed the little boy in the chair. It was him I chased into the woods, and that's how he was there at hand when I collapsed, posing as a Good Samaritan.

Drake said himself that he came looking for me and Madison tonight. Finding us in the woods together making love, he seized the moment to go find himself the little girl, murder her, then bring her back to the house. Once she was in place, he raised the alarm.

It all fitted together so perfectly, but how would I catch him? Turning away from the hole that I'd dug, I shook the mud and earth from my claws. I didn't want any dirt on my hands when I laid that little girl into her grave. Wiping my claws against my trousers, I made my way over to the child. Kneeling down, I plucked two flowers from a nearby bush, and crossing her arms over her chest, I placed the flowers in her hands.

Picking her up in my arms, I carried her slowly towards the hole and lowered her into it. Then closing my eyes, I lent down into the grave and kissed her gently on the cheek.

"I'm sorry," I whispered with silent tears running down my face. "I'll catch him for you, I promise." I filled in the hole.

I smoothed over the mud with my hands and stood up, and it was then I knew how I would catch Drake. I knew how I would get him to believe I was somewhere I wasn't. I had a plan.

17

I didn't sleep well for the rest of that night. It wasn't the uncomfortable camp bed or the cuts across my chest that kept me from sleeping too deeply, it was my guilt. How had I let my friends and those children down so badly? What had I done?

But I wasn't the only one who couldn't sleep. Just before dawn, the door to my bedroom creaked open and Madison came in. She was dressed in a loose-fitting nightdress that seemed to shimmer against her body.

"Are you awake?" she whispered.

"I am now," I grumbled, rolling over onto my side.

I heard her kneel beside my bed and brush my shoulder with her fingertips. "Room for one more in there?" she whispered.

"What do you want?" I barked.

"I can't sleep," she explained.

"Well go back to bed and try," I snapped at her.

"But it's more than that," she whispered.

Rolling over so I could look into her face, her eyes gleamed out of the darkness at me. “What’s keeping you awake?” I asked her.

“You are,” she said, stroking the bandage that covered my chest.

“Sorry, I didn’t know my snoring was that loud,” I said. She didn’t smile, she just looked at me and again I saw that glimmer of sadness in her eyes. “Okay, what’s wrong? What have I done now?”

“Tomorrow night it will all be over,” she hushed. “If we catch the killer or we don’t, either way, we will never see each other again.”

“I think that will probably be for the best,” I said flatly.

“Do you really mean that?” she almost seemed to gasp.

“I don’t think we make a good mix.”

“You admit, then, that there is something between us?”

“Whatever it is, it isn’t right,” I told her gently. “We are not meant to be.”

“But earlier...” she started.

“Was a mistake,” I told her. Again she looked sad by what I said, so I quickly added, “What I mean is, it was a mistake there and then. We took our eye off the ball and a child lost her life because of it. We should have stayed focused.”

“But I couldn’t help my feelings,” she said. “Neither of us could.”

“We should have tried harder, Madison,” I whispered as she came close.

“And what about now?” she asked me. “The wolf has done his killing for tonight. The sun will soon be up and he won’t come back in the light.”

“And what if I say no?” I asked. “Are you going to pull that crazy shit with your eyes again?”

“I don’t know what you mean,” she half-smiled at me.

“Yeah you do,” I said, pulling open the sleeping bag for her to climb in next to me. Pulling her nightdress from over her head, I watched as the silver cross lay flat against her breasts. Madison lay next to me, and I folded her in my arms as she rested her head against me. Her hair fanned out across my chest and it felt soft like feathers. But this time it was different. It wasn’t like what had happened between us in the woods. We didn’t make love; we just lay in each other’s arms and held each other. Eventually I did drift into sleep and as I closed my eyes, I was sure that I could hear the gentle sound of her weeping. I wondered what had made her feel so sad.

18

When I woke, Madison had gone. I'd slept most of the day away again. Knowing I only had a few hours to put my plan into action, I climbed out of bed and got dressed. My stomach rumbled and I couldn't remember the last time I had actually eaten a proper meal.

I went downstairs and both Madison and Drake were sitting silently in the living room. I looked at Madison and she smiled. Drake sat stone-faced, staring at the little chair. The wind outside had picked up and it blew hard about the eaves.

"Is there any food in this place?" I asked Madison.

"There are some cans of corned beef and some crackers we brought with us in the kitchen. It's not much," she said.

"It's something, I guess," I said back.

"Should have packed your own," Drake mumbled as I headed for the kitchen. I ignored him. I wasn't in the mood for a fight right now. That would come later.

In the kitchen I found half a can of corned beef and a few crackers on a plate. With a knife, I dug inside the can and pulled out a lump of the meat. It looked pinkish and was covered in a white layer of fat. *Beggars can't be choosers*, I said to myself as I pulled the lump of beef from the knife and wolfed it down. It tasted salty, but it would do. Taking two of the crackers, I broke them in half and munched on them. The food left me feeling thirsty and I spotted a bottle of water on the table. Unscrewing the cap, I gulped some down and it was cold and refreshing. Wiping my mouth with the back of my hand, I placed the bottle back on the table and left the kitchen.

Madison and Drake were still sitting where I had left them. Dropping down onto the sofa next to Madison, I asked, "So what's the plan?"

"What plan?" Drake scowled at me.

"Well it's do or die time tonight – well for me and my friends at least," I smiled at him. "I need to catch this killer or my sergeant dies and my buddy Luke and I do ten to twenty in the pen."

"I don't have a plan," Drake said. "That's why Harker got you on board, isn't it?"

I glanced sideways at Madison and said, "Any ideas?"

Madison shook her head and said, "Nope."

Sitting forward, I looked at them and said, “The way I see it is like this. This wolf is a cunning bastard. He seems to know where we are and what we get up to. Tonight we don’t leave this house. We lock the doors and keep that chair exactly where it is – no one is to touch it. Madison, you keep watch at the back of the house and Drake, you stay down here and guard that chair.”

“And what will you be doing?” Drake asked me.

“I have an excellent view of the woods from my window and the path leading up to the front door. I’m going to sit by that window all night long. We know he comes through the front door as there’s no other way in or out, except for the windows, but from what I saw of this wolf the other night, he’s huge and would never fit through them. So I will see him approach as he sneaks out from the woods. When I do, I will give three taps with my boot on the floor. As soon as you hear my signal, Drake, you go and stand behind the door. Madison, you come from your room and we’ll both head downstairs. And as soon as that son-of-a-bitch puts a paw over the threshold, we kill him.”

“But what about if he approaches from the back?” Madison asked.

“Then you give the signal,” I said. “He will still have to come to the front of the house to get in, so as soon as he gets round the front, I’ll make my way downstairs.”

“It seems like we should have the whole house covered,” Madison said thoughtfully.

“Hang on, how do I know that you’ll stay in your room?” Drake asked me.

“Why would I leave?” I asked him, with my best look of confusion.

“We still don’t know it wasn’t you who moved the chair,” Drake said. And then looking at Madison, he added, “And no offence, but I only have your word that you two were in the woods together at the time of the murder.”

“And we only have your word that you were out looking for us,” Madison shot back.

Hoping that this would come up, I said, “How about we lock the doors to our rooms. That way, you would hear the doors unlock, I mean those doors creak enough as it is – hang on!” I smiled. “I have an even better idea, why don’t you lock us in and keep the keys, that way we could only get out if you let us out. But as soon as Madison and I give the signal, you better be up those stairs in a flash to let us out, okay?”

“Okay,” Drake said as I watched him mentally weigh the idea in his head. “You could climb out of the window!”

“What is this?” Madison cut in. “Don’t you trust me or something?”

“It’s not you,” Drake said. “It’s him,” and he nodded over at me.

“That’s okay,” I smiled. “I understand that we haven’t exactly hit it off, but I just want to catch this wolf tonight so if you need some extra reassurance that I won’t be leaving my room, how about...let me see?” I said, rubbing my chin thoughtfully, although I knew exactly what I was about to suggest. “I’ll be back in just a second.”

I raced up the stairs, went to the bathroom, snatched the cracked mirror from off the wall above the sink, and hurried back downstairs. Standing in front of Drake, I said, “Right, who do you trust more, me or Madison, because I’ve only got the one mirror.”

Drake looked at me as if I’d lost the plot and said, “Madison of course.”

“Okay then,” I said. “Follow me.”

Drake and Madison followed me outside into the front garden. Digging around in the earth I found a large stone and propped the mirror against it on the ground beneath my window. “Take a look,” I said.

“Why?” Drake said, looking confused.

“Just take a look,” I insisted.

Drake came forward and peered down into the mirror.

“What can you see?” I asked him.

“Your bedroom window,” he said.

“Okay, now follow me back into the house,” I ordered.

They followed after me as I led them to the poky living room window. I peered through the glass and smiled to myself as I looked down into the mirror that lay propped against the stone beneath the living room window.

“Now tell me, what you can see?” I asked Drake, turning to face him.

Drake peered out of the window and down into the mirror. “I can see your window,” he breathed.

“Exactly,” I said. “Now I’m going to sit in that window all night long if that’s what it takes. I’m not gonna move an inch, too much is at stake. So at any time, all you have to do is look into that mirror and you’ll see me sitting up there. Come dark it might not be great, but we know there is going to be a full moon tonight, so you’ll at least be able to see my silhouette. Good enough for you?” I asked him.

“I guess,” he said, and I was sure I saw a sense of relief spread across his face.

“What about you, Madison?” I asked her.

“It’s not me with the trust issues around here,” she said looking at the both of us as if we were a couple of naughty school boys. “But I guess Drake will know exactly where you are.”

Rubbing my hands together, I said, “Well if everyone is happy, I’m going to lie down, we have a long, and I imagine, dangerous night ahead of us.”

I turned my back on them, and headed for the stairs. As I climbed them, I couldn’t stop a smile from crawling across my face. So far, so good.

19

I went to my room, but didn't put the second part of my plan into place straight away. I figured that Madison might come to my room one last time, and I was right. So, lying on the camp bed, I laced my hands behind my head and crossed my feet at the ankles. I hadn't been in my room for more than five minutes when the door creaked open and Madison came in.

She closed the door behind her and came and sat next to me on the bed. Her hair shone in the dying sunlight that spilled into my room and I fought the urge to reach out and touch it. Madison sat with her face cast down, a forlorn expression on her face.

"Are you okay?" I eventually asked her.

"I guess," she said softly.

"Tell me what's wrong," and I genuinely wanted to know.

"What will happen after tonight?" she asked me.

I knew what she was talking about. "We move on and let go – isn't that what you told me to do?" I said.

“When I said that, I wasn’t talking about us. I was talking about whoever it was that was haunting you.”

“I’ve let go of her too,” I told her.

“Really?” she said, looking up at me.

“You helped me do that.”

“How?”

“By showing me that it is possible to have feelings for someone else,” I said.

“So you do have feelings for me then?” she whispered hopefully.

“Does it matter?” I asked her.

“It matters to me.”

Leaning nearer, I put my arm around her shoulder and pulled her close. “Madison, we can’t go on from here – not together. People like you and me aren’t meant to be.”

“What do you mean, ‘people like you and me’?”

“Vampyrus and Lycanthrope don’t make a good mix,” I told her.

“We did yesterday in the woods,” she reminded me, but I didn’t want to be reminded of that.

Looking away, I said, “Madison, that can never happen again – it was...”

Then taking my face in her hands, she turned my head so she could look into my eyes. I stared into them, and they almost seemed to burn yellow. “You are unlike any man that I’ve ever met before,” she whispered. “Your passion, your anger, your love...I’ve never met a man with such a dark side before. My desire for you has no end.”

“We can’t...” I said.

“We could run away,” she whispered. “Go where no one knows us – we could make a life together. Please, Potter, take me away from here. You could save me.”

I blinked and it was as if a spell had been broken. Gently easing her away, I asked, “Save you from what?”

“From myself,” she said.

“The only people I want to save, Madison, are my friends, Murphy and Luke,” I told her.

She kissed me gently on the mouth and stood up. “Then I truly am lost,” she said, and left my room.

I got up to go after her, but stopped myself. There was very little time left before nightfall and I had to have everything ready – if I didn’t catch the wolf tonight we would all need saving.

Making sure that the door to my room was shut fast, I turned to the wardrobe. I took the frayed-looking jacket, worn trousers, and scuffed shoes

and placed them on the floor. Then with my claws, I cut the sleeping bag into strips and removed the pull-cord. Taking the strips, I stuffed them into the arms of the jacket and down the legs of the trousers. I padded out the arms and legs of the clothing until they were stuffed full. Then, with one long claw, I hacked away at the thin mattress until it lay in half on the floor. I wrapped the cord around the top third of one end of the mattress, until the end of it was bunched together and looked roughly the size and shape of a head. I tied what was left of the cord around the ends of the jacket sleeves and the bottoms of the trousers so that none of the stuffing fell out. Placing the jacket around the end of the mattress, I made it look as if a head was sticking out of the end. The other half of the mattress, I stuffed into the trousers. I stared down at the floor and it looked as if I had two halves of a body stretched out.

Lifting the bottom half of the body, I placed it against the wall beneath the window. Then, taking the other half, I balanced it on top. Stepping back from the window, I screwed up my eyes and peered at the dummy I had made. I smiled at my handiwork. I knew with the moonlight reflected back in the mirror, it would look even more realistic – it would look as if I were standing at the window.

Then from below, I heard footsteps on the stairs. They were too heavy to be Madison's. It was Drake coming to lock me in for the night.

I grabbed hold of the two halves of the figure, and kicking the wardrobe door open with my boot, I placed the dummy inside. With the sound of footsteps just outside my bedroom door, I swung the wardrobe door closed and jumped onto the camp bed, spreading my coat over me so he couldn't see that there was no longer a mattress or sleeping bag. Lacing my hands behind my head, I looked up as Drake pushed the door open.

"It's time," he said, looking in at me.

"Okay," I said as casually as I could. "You know what to do?"

"I'm not stupid," he said.

"Of course you're not," I smiled. "I'll be at the window."

"And I'll be checking the mirror," he said back.

"I'll be here," I assured him with a smile then added, "Good luck, Drake."

Drake made a huffing sound, swinging the bedroom door shut. I listened to the sound of him locking it from outside. I waited for him to go to Madison's room. I heard the deep rumble of his voice as he spoke to her. Then the door creaked shut and I heard the sound of the key rattling in the lock. I listened to the sound of his feet pass by my door and as soon as I heard the top stair creak, I was up. I knew that I had only seconds to get the dummy in place and for me to escape my room before he got downstairs

and checked for my reflection in the mirror. And he *would* check – he wouldn't be able to resist.

Jumping to my feet, I yanked open the wardrobe door and carried the dummy to the window. With my heart racing in my chest, I pushed open the window. Then looking down, I saw something on the floor. Whatever it was must have fallen from the dummy's jacket. I snatched it up and stuck it into my trouser pocket. Climbing onto the window ledge, I leant back into the room and dragged the dummy into place. It wobbled backwards, and I grabbed hold of it. Once I had it in place, I threw my coat back into the room, pulled the window closed, and before my wings had even opened, I was leaping backwards through the air.

I rocketed upwards and away from the house as fast as I could. Once I was out of sight, I swooped through the night sky and skimmed over the treetops of the woods. Finding a branch that was well-hidden but gave me a good view of the front of the house, I perched on it. Peering through the leaves, I saw Drake come to the living room front window and peer out at the mirror that sat propped amongst the weeds in the front garden, just like I knew he would. But would he be fooled? I glanced up at the window and just as I hoped, in the light from the moon, the silhouette looked just like somebody standing at my bedroom window.

Settling back in the tree, I waited.

The wind blew hard and the branches of the tree I hid in swayed all around me. As the moon rose higher in the sky, the temperature dropped and I wrapped myself in my wings to keep warm. The claws at the tip of each wing grabbed hold of the tree to keep me from falling when the gusts of wind picked up.

As I settled back and watched the house, I saw the silhouette of a figure as they went to the living room window and checked the mirror, just to make sure I was where I said I would be.

“Come on Drake, take the bait!” I whispered.

The figure moved away from the window, satisfied that I was still in the Wolf House.

Leaning back in the tree, I felt something in my trouser pocket. Fumbling, I pulled out whatever it was that had fallen from the dummy’s body in the bedroom as I made my escape. It was a piece of paper about the size of a credit card. Turning it over, I could see that it was an old black-and-white photograph. Holding it at an angle so I could see it in the moonlight, I checked it out. The picture was of an old man sitting in an armchair. As I stared at the ancient photograph, it looked to me as if the old

guy was wearing the old jacket, trousers, and scuffed-up shoes I had discovered in the wardrobe that was now wrapped around the dummy. Next to the old man was another chair – a much smaller chair – and seated in that was a pretty little girl. She had blond ringlets falling onto her shoulders and the cutest face you could ever imagine. In her hands she clutched a Barbie doll. Both of them looked happy as they stared out of the picture. Looking at the picture closer still, my heart went cold as I could see that it had been taken in the living room of the Wolf House, where the wolf had left his victims. But who were they? Where were they now? The picture was as old as the clothes in the wardrobe, so the old guy and the little girl had probably lived in the house many years before. Looking at it one last time, and feeling a little creeped out, I folded it and put it back in my pocket.

I looked back at the house and I nearly fell off my perch. The front door of the Wolf House was open, somebody had snuck out. With my heart racing in my chest, I scanned the immediate area and then saw something – the bushy end of one giant tail, disappearing around the side of the house.

“Drake’s taken the bait!” I whispered.

While I had been looking at the picture, he had slipped out of the house, keeping low, so I wouldn’t be able to see from my bedroom window – if I had still been in it.

Opening my wings, I sprang from the treetop and swooped high up into the night. With my wings rippling out on either side of me, I circled above the house, and I could see a giant wolf slinking away across the fields in the direction of Little Hope.

“I’ve got you!” I smiled grimly. But I wouldn’t take him yet. No, I if I swooped down now, he’d just give me a load of old bullshit about how he was out looking for a place to take a crap. I needed to catch him red-handed in the act of taking a child before I detained him.

Soaring higher, I sailed over the treetops and fields, never once losing sight of his huge, silver body as it reflected back at me in the moonlight. I followed him as he made his way into the narrow, winding streets of Little Hope. Although the quiet streets were deserted, he was cunning enough to keep to the shadows, remaining out of view. He crept through the town until he came to a small cluster of houses on the other side of town.

With my heart racing out of control, I lost altitude, not wanting to lose sight of him now. The wind rushed past me, and I spread my wings to make my approach as silent as possible. The wolf bounded over a fence and into a garden. There was a Wendy House, a small three-wheeled bike which lay on its side, and a sand pit. Hovering just out of sight, I watched the wolf press his nose to the ground as it sniffed the outside of the Wendy

House, the kid's bike, and the edges of the sand pit. It was almost as if he was trying to locate the scent of a child so he could follow it directly to one who would be sleeping peacefully inside the house.

With his nose hovering close to the ground, he followed the scent towards the back door of the house. Reaching it, he leapt up and sniffed the handle. Dropping onto all fours, he hunched his giant shoulders and put all of his weight against the door. From where I hovered above, I heard the sound of the lock go *pop*! Then, the wolf glanced quickly back and disappeared into the house.

I sped out of the sky and within a heartbeat I was hovering outside the bedroom windows of the house. I circled once, then twice, looking into the windows. Then I saw the child. A girl of about seven, tucked fast asleep inside her bed, with the wolf standing at the end of it. His eyes burned yellow and his giant tongue lolled from the corner of his mouth. Flashing his razor-sharp teeth, he sniffed at the air, made a soft woofing sound in the back of his throat, then crept towards the little girl.

Swooping away, I aimed myself at the window and sped towards it. With my fists held out before me, I crashed through the bedroom window in a shower of glass, wood, and brick as I took the whole of the window and its frame out.

Before Drake even knew what was happening, I'd wrapped my arms around his colossal neck and was flying backwards out of the hole I'd made in the side of the house. As I tore away, I caught a brief glimpse of the little girl sit up in her bed and rub her eyes. By the time she had rubbed the sleep from them, we were soaring away and out of sight. She would probably never know how close she came to death that night or how she woke to find half of her bedroom wall missing.

The wolf struggled against me, his massive jaws snapping at the air, foam flying from his teeth into the night. Drake was unbearably heavy and it was impossible to keep hold of him. We were plummeting out of the sky at an incredible rate. He gnashed at me and his howling was deafening. I could see the fields racing up to meet us, and I knew that if I didn't release him, I would die as we hit the ground. So, letting go of him, I back flipped through the air to stop myself crashing into the field that was only feet beneath us.

Hovering, I watched Drake land awkwardly on all fours, then saw him race away back towards the woods. With my wings pointing out behind me, I zoomed after him. The wind tugged at my hair, and the skin on my face rippled as I flew faster and faster after him. Madison had been right, the Lycanthrope could run fast, and at times he just looked like a streak of silver ahead of me as he raced towards the woods. If he reached them, then

I would lose sight of him from above as he darted between the shelter of the trees. So I stayed low, my arms out in front. He was only feet away now, and his tail looked like a strike of lightning as it whipped back and forth in front of me. I reached for it, but it slipped through my fingers and he was gone, tearing away amongst the trees. Rocketing upwards, I swooped over the treetops, but as I had feared, I'd lost sight of him. Dropping like a stone through the air, I landed on the soft woodland floor. I snapped my head left and right as I scanned the darkness between the trees. Then my heart stopped as I heard the sound of a woman scream, followed by the deep booming of a werewolf's howl.

Sprinting in the direction of the sounds, I whisked between the trees in a black spray of shadows. Moonlight cut through the treetops in silver slices and it was almost as if I were running through a wood made of giant daggers. Then ahead of me, I saw someone or something stumble from behind a tree. I stopped hard, sending up a shower of fallen leaves and pine needles. It was Madison who was staggering towards me. Her eyes blazed yellow out of the darkness, but there was something else that glistened. I looked at her hands as she clutched her stomach and could see blood running between her fingers in black silky streams.

"Madison?" I yelled, running towards her.

She fell against me and I took her in my arms.

“What’s happened?” I asked as she looked up at me, her eyes locking onto mine.

“Drake,” she barely whispered.

“Where is he?” I asked her. “I lost him.”

She trembled in my arms and clung onto me. “Potter,” she whispered.

“Shhh,” I whispered. “Save your strength.”

“I don’t have much time,” she groaned in pain. “I just want to know your name – your first name.”

Looking down at her in my arms, her eyes still fixed on mine, I said, “Sean.”

“That’s a nice name,” she smiled weakly up at me.

“What’s yours?” I whispered.

“Sean, look behind you,” she said, her eyes closing as she fell limp in my arms.

Glancing around, I saw the wolf spring through the air towards me, then everything went black.

21

I woke to the sound of howling. It was so loud that the earth trembled beneath me. It took me a moment or two to get my bearings. My heart thumped and it felt as if I had the worse hangover in the world. I peered up and could see the moon shining through the trees that stretched high above me. Rolling over onto my side, I groaned in pain then fell silent as I saw Drake only feet away between the trees. His giant hair-covered body was bent over and he had his nose buried in something that lay scattered across the ground.

I crawled on all fours towards him, being careful not to make the smallest of sounds. Lying on my stomach, I peered around the edge of a tree trunk and nearly puked in revulsion. Drake had his snout buried in a pile of innards and flesh that lay scattered across the floor of the woods. Whoever it was had been torn to pieces by the wolf. I inched my way forward, using my claws to pull myself along. I could hear the sound of licking and slurping as Drake prodded at the bloody remains with his tongue. Then, just as I was about to move forward again, something glinted amongst the entrails strewn across the fallen branches and leaves. Peering at it, my heart

stopped. No, it didn't stop; it broke as I saw what it was shining back at me from the pile of red stuff – it was Madison's cross necklace.

Then, everything came clear to me. Drake had come bounding out of the woods as Madison lay dying in my arms from an injury that he had caused because, like me, she had discovered he had been the killer all along. After knocking me unconscious, he had torn Madison to pieces and I had woken to find him eating her remains.

With my heart aching in my chest, I staggered to my feet. "You filthy fucking animal," I screeched and shot at him.

Drake glanced back, a look of surprise and fear on his face, as I lunged at him with my claws. He rolled back his fleshy gums as if to bite me, but I was too quick and he had been taken by surprise. Swinging back my arm, I swiped at him, slicing his head from his body.

The wolf's head spun away, and the animal's giant body slumped to the ground, where it twitched then fell still. Then the craziest thing I had ever seen happened. The wolf's body started to change. It was as if it were shrinking in front of my very eyes, as its fur disappeared and it changed back to its human form. Turning, I raced over to where the head had fallen. The long snout, pointed ears and teeth withdrew back into the giant skull which gradually grew smaller. I watched the transformation until it had finished and Drake was staring blankly up at me.

Reaching down, I picked up Drake's head by the hair. It felt heavy in my hands as it swung against my leg. I went back to the bloody mess that had once been Madison. Bending down, I took the crucifix from beneath a lump of flesh. Holding it up before me, I watched the moonlight wink back at me as it reflected off of it.

"I'm sorry, Madison," I said and like a distant memory, I had trouble remembering her face. Maybe that was for the best. Perhaps I should forget about what happened between me and Madison at the Wolf House. It would be our secret – *my* secret.

I put the crucifix in my pocket, turned, and headed back to the town of Little Hope with Drake's head dangling from my fist.

I reached the Little Hope railway station just before dawn. With Drake's head still swinging by the hair from my fist, I entered the car park. There were two vehicles parked next to one another. One was a Chrysler, the other a van, but both were black in colour. The headlights of the car flashed twice at me, and I covered my eyes with my free hand.

The passenger door swung open and someone got out. At first I couldn't see who it was as I was blinded by the headlights. But as I got nearer, I could see that it was Harker who had gotten out to greet me. The way the dying moonlight glinted off his bald spot I would recognise anywhere.

"Have you caught this rouge Lycanthrope?" he asked me.

Without saying anything, I chucked Drake's head at him. It bounced off the tarmac and rolled towards his feet.

Harker glanced down at it and said, "Drake?"

"Yes," I replied.

"Are you sure?"

“Of course I’m sure,” I hissed. “I don’t cut people’s heads off for the fun of it. That’s why you never caught him, he was working from the inside. He knew your every move so he could work around you.”

“Can I trust you on this?”

Lighting a cigarette, I said, “There’s a house on the other side of town. My guess is that by morning you will receive a call into the police station from the owners saying that they woke to find a huge hole in their daughter’s bedroom wall.”

“Constable Drake?” Harker asked, cocking an eyebrow.

“No, me.” I told him. “I followed him last night to the house. I saw him with my own eyes as he tried to take the little girl, so I killed him. You won’t have any more child killings in Little Hope.”

“Constable Madison?” he said.

“Dead,” I answered blowing smoke through my nose.

“How come?” he asked flatly.

“Drake killed her when she discovered he was the killer,” I told him.

“That’s a shame,” Harker said. “She was a good officer.”

“Was she? I wouldn’t know,” I said. “Where are my friends?”

Harker raised a hand into the air, as if giving a signal, and the side door to the van slid open. Luke stumbled out and fell to his knees. He was blindfolded and his hands were bound behind his back. Murphy followed as

he was shoved from the darkness of the van. Like Luke, he was blindfolded and bound. He hit the ground hard and cried out in pain.

“I think that concludes our business,” Harker smiled and held out his hand for me to shake.

I looked at him and said, “You put a bullet in my sergeant, I won’t forget that. Watch your back, Harker.”

Without shaking his hand, I flicked my cigarette away and walked over to my friends. Kneeling down, I removed their blindfolds and restraints. I watched Harker pick up Drake’s head and throw it into the boot of the car. He then climbed back in behind the steering wheel and both vehicles drove away into the night.

Turning back to my friends, I could see that Murphy was as white as paper and looking gaunt. A filthy bandage had been tied about his thigh. It was stained brown with dried blood.

“Are you okay?” I asked him.

“Do I bloody look okay?” he barked. “You sure took your time!”

I looked at Luke then back at Murphy and said, “Well don’t thank me all at once! I’ve just saved your bacon!”

Reaching out, Luke placed his hand on my shoulder and said, “Thanks Potter – you did good.”

“Did I?” I asked, looking down at Murphy.

“You’d do even better if you got me back to The Hollows so I can get this bullet out of my leg!” he snapped, and then out of the corner of my eye, I saw him wink at Luke and smile. I’d done good.

Snaking our arms around Murphy, we hoisted him to his feet as he limped across the car park. As we went, I felt something digging in my trouser pocket and it was sticking into my thigh.

“Wait a minute,” I said.

“What now?” Murphy groaned.

I reached into my pocket and pulled out the photograph of the old guy and the cute little girl. Wrapped around it was Madison’s cross.

“What’s that?” Luke asked me.

“A crucifix,” I whispered.

“You’re not going all religious on us, are you?” Murphy grumbled.

“No,” I said thoughtfully. “You can have it. It will keep you safe.”

Murphy took it from my hand and tucked it into his shirt pocket and grunted.

“Who’s the picture of?” Luke asked me.

I looked down at the photograph of the old guy and the beautiful little girl as she sat smiling in that chair, clutching her Barbie doll. Tearing it into tiny pieces, I said, “I don’t know,” and scattered it to the wind.

23

We took Murphy back into The Hollows where a Doctor named Ravenwood removed the bullet. He told Murphy he would survive but would always have a limp from now on. This pissed Murphy off but he learnt to live with it. The crucifix he wore on his tie and for some reason, he said it was his lucky charm.

Luke stayed with Murphy in The Hollows while his leg healed. I stayed long enough to fight any growing cravings and then came back above ground. What was the point of staying in The Hollows when I had no one there?

I stayed in a small motel and waited for them. Most days I did nothing apart from lay on my cheap bed and watch the T.V. in the corner. Eventually, I took a piece of note paper from beside the phone and wrote Sophie a letter. But before I'd even finished, I'd screwed it up and tossed it in the bin.

I had to let go – somebody had told me I needed to – but who had said that? I couldn't even remember her name, let alone picture her face.

Bored almost out of my mind, Murphy and Luke arrived back from The Hollows. Almost kicking my motel door in, Murphy limped into my room and barked, “Get off your lazy arse, Potter, we’ve got work to do!”

“Work? What kind of work?” I asked him.

“We have another suspected vampire outbreak,” Luke said.

“Where?” I asked, keen to get going.

“It’s miles from here,” Murphy told me. “A place called the Ragged Cove. Now get your shit together and let’s get going!”

So I left with Murphy and Luke for the Ragged Cove and forgot all about the Wolf House and what happened there. But I didn’t – not really. There was something that sat in the back of my mind, like an itch that I just couldn’t reach.

Slowly it came back to me, what it was that I couldn’t quite remember about my time spent at the Wolf House. I was with Kiera in the caves below the mountains. Seth had just released us from our cell. I was staring at her – not Kiera – Seth’s companion, Eloisa.

Kiera had elbowed me in the ribs and said, “*Remember the hairy tongue!*”

“*Who’s this?*” I had asked Seth, unable to take my eyes off the woman standing next to him.

“Does it matter?” he had asked me.

“It does if we’re to trust you,” I said.

“This is Eloisa – my lover,” he smiled, reaching out and stroking her face with his hooked fingernails.

But whatever had seemed so familiar about Eloisa faded away like a puff of smoke, and I hadn’t thought any more about it.

Then, as me, Seth, and Eloisa had taken refuge at the police station in the town of Wasp Water, she had seemed to want to befriend me. She had called me Sean. How did she know that was my name? Nobody called me Sean, not even my folks had as a boy. I had always been known as Potter.

Even Kiera had thought it strange as we had rowed together in the cafeteria at the police station.

“I see that you’re on first-name terms with the werewolf –because that’s what she is, Potter. She’s also a child killer and so is her lover, Jack Seth!” Kiera had shouted at me.

But I hadn’t made the connection. The itch was still itching but still, I was unable to reach it, so I said to Kiera, *“You are jealous and that’s what this is all really about. You’re not pissed at me because I made plans without you – you’re pissed because I’ve been spending time with her.”*

Something inside was telling me something was wrong. It was like I had a secret that even I didn’t know about. But Kiera saw it, she saw

everything. As we lay in bed after making love at the facility, she had turned to me and said, *“So, what about you? What’s your secret?”*

“I’m not sure that I have one,” I said.

“Yeah, you do,” Kiera smiled, and pinched my arm.

But she was right, I did have a secret. I just couldn’t remember it – not until I fought with Seth in the hangar. I had nearly killed him, he was dying in my arms when, Nik had raced in, begging for me to let his father go. Nik was confessing to the murders of all those women.

“It’s true,” a voice had said, and I looked up to see Eloisa walking across the hangar floor towards me. Her long, blond hair bounced beautifully about her shoulders and her eyes glimmered like crystals. I looked her straight in the eyes and she stared right back. Her eyes shone yellow and I saw a flash of her and me making love in the woods somewhere.

Shaking my head to rid myself of those images, I said, *“So you’re this wolf’s mother?”*

“I’m not his mother,” Eloisa smiled with her perfectly-formed lips. *“Nik’s mother died when he was just a baby. I am Jack’s lover, that is all.”*

I stared into her eyes, then slowly released my grip on Jack. In my mind’s eye, I could see us kissing, holding each other close. Breaking her

stare, I looked down at Seth who lay at my feet, and I kicked the giant beast away with my foot.

Seth began to come round and Nik started to talk to him, but I wasn't listening to what they were saying – I couldn't. My head was alive with vivid images of Constable Madison – I mean Eloisa.

Madison! The named screamed across the front of my mind. How had I forgotten?

Without saying a word, I walked directly towards Eloisa. She smiled at me and her eyes twinkled. In them I saw her as a little girl sitting in that chair, smiling and clutching her Barbie doll to her chest as she sat next to her grandfather. Then, I saw the old man being dragged from the house by the townsfolk of Little Hope. They took his clothes from him as they screamed that they wanted to see his fur. They wanted to see the werewolf! Dousing him with petrol, they stuck a match to him. I saw the little Eloisa Madison watch from her tiny chair as her grandfather disappeared in a cloud of smoke and flame.

When the townsfolk had gone, she went quietly into the front garden and gathered together her grandfather's clothes. She took them to his room, and as she placed his frayed-looking jacket, trousers, and scuffed brown shoes into the wardrobe, I heard her swear to herself that one day she would have vengeance against the people of Little Hope. Like they had taken her

grandfather from her, she would take their children from them. She wanted the townsfolk to find their children in the very chair she had watched her grandfather die from.

Then, in her eyes, I saw her slink down the stairs as I stood in my room and Drake took a whiz in the woods. She took the chair and placed it in the front garden and sneaked back into the house again. She waited for me to go to sleep that night so she could sneak away and find her prize. She returned with the little boy and just managed to position him in the chair before I woke. But I nearly caught her as she sneaked from the house. I chased after her, thinking it was Drake, but he had heard the howling and come into the woods – that's why he had been there that night.

As I drew closer to her, Eloisa's eyes began to widen and I wondered if she knew that I was remembering who she really was. Her eyes sparkled and in them I saw us making love, she was lying on top and staring down at me, casting me under her spell. And as I lay and dreamt that I was making love to Sophie, Eloisa crawled away, her skin revealing the Lycanthrope that was hidden beneath and she raced off to the town of Little Hope. While I was dreaming and Drake was searching the woods for us, Eloisa stole the little girl, shook her to death in her mighty jaws, and sneaked back into the house, placing her in that chair.

Once the murder had been committed, she raced back to the woods, changed back into human form, and wrapped her long legs about me. Eloisa waited for Drake to discover the body and raise the alarm. She had a perfect alibi.

Believing I was in my room, tricked by the dummy I had constructed, Eloisa crept from the house, but Drake had caught her. Knocking him unconscious and believing I was in the window upstairs, she had made her way back into town and to the little girl's bedroom.

I watched the rest play out like a movie in her eyes as I crossed the hangar towards her. Then I was chasing her through the woods, and she got away from me, but not from Drake. He sprung at her. Eloisa struck him with her claws, wounding him. Changing form and knowing she was close to being caught for her crimes, she staggered from behind the tree; the blood on her hands was Drake's but she pretended it was coming from her. Collapsing in my arms, I saw her ask me my name and then tell me to look behind me. Drake was leaping through the air. He swiped me away from her with one of his giant paws in an attempt to get me to safety, but in doing so, I struck a tree and was knocked out. I saw Eloisa and Drake fight, their claws scratching at one another, jaws gnashing as each tried to kill the other.

But Eloisa Madison was cunning and she overpowered Drake, looking into his eyes and sapping his strength until he was unconscious.

Once we were both out of it, I could see that she needed to get away, she needed us to believe she was dead so no one would go after her. So, hunting down a deer, she slaughtered it, removing its hot innards and spreading them over the ground near where Drake and I were unconscious. Taking the crucifix from around her neck, she threw it onto the animal remains so there was no doubt it was her that lay ripped to shreds on the woodland floor. Before she went, I watched in Eloisa's eyes as she lent beside me, whispering in my ear, saying, "I could kill you, Potter, but what I said was true. You are unlike any man I have ever met – and you were right – we could never be. So forget about me."

Then she was up and walking calmly away into the night. Drake awoke first, and as he licked at the remains to see if it were really the innards of a wolf, I lunged at him, believing he was eating Eloisa's remains, and killed him.

"Forget about me," is what she had whispered in my ear, and that's what I had done, I'd forgotten her. Until now. It had been Eloisa Madison who had murdered those children. I saw it in her eyes and she knew I had seen it; I had seen everything. She smiled at me and her eyes twinkled as I shot my arm out and thrust a claw into Eloisa's chest. It happened so fast that she still had that smile on her face as I ripped out her heart. She looked at me as if to say something, but all that came out of her mouth was a thick

jet of black blood. Eloisa fell forward, crashing face-first onto the floor of the hangar.

With her heart still beating in my fist, I walked back to Seth. I knew I could never tell him, or anyone, why I had *really* killed Eloisa. But I had promised that little girl as I laid her in her grave that I would catch the killer, and I just had.

So, holding Eloisa's heart out in front of Seth's huge face, I said to him, "*You might not have murdered those women, but you helped take the heart of somebody I loved.*" Then, dropping Eloisa's heart on the floor in front of Seth's giant paws, I looked into the wolf's eyes and said, "*I guess that makes us just about even.*"

But in my heart, I knew that it hadn't. I got even for those children who had been murdered at the Wolf House. I was still to get even for the murder of my friend, Murphy.

Bending over against the snow, I headed towards the zoo and my friend, Luke. I could still see the fear in Kiera's eyes as she had witnessed me kill Eloisa for no apparent reason.

"*You're scaring me,*" Kiera had said, and those words kept going around and around in my head. I could tell her the truth, all about what

Eloisa and I shared together at Wolf House, but what good would that do?

That was my past; that was my *secret*.

In the distance through the driving snow, I could just make out the gates to the zoo. Pulling the collar of my coat tight, I made my way towards it.

Vampire Hollows
(Kiera Hudson Series One)

Book Six

By
Tim O'Rourke

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This book is a work of fiction. The names, characters, places, and incidents are products of the writer's imagination or have been used fictitiously and are not to be construed as real. Any resemblance to persons, living or dead, actual events, locales or organisations is entirely coincidental.

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For my friend Richard Ayres

The tall guy with a big heart & his cat Dave

Chapter One

The truck lunged to the right, then to the left, and I nearly lost my footing. Doctor Hunt reached out to steady me and I snapped my arm away.

“*Get off!*” I hissed.

“Kiera?” he asked, his eyes growing wide. “What’s wrong?”

“I know who you are!” I shouted, raising my claws as to defend myself should he try and grab for me again. “*You’re Elias Munn!*”

The truck continued to rattle, lurch, and bump, and I pressed the flat of my hand against its frame to keep my balance.

“I’m not...” Hunt started and I jabbed at him with my free hand, fingernails long, black and curved.

“You’re behind everything,” I spat. “You’re the invisible man we’ve all been searching for!”

“What?” Hunt cried in disbelief. “You can’t really believe that?”

“Why not?” I asked, staring into his eyes, trying to see something – *anything*. “It all makes sense now!” But did it? I couldn’t work it out. Where did Hunt fit into all of this? With my mind racing back to my days of

training, I frantically tried to search for opportunity and motive. But did any of those rules apply to him? Wasn't Elias Munn a twisted killer who only wanted the destruction of the human race because he had been spurned by his true love?

"I see it in your eyes, Kiera," he said, his voice softer now.

"See what?" I shouted.

"Your uncertainty," he said back. "Why would I help you escape from that zoo if all I wanted was to kill you anyway?"

"Because you need me to love you," I replied.

With a half-smile on his lips, Hunt looked at me and said, "I'm flattered, Kiera, but aren't I a little bit old for you?"

"I'm not talking about us being lovers!" I barked at him, my right claw still held out before me. "I could love you as a friend, as a father! And by you helping and taking care of me, there would be a very good chance I could grow emotionally attached to you – love you perhaps."

"That wasn't my reason for helping you, Kiera," he shouted back over the roar of the truck's engine. "I want this Elias Munn dead as much as you. I lost my wife because of him and almost Kayla and Isidor too!"

"So if you're not Munn, why were you trying to escape that facility with my mother, Phillips, and Sparky? Why have your head covered? Who were you trying to hide your identity from?"

“They were trying to hide my identity from you!” Hunt said.

“And why would they want to do a thing like that?”

“Because they were using me as a decoy, for crying out loud!” Hunt insisted.

“A decoy?” I asked confused.

“They wanted you to think that I was this Elias Munn, so you would follow me while the real Munn got away,” he started to explain. *“They covered my head because if you had seen it was me, you would never have followed. You would’ve smelled a rat and not come after us.”* Then, looking at me he added, *“But then again, perhaps you have come after me, not to save me, but because you did believe that I was Munn.”*

I looked at him and could see despair in his blue eyes. It was as if they had clouded over like a summer sky that was threatening a storm.

“So if you’re not this Elias Munn, who is?” I asked with a sneer, but something in my heart told me perhaps he was telling the truth. *“You must have some idea. You told Murphy back at the Hallowed Manor that you had your suspicions.”*

“I can’t be certain, but...” he started.

“But what?” I demanded.

Before he could answer me, the truck tipped onto its side and I toppled backwards onto my arse, my arms and legs pinwheeling. Hunt was

up, throwing away the cloak he had draped over his shoulders. He came towards me, his hand outstretched. I threw my hands up, as if to protect myself from him.

Hunt could see the fear in my eyes as he came towards me. Then reaching out, he grabbed hold of me and yanked me to my feet.

“Kiera, I’m not going to hurt you. You’ve got to trust me,” he said, his eyes fixed on mine.

Pushing his hand away, I looked at him and said, “Who then? Who is this Elias Munn?”

“Who is it that you love?” he asked, and his face looked almost sad.

“What...why?” I stammered as I searched my feelings. I knew in my heart that I had only ever loved a very few people. My father, mother, and if I were to be honest with myself, I knew I had fallen in love with...

The roof of the truck was suddenly ripped open as a set of claws shot into the darkness of the cargo hold and yanked Hunt out. I looked up to see his feet disappearing through the jagged hole. Leaping from the back of the truck, I swept up into the sky through the snow that continued to fall like giant feathers.

With my wings poised on either side of me, I snapped my head left and right and stared through the snow and into the night. Narrowing my eyes to slits, I saw a dark shadow whisk upwards and away. Pressing my

arms against my sides, and tilting my head back like the shape of an arrow, my wings instinctively spread open, and with those little black fingers seeming to grab at the air, I propelled myself forward. I tore through the snowy air as I made my way towards the black-winged shape that was racing away from me. My long hair bellowed out behind me, and I could hear and feel the wind pressing itself against me as I cut through it. I don't know how fast I was flying, but when I dared to glance down, the treetops and barren moors below me were just a blur.

I gained on the shape ahead of me, and as I drew closer to it, I could see Doctor Hunt struggling with the creature that had snatched him away. Hunt kicked and lashed out at the Vampyrus, but the other seemed stronger. In a flicker of shadows, the Vampyrus ripped and tore at Hunt. Over the sound of the roaring wind, I heard a cry that almost froze my heart. It was an ear-splitting scream of utter agony. Then I watched in horror as Hunt fell from the Vampyrus' claws and dropped from the sky, his own wings fluttering on either side of him like two torn sails.

His attacker seemed to hover just beneath a grey belly of swollen cloud. Whoever it was looked back at me, and I looked into their face, but like in my dreams – *nightmares* – his face was a blur of shadows that appeared to twist and contort before my very eyes. Blinking, I looked back

but he had gone, disappearing into the cloud that lumbered across the night sky, showering the earth below in snow.

I looked down and could see Hunt spiralling towards the ground. Twisting around in the sky, I shrugged my shoulders to spread my wings and I shot down after him. The ground raced up towards me at a terrifying rate. Still not really sure how to use the two glistening wings, I hoped that I would know how to stop in time. Reaching out with my claws, I snatched at Hunt as I shot past him. Then, knowing that I had just seconds to catch him before we both smashed into the hard, rocky ground of the moors, those bony black fingers at the tips of my wings, which had once repulsed me so much, gripped hold of Hunt. Seeing that I had caught him, I arched my back and came to a sudden stop, just inches from the ground. I floated downwards, placing my boots gently against the earth. Hunt felt heavy and lifeless. Placing him out of the blizzard, I rested him against a large rock and he slumped forward.

“Doctor Hunt!” I roared over the howling wind. “Who is Elias Munn?”

Gently taking his face in my hands, I lifted his head to look at him. His eyes were open and they stared back at me. Snow fell onto his black hair and chest. Staring into his eyes, I knew there was no life in them, but I

didn't want to accept that. Hunt had just been about to tell me who Elias Munn was, I didn't want him to go – not yet.

“Please tell me,” I whispered into his face. “I need to know.” But he just looked back at me, his mouth drawn into a permanent grimace, like a gash across his face.

Then I noticed the snow that covered his chest and lap had turned pink, then red, almost black. With one of my claws, I brushed the snow away and closed my eyes at the sight of the ragged hole in the centre of his chest where his heart had been removed.

Laying him down, I stood up, clenching my claws. I then threw my head back and screamed into the wind.

Chapter Two

I wept as I covered Hunt's body with some branches and leaves from a nearby crop of trees. They weren't just tears of sadness for him, they were more tears of frustration. It didn't seem fair. However close I got to Elias Munn, the further he seemed to move away. Murphy had said that the invisible man – Munn – always seemed to be several steps ahead of us. It was like we had been chasing a ghost, something made of smoke; someone made of vapour.

When his identity was close to being revealed, it was snatched away from me, just like Hunt had been snatched away from the truck. As I gently placed the broken branches over Hunt's body, I thought back to what he had said to me just before he had been taken and murdered.

Who is it that you love? He had said.

But what kind of love? How deep does this so-called love have to be? I loved my mother and father, and on some level, I loved Kayla and Isidor like a brother and sister. But I knew there were two others I cared deeply about and one of them I had fallen in love with. I couldn't deny that

to myself any longer, because if I did, then perhaps I would fail to see Elias Munn's true identity.

Standing, I looked down at Hunt's covered body and watched as the giant snowflakes seesawed down, smothering his makeshift grave like a blanket.

I turned away and headed back in the direction from where I had come. My wings trailed behind me, and reaching out, I ran the tips of my claws over their black glittering surface. They felt like the softest of feathers – like silk somehow, but tougher. The three bony fingers at the tip of each wing were curled closed like a deformed-looking fist. I looked at them and imagined them open, and no sooner had I conjured the thought in my head, the fingers curled open like the petals of a black rose. I pictured them closed and they folded inwards on themselves. It was no harder for me to open and close them than it was my own hands. I looked back at my wings. Now that they were out, how did they go away again? Just like I had done with those bony black fingers, I just imagined them gone again, and before I knew what was happening, my shoulders were rolling forward as if I were shrugging and the wings were withdrawing back inside of me. It wasn't a painful feeling, just uncomfortable. I could feel them wrapping themselves around my ribcage, and for just a few moments, I felt short of breath. It was like my lungs were being squeezed or filled with warm water.

Then the feeling was gone and I could breathe again, and I felt no different than I had for the last twenty years of my life. I looked down at my hands, which didn't really look like hands anymore. They were more of a cross between a crow's claw and that of an eagle. The skin covering my hands had taken on an almost translucent look, like marble. My fingers were longer – way longer than normal. I held them up before me and I guessed my middle finger was somewhere between ten and twelve inches long. Each one of them was capped with a sharp, black fingernail which was slightly hooked. I looked at them and wished that they would go, and no sooner had the thought entered my head, the claws were shrinking away and leaving behind my normal-sized fingers. I imagined the claws again, and they were back in an instant like blades being sprung from a flick-knife. I wished them away and they went as quickly as they had appeared. I still wasn't happy or sure about the changes that my body was making and the thought of those little black fingers curled around my ribcage still made me feel sick, but the claws? They were pretty cool.

Running my tongue gently over my front teeth, I could feel that my canines were longer and sharper than before. With the tip of the thumb on my right hand, I pushed gently against one of them, then, snapped it away as it pierced the flesh. Blood ran down the length of my thumb and trailed around my wrist. My first instinct was to mop it up with my tongue, but I

didn't want to go there, the craving for the red stuff was manageable at the moment. So instead, I wiped my hand against my jeans. Just like I had with my wings and claws, I thought about them not being there, and they withdrew back into my gums. To be honest, it felt like having a tooth pulled out, but in reverse.

Feeling and looking like the Kiera I had grown to know over the last twenty years, I thrust my hands into my coat pockets, bent my head against the snow, and headed across the featureless moors. How far away from the truck I was, I didn't know. I had been flying, not for too long, but at a great speed, so I couldn't be sure of the distance I had travelled in pursuit of Hunt and Munn.

The walk gave me time to think but not make a plan as such. How could I plan for anything anymore? I was meant to be heading to The Hollows with the others. In his letter, Ravenwood said that I should seek out someone by the name of Coanda who lived in The Hollows. How was he going to help me? And what of this choice I had to make? Did I really have to decide which race would survive? Would it be the humans or the Vampyrus? How could I ever make a decision like that? I was half human and half Vampyrus – how could I choose between them? Potter had said the whole thing was just a fairy tale, something of myth and legend. To him, Elias Munn was no more real than Father Christmas.

But what of Potter? In my heart, I could feel the nagging doubts that were growing there. When I thought of him, all I could see was him striding across the floor of the facility and driving his fist into Eloisa's chest, tearing out her heart in one quick, sudden movement. Why had he done that? I know Potter could be cranky at times and he had a temper, but that was so out of character for him. Don't get me wrong, I wasn't Eloisa's biggest fan but hey, did she really need to be murdered like that just so Potter could avenge Murphy's death? It scared me to think Potter could be capable of doing something like that. I couldn't help but remember what Ravenwood had written to me in his letter.

"..Elias Munn plunged his fist into her chest and tore her heart out..."

Those words kept going over and over in my mind since I'd seen Potter tear Eloisa's heart from her chest. But there were also other parts of that letter that just wouldn't go away. They kept flashing across my mind like giant, neon words.

"But be careful, Kiera, of who you befriend and love on your journey, for it is said that if Elias Munn can get the half-breed to love him, as a father, or a brother, or a lover, then just like his first love – he would have taken your heart as his own and he will be given the power to choose which race lives and which race dies."

Reading those words again in my mind's eye, my heart sank as I thought of Potter and I prayed that he wasn't the invisible man, Elias Munn. How could he be? Had he really just snatched Hunt from beneath my nose and killed him? Potter had gone back to the zoo to rescue Luke; he was miles away from here. Pulling the collar of my coat tight about my neck, I moved on and I hoped more than anything that my growing suspicions for Potter were wrong, because I had fallen in love with him.

Chapter Three

In the distance I could see a coil of smoke bellowing up into the night sky. I headed towards it but kept as low as possible, darting between rocks and the odd outcrop of trees. Just like I had with my wings, claws, and fangs, I looked at an object in the distance, and at a blink of an eye, I was there. When that happened, everything around me almost seemed to speed up, blur out of focus – out of time. But there was something else. It made me feel as if I was being stretched in some way, dragged towards the object that I wanted to be near. I'd felt it before, back at the police station in the town of Wasp Water as I'd sped across the canteen towards Jack Seth.

I had seen the others, Potter, Luke, and Murphy flit from one place to another in what looked like a spray of shadows, and I wondered if that's what I looked like now, fluttering from place to place in a blink of an eye. Now this was one Vampyrus trait that I didn't mind having, I smiled to myself.

Appearing behind a cluster of jagged rocks, I peered over them. The smoke was coming from the truck, which lay on its side in the snow. From

my hiding place I could see the tear in the roof where Hunt had been yanked through. There were two figures by the truck and I peered through the darkness at them. My heart leapt with joy at the sight of Kayla and Isidor. Standing, I left my hiding place and ran towards them. Upon seeing me, Kayla threw open her arms and hugged me.

“We thought they had taken you,” Kayla said.

“No,” I told her, shaking my head. “Elias Munn got away.”

“So he was in the truck then?” Isidor asked, pulling a stake from the dead Vampyrus who had been driving the truck. Seeing me looking at him, he shrugged and said, “I can’t afford to waste any. I haven’t got many stakes left.”

“He wasn’t in the truck,” I told them.

“But you said he got away,” Kayla said, looking confused.

I looked at her, then at Isidor. Should I tell them that their father was in the back of that truck, used as a decoy, only to be murdered by the real Elias Munn? What good would it do? Hadn’t Kayla and Isidor come to believe that their father was already dead? It would do no good to tell them he had been alive after all but only now had he been murdered. Potter had managed to turn them both around. He hadn’t done it in a way I would have chosen, but it had worked. They had both stopped focusing on their grief and were now focused on the journey that lay ahead of us. Perhaps Potter

had been right; they could do all their grieving after this was over. If they were to survive what lay ahead, they needed to be strong both physically and mentally. By telling them now that I had just buried their father, a few miles from here beneath a pile of broken branches and leaves, would only set them back. But if I were being truly honest with myself, I just didn't have the heart to tell Kayla. I just couldn't do it to her.

So rightly or wrongly, I guessed I might never know, I pulled them both close and said, "It was just a Vampyrus they used as a decoy so the real Elias Munn could escape."

"Where is this Vampyrus now?" Isidor asked, raising his crossbow.

"He's dead," I told them and that wasn't a lie, but what I said next was. "I killed him."

"Good," Kayla said, looking at me. "The more Vampyrus and vampire we kill, the better."

"I don't know if that's the answer," I said. I looked at Kayla and could see the anger and hurt in her eyes and knew then that I had made the right decision in not telling her about her father. So changing the subject, I asked, "What happened to my mum and Phillips? You went after them, right?"

"Just like Munn, they got away," Isidor explained. Then looking up at the sky with its snow-filled clouds he added, "This storm doesn't help. I

lost Phillips in some low-flying cloud.”

“Your mum had too much of a head start on me,” Kayla said. “I lost sight of her.”

“Maybe it was for the best,” I told them.

“How come?” Kayla asked me.

“What would you have done even if you had caught up with her and Philips?” I asked.

“Ripped her throat out,” Kayla said matter-of-factly.

“That’s my mum you’re talking about,” I half-smiled. I couldn’t be angry with Kayla for what she just said. But somewhere deep inside, I still clung to the hope that I could save my mum.

“She isn’t your mum anymore, Kiera,” Isidor cut in. “She’s like the rest of them now. Lost to the red stuff.”

“But we’ve managed to overcome it,” I said. “Perhaps she could too.”

Kayla looked at me and her eyes seemed full of sorrow as she said, “Kiera, don’t bank on it.”

“Why?” I asked.

Kayla nodded in the direction of the drivers cab.

I turned towards the truck and could see one of the Vampyrus hanging half in and half out of the shattered windscreen. I couldn’t tell what

sex or even how old it had been as its face was missing. White lumps of skull and cheekbone glistened wetly through what was left of the flesh.

Turning away, I faced Kayla and asked, “Did you do that?”

Nodding, Kayla said, “It wasn’t intentional at first. Once I’d lost sight of your mum, I raced back after the truck to help you. I smashed through the windscreen and pulled the two Vampyrus out. They fought with me, but I was quickly joined by Isidor. The Vampyrus bit and clawed at me, so I bit back. At first, I just ripped off its nose and ears, but the blood tasted good and I just lost it, you know, went kind of crazy. Before I knew what was happening, Isidor was yanking me off the Vampyrus. It was then that I realised I had eaten his face clean off.”

“Kayla, you can’t carry on like this!” I barked at her, but as soon as the words were out, I regretted the tone I had used.

Kayla flinched backwards and her eyes glowed momentarily. “I’m sorry,” she hissed. “But we can’t all be like you, Kiera and have total control.”

“I didn’t mean to shout at you,” I told her, knocking snow from my hair. “It’s just that you were right about my mum; she is lost to the red stuff and lost to me. I just don’t want that to happen to you, Kayla.”

“Why not?” She snapped, still hurting from how I had spoken to her. I squeezed her shoulder and said, “Because you’re like a sister, Kayla.”

Then looking at Isidor I added, “I love both of you as if you were my family. You are my family now.”

Kayla and Isidor looked at me through the falling snow, but before either of them had a chance to say anything, someone from behind us spoke, saying, “What about me? Can you find it in your heart to love me, Kiera Hudson?”

Chapter Four

Together we looked back and saw Jack Seth standing in the shadows. His tall skeletal frame loomed up into the darkness, and if he had been any taller, it seemed like his head would disappear into the clouds. Snow covered the baseball cap he had fixed on his head and his yellow eyes blazed from within his sunken eye sockets. His denim shirt was open at the throat and the red bandana he had tied about his neck fluttered in the wind. One of his hands swung loosely by his sides and the other was hidden behind his back. The hand I could see was covered in what looked like black tar, but when I stared harder, I could see that his fingers were streaked with blood.

The last time I saw him, he had gone bounding away after Sparky as he'd fled the truck in the shape of a wolf.

"Well, Kiera Hudson, can you find it in your heart to love me?" he smiled, and his lips cut a crooked line across his emaciated face.

"Why should I love you?" I asked him, the thought repulsing me.

“How about you?” he asked, looking at Kayla. Then, glancing at Isidor he added, “And what about you?”

“Why should any of us love you?” Kayla snapped, taking a step forward.

“I’ve just caught your mother’s killer,” he smiled at Kayla. Then, yanking on something, Sparky appeared from the shadows. He fell before us, a length of rope tied about his neck, the other fixed in Seth’s bony hand.

Sparky made a whiny noise in the back of his throat. He looked up at us and I could see that his face was flushed red with a spattering of painful-looking boils. His glasses lay crooked across the bridge of his nose, and the right lens looked frosted with ice where it had been cracked. His black hair hung across his forehead, and his clothes were spattered with blood. I could see a huge bite mark down the length of his left thigh and his jeans were torn and coloured black with blood. Then, as if a bright light had been turned on inside my skull, I could see Seth racing after him, his heart thumping with revenge for the death of his son, Nik. When Sparky had been within his reach, Seth had lunged forward. I looked at Sparky’s wounded leg again and could see where Seth had ripped away most of his thigh.

Not taking his eyes off mine, Sparky tried to stand, but he fell again and screamed out in pain. He covered the bite mark with his hands, and I watched as streams of black blood oozed through his fingers. Smiling to

himself, Seth pulled on the noose and Sparky rolled over, his screams cutting through the night.

“Enough already!” I hissed at Seth.

“Enough?” Kayla questioned me as if lost and bewildered. “How can that be enough after everything that he’s done? He killed my mum!”

“I know he did,” I said, not able to take my eyes off the pitiful creature that now rolled around in the snow at my feet. “We’ve all got good enough reasons to want him dead, but we’re better than him.”

“Are we?” Isidor asked, raising his bow and aiming at Sparky’s upturned face. “He killed my auntie, the woman I believed was my mother for all those years. She was the woman who loved me and brought me up when my father gave me away.”

“And if it wasn’t for scum like this, my son Nik would still be alive,” Seth said as he ground the heel of his boot into Sparky’s open wound.

Sparky’s cries were ear-shattering as he twisted and contorted on the ground beneath the heel of Seth’s boot. His eyes bulged from his head and his tongue lolled from the corner of his mouth as he screamed over and over again. Racing forward, I shoved Seth in the chest with my hands and sent him flying backwards.

“I said enough!” I shouted over Sparky’s screams.

“Why are you protecting him?” Kayla asked, rushing forward.

“Because we don’t just kill him,” I told her. “We’re not God, none of us are. He should be given the opportunity of a trial.”

“A trial by whom?” Seth sneered as he came back towards me.

“The elders,” I snapped back. “They tried you for the murders of those women.”

“And what a lot of good they were,” Seth barked. “They convicted an innocent man!”

“You wanted them to convict you!” I snapped back. “You wanted to take the blame for your son. If they’d known the true facts of the case, it would have been Nik who had gone to prison – not you!”

“So what you’re saying, Kiera, is that we take him back to The Hollows with us and hand him over to the elders?” Isidor asked, still aiming his crossbow at Sparky.

“Yes,” I replied.

“You’re wrong, Kiera,” Kayla hissed. “He can’t be trusted. He’ll trick us, deceive us, and kill us as we sleep.”

“No...” a feeble voice murmured and we all looked down to see that it was Sparky who had spoken. With one blood-stained hand, he reached up to us, his face a mask of pain and fear. “Please don’t kill me...show me some mercy.”

“Like the mercy you showed my mother!” Kayla roared, and before I had the chance to stop her, she sprung forward and was tightening the rope about Sparky’s throat. His eyes bulged again and he clawed at the noose with his fingers, trying to wedge them between his neck and the rope.

“Kayla!” I shouted. “Stop it!”

“No, Kiera!” she roared back. “He killed my mum, he murdered those half-breed children in their beds back at the Manor, he killed Murphy’s daughters, and was partly responsible for his death. And he killed Isidor’s auntie – he deserves to die!”

Kayla yanked on the rope, and springing forward, I brushed her away, not too hard; just enough for her to lose her balance and release the rope. Seeing the discontentment growing between me and my friends, Seth chuckled.

I looked at him and said for the benefit of everyone, “We’re not cold-bloodied killers, we’re better than that. I understand all of your reasons for wanting Sparky dead, I have enough of my own, but if we kill him, we become him.”

“And how do you figure that?” Isidor said, crossbow still aimed at Sparky.

“Because Sparky kills in cold blood. He shows his victims no mercy. He kills out of hatred and fear,” I told them. “You kill him now and

you'll be doing it for all the same reasons. You'll be a mindless killer just like him," then glancing at Seth, I added, "and him."

Seth smiled at me, his black, broken teeth festering in his shrunken gums. Looking back at Kayla and Isidor, I said, "Do you really want to turn out like Seth and Sparky? Is that what you really want? Because if it is, I won't stop you," Then, releasing the rope, I walked away, giving Kayla and Isidor enough time and room to attack Sparky who still lay on the ground whimpering like a baby.

I looked back at them and saw Kayla step towards him, her claws out and raised up before her. Isidor stood as if frozen to the spot, then slowly, he lowered his crossbow and aimed it not at Sparky but at the ground. Sparky looked up and could see Kayla coming towards him, her long, black fingernails and fangs gleaming in the dark.

"Please," Sparky cried out, lacing his fingers before him as if he were about to say his prayers. "Don't kill me. I can help you."

As if deaf to his pleas, Kayla continued forward, and when just inches from him, she dived forward and snatched up the rope.

"No!" Sparky begged.

"Oh quit complaining," Kayla snapped at him. "I'm not going to kill you – not yet anyhow. But if we're to take you with us into The Hollows, then you're staying on the end of this rope where I can see you. But I

promise you this, if for just one second I think you are going to harm me or my friends then I will take your head off in a heartbeat. Do you understand?”

Sparky looked at her, nodded and licked his lips.

“I said, do you understand?” she roared into his face, her claws just inches from his throat.

“Yes! Yes!” Sparky screeched and cowered back as far away from her as his leash would allow him.

Yanking on the rope, Kayla pulled him back close to her. “Don’t screw around, Sparky. I promise you, I’m not that scared little girl anymore. I couldn’t give a shit if you died, and in fact I hope and pray that you do break your promise, because that’s all the reason I’ll need to rip your fucking lungs out.”

“I won’t, I promise,” he snivelled. Then looking at me, he added, “Thank you, Kiera.”

Without saying anything, I looked away in disgust. I wasn’t helping him, I was helping Kayla and Isidor to not become like him. Seth then strode forward, and grinding the heel of his boot into Sparky’s open wound again, he shouted over the screams of pain, “The martyr might have saved you for now, but watch your back. You’re a disgrace to the Lycanthrope.”

“We’re no different, Seth,” Sparky wailed. “You’re a killer just like me.”

Ignoring him, Seth said, “You said you could help us. How?”

“I didn’t say that,” Sparky cried out as Seth drove down harder with his foot.

“Yeah, you did,” Kayla cut in.

“What do you know?” Isidor asked.

“Nothing!” Sparky sobbed in pain.

Going to him, I pushed Seth aside, and Sparky cradled his wounded leg. “It hurts doesn’t it?” I said looking down at him. “Remember how you treated me back in the zoo when my leg was wounded?”

“That wasn’t me,” he said, staring up at me. “It was Phillips.”

“You licked my goddamn leg, you animal!” I hissed at him. “You threw me around the room and hosed me down with freezing cold water.”

“It was Phillips,” Sparky groaned.

Hunkering down, I looked in to his bloodshot eyes and whispered, “Sparky, this lot only needs one little excuse to rip you in half. I can only hold them off for so long. So tell me what you know.”

“I don’t know anything!” he cried.

“Liar,” I hissed and punched his wounded leg.

Sparky's leg jerked and went rigid and I could see the pain in his eyes. They seemed to spin in their sockets. "Tell me, Sparky."

"I don't..." he started, but I hit him again, this time harder.

"Okay!" he screeched, phlegm spraying from his lips as he gripped his leg. "I know where you can find this invisible man, Elias Munn!"

"Who is he?" I demanded my heart racing.

"I didn't say I knew who he was," Sparky wailed in pain. "I said I know where he is heading – where you can find him."

"Where?" I breathed, feeling nervous at the thought that I might actually be able to catch this man once and for all.

"The Hollows," Sparky said, through gritted teeth.

"We already know that," I told him, hoping for his sake that he wasn't messing with me.

"But you don't know where in The Hollows," Sparky grimaced.

"Where?" I shouted, raising my hand as if to strike his wounded leg again.

"The Dust Palace!" Sparky whispered as if giving away a deadly secret.

"Impossible," someone said from behind us.

I spun round to see Potter standing beneath the shadows of a solitary tree that stood some feet away. Beside him stood someone else. Peering

through the gloom, my heart leapt at the sight of Luke. Potter had rescued him.

Standing slowly, I watched as both of them walked out from beneath the low-hanging branches of the tree and came towards me. As usual, a cigarette dangled from the corner of Potter's mouth, the blue smoke trailing away into the night. He looked at me, but it was more than looking at me; it was like he was searching my eyes, looking into me.

I broke his stare and turned towards Luke. He came towards me. His jet-black hair was longer than I remembered and hung around his shoulders. The lower half of his face was covered in a scruffy-looking beard, but this only accentuated his brilliant green eyes. His rugged good looks were still visible from beneath his beard, and although he looked as if he had lost some weight, the dirty shirt he wore still showed off his muscular chest and arms.

Luke stopped just a few inches away and looked at me. His eyes seemed to glimmer. I glanced over at Potter who had his eyes fixed on me. I quickly looked away and back at Luke. I remembered the last time that I had seen him – being kicked and beaten before me as my mother offered me a fist full of the red stuff. I had eaten it to save his life. There was an uncomfortable silence, not just between Luke and me, but throughout all of

us. No one said a word and I knew without even turning to face them, they were all watching me.

My heart raced in my chest like a trip hammer and those feelings that I had felt so passionately when with Luke came rushing back. But it was more than that. The feelings which were making my heart race were not of lust or desire, but guilt and betrayal. While Luke had been suffering at the hands of Phillips, Sparky, my mother, and God knows who else, I had been making love to his friend – I had fallen in love with his best friend.

Every part of me wanted to look at Potter again, but I just couldn't. I didn't want to look into his eyes. What would I see there? So, very slowly, I walked towards Luke and hugged him.

Brushing his bristly cheek against mine, Luke whispered in my ear and said, "I never thought I would see you again, Kiera."

"I didn't think I would ever see you again either," I told him as he held me tight. I could feel his body against mine, and just as I had remembered it, it felt as hard as stone.

"What did they do to you?" I whispered, still not able to look into his face.

"It wasn't so bad," he said. "Potter told me that they hurt you, Kiera. I'm so sorry I wasn't there for you. I'll never be able to thank Potter enough for taking care of you for me."

To hear those words threw images of me and Potter across my mind, our bodies entwined as we had made love. I pushed the pictures away. Opening my eyes, I looked over Luke's shoulder as I hugged him and could see Potter watching me. His face looked hard and haggard. But it was his eyes, there was a sadness to them – something I had only ever seen once before, the day Murphy had been murdered.

Taking the cigarette from the corner of his mouth, he flicked it away. He looked away from me, crossed to where Sparky lay nursing his leg on the ground, and kicked him in the guts. Sparky howled in agony and screwed himself into a ball.

Pulling away from Luke, I turned to face Potter and said, "What in the hell was that for?"

"He's a fucking liar!" Potter said, looking at Sparky and not at me.

"What are you talking about?" I said, heading back towards Sparky and the others as Luke followed me.

"He said that you would find this Elias Munn in the Dust Palace," Potter hissed, still unable to look at me.

"So?" I shrugged.

"That's impossible," Potter barked, and this time he did look at me. The sadness had gone from his face and was now replaced with anger.

“Why is it impossible?” Isidor asked, coming forward, his eyebrow piercing twinkling in the moonlight.

Potter looked at him, but said nothing. Instead, he shoved another cigarette into the corner of his mouth and lit it.

“Potter’s right,” Luke cut in. “The Dust Palace is the home of the elders. He couldn’t possibly be there.”

“Why not?” Kayla asked, as she brushed snow from her red hair.

Blowing smoke from his nostrils in two thin jets, Potter looked at Kayla and said, “Listen, sweetheart, you don’t just stroll into the Dust Palace. It’s the most sacred place in The Hollows. It’s where the Elders, or as some like to call them, the gods live. It’s their home. To me, I think it’s just a bunch of bullshit, but one thing I do know for certain is that place is a fortress and there’s only one way in.”

“And where’s that?” Seth asked.

“Shit, who invited you along?” Luke suddenly groaned, as if noticing Seth for the first time.

“Good to see you too, Luke Bishop,” Seth snarled. “It was Potter’s idea.”

“I had no choice,” Potter said, looking at Luke.

“Didn’t you say this scum was responsible for helping to kill Murphy?” Luke asked in disbelief.

“That’s right,” Potter said, flicking ash from the tip of his cigarette. “But I’ve gone some way in getting even,” he added, then glanced at me.

“How could you ever possibly get even over the death of Murphy?” Luke asked, his black beard now turning white with snow.

“Just like Seth helped take Murphy’s heart, I took the heart of his lover,” Potter told him, and again he looked at me, as if trying to gauge my reaction.

Those images of Potter striding across the floor of the facility and ripping Eloisa’s heart out swam in front of my mind again and they sickened me. I broke Potter’s gaze and looked away. I still couldn’t understand why he had done that, he had confused and scared me.

“I think you’ll find that I’ve lost more than Eloisa,” Seth barked at Potter, his eyes blazing like hot coals. “I’ve lost my son, Nik too.”

“What, you mean he’s dead?” Potter asked, and for a moment I thought I could see the briefest of smirks tugging at the corner of his mouth.

“Yes,” Seth spat. “He was killed in a vampire attack a few miles from here.”

“Aww,” Potter groaned. “My heart bleeds for you. Don’t tell me any more or I think I might just start crying.”

Before anyone knew what was happening, Seth launched himself at Potter and had him by the throat. “We have unfinished business, Potter, so I

wouldn't be too cocky if I were you!"

Tearing Seth's claw from his throat, Potter stared into Seth's eyes, blowing smoke into his face. "Bring it on anytime, wolf-man, I'll be ready for you."

"Oh, please." I groaned. "What is it with you two and all this schoolyard crap? Okay, so some of us don't like each other much – and that's putting it mildly – but we have to find a way of getting along, because if we can't, then we might as well die, right here, right now, and save Elias Munn the job of killing us."

"She's right you know," Luke said, stepping between Potter and Seth, pushing them apart.

Potter scowled at Seth and wandered away back towards the tree.

"So what's the one and only way into this Dust Palace?" I called after Potter.

"You have to be invited in by the gods," he shouted back over his shoulder at me. "And somehow, I can't imagine them ever inviting Elias Munn around for tea!"

"It's true, I tell you," Sparky snivelled, still clutching his stomach where Potter had kicked him.

Kneeling down beside him, I looked into his wild yellow eyes and said, "You better not be leading us into some trap!"

“I’m not, I promise,” he said.

“Your promise had better be as good as mine,” Kayla told him, yanking on the rope still wrapped about her fist, “or you’ll be dead.”

“I’m dead anyway,” Sparky yelped as Kayla pulled him to his feet. “When Elias Munn discovers that I’ve betrayed him, he’ll kill me anyway.”

“Then you better start praying that we kill him first,” Isidor said, placing his crossbow across his back. Then, looking at me he added, “So what’s the plan, Kiera?”

Looking up into the sky, the clouds had started to spread out and the storm started to ease. It was still bitterly cold and we were all covered in a coating of snow. “We head down into The Hollows,” I said, looking at Luke then over my shoulder at Potter, who was leaning against the tree with his arms folded across his chest. “I’ve got to find someone called Felix Coanda.”

“There’s no entrance to The Hollows for miles,” Potter said. “And we know the whole area has been sealed off.”

“What about the huge hole the Vampyrus have the humans digging?” Kayla asked.

“What hole?” Luke asked.

“We came across this...crater, I guess you could call it,” I started to explain. “The Vampyrus are building some kind of giant escape hatch so

they can flood the country at great speed. They've got the townsfolk from Wasp Water digging it, human slaves. It's a few miles from here."

"We could enter The Hollows from there," Luke suggested, rubbing his beard with his fingers.

"Good luck," Seth growled.

"What's that supposed to mean?" Luke asked him.

"We barely got out of there alive," Seth said. "The whole area is teeming with vampires."

"There is another way into The Hollows," Sparky said, looking at me, half-smiling.

"Where?" I snapped at him. I didn't want him to smile at me, I didn't like or trust him.

"The Vampyrus built another tunnel, an escape route if you like," he said, "just in case the main tunnel collapsed and they needed to get out."

"How can we trust you?" Luke asked him.

"We can trust him on that," I said thoughtfully.

"Why?" Luke asked.

"Remember that disc I took from the monastery?" I asked him.

"Well, I had a chance to check it out on a computer back in Wasp Water and there were plans and drawings of places that the Vampyrus were using.

There was a plan of what I now suspect was that huge hole they're digging. There was a tunnel leading from it, but it didn't show where it led to."

Looking at me, then at Sparky who now hobbled on one leg next to Kayla, Luke said, "Okay then, lead the way, but this better not be some kinda trick or..."

"I know, I know," Sparky whined, "or I'm dead."

Turning, Sparky limped away, Kayla only feet behind him as she held onto his leash. "This way," he said back over his shoulder. Silently, Seth and Isidor followed.

Luke took my arm and said, "Stick close to me, Kiera, I'm still not convinced we can trust Sparky." He led me away towards the mountains in the distance, and looking back over my shoulder, I could see Potter standing alone by the tree.

Chapter Five

We followed Sparky as he limped and hobbled over the rocky ground that spread out before us like a white blanket. The snow had eased, and a grey sun was just starting to peek over the horizon. It was cold and my hands felt numb, even though I had them tucked into my coat pockets.

Every so often, Kayla would pull on Sparky's leash and tell him to hurry up. How much of this she did out of spite and hatred for Sparky, or just because she was desperate to get out of the cold, I didn't know. Kayla seemed tougher now – *harder* – and I wasn't sure I liked it. But could I put the blame for the change in her solely at the feet of Potter? Yeah, he told her she needed to toughen up and prepare herself for what might lay ahead, but I wondered too if everything she had been through hadn't also changed her.

Luke walked beside me and said very little. When I did sneak a sideways glance at him, he looked lost in thought. I found it hard to strike up a conversation with him as it felt uncomfortable. I felt bad about what had happened between Potter and me while he hadn't been around. I didn't regret what had happened between us, and I wouldn't go back and change

that for anything as I had fallen in love with Potter and I knew that now – but I had to tell Luke somehow and I didn’t know when. The guy had just come back from hell, he had put his life on the line for me as I had for him, back in the caves beneath the Fountain of Souls. So how would he take the news that I had fallen for his best friend? What would that do to him? What would that do to the friendship between the three of us?

And what of Potter? Had I fallen for the wrong guy? However much I tried, I couldn’t get those images of him ripping out Eloisa’s heart out of my head. Why had he done that? And those words written by Ravenwood, “...*Elias Munn plunged his fist into her chest and tore her heart out...*”

Had Potter really murdered Sophie in that way? Had he slipped up in front of me by killing Eloisa in the same manner? The only way I would know for sure was to ask him. Looking back over my shoulder, I could just make out his lonely figure as he followed us up the mountainside from some distance away. Slowing down, I decided to hang back and wait for him so we could talk.

Noticing that I was no longer beside him, Luke said, “Hey Kiera, we don’t have much time to lose, keep up.”

“What about Potter?” I asked.

“He’s big and ugly enough to look after himself,” Luke smiled at me.

“All the same, I still think we should...” I started.

Then, blowing warm breath over his hands, Luke said, “C’mon, Kiera, it’s freezing out here.” Taking my arm, he pulled me close to him. Gently, I pushed his hand away.

“Is everything okay?” Luke asked, a look of puzzlement on his face.

“Everything’s fine,” I said, starting to move forward again.

“Are you sure?” Luke asked, catching up with me.

“It’s just that I don’t need to be told what to do, okay?” I told him.

“I’ve survived this long. Things have changed, Luke. I’ve changed.”

“What do you mean?” he asked, sounding surprised.

“Look, all I’m saying is that I’ve had to learn to fend for myself over the last few months,” I explained. “So it’s hard for me to have you tell me what to do and what’s best for me.”

“I wasn’t trying to tell you what to do, Kiera,” he said softly. “I just didn’t want you to get cold.”

“I’m already cold,” I half-smiled.

“Okay, I’m sorry,” he said. “It’s just...it’s just that I still care for you, Kiera. My feelings for you haven’t changed. I still lov-”

“Please, Luke,” I said, looking away from him. “Don’t say any more.”

“Okay, I won’t for now” he whispered, and we walked the rest of the way in silence.

Halfway up the mountainside, Sparky turned down a narrow crevice set between two giant slabs of granite stone. The wind whistled through the gap and sounded like the cries of lost children searching for their mums. This break between the mountains was only wide enough for us to walk single file and Sparky led the way, shuffling onwards and mumbling in pain. Looking at him like that made me remember how he had once been. He had been my friend, or so I thought. We had shared coffee together at Starbucks, gone to see movies, sat in front of the T.V. in my poky flat back in Havensfield while we ate my poor attempts at cooking. That was when we had been friends, and all the while, little did I know he was watching me, keeping an eye on me, until Elias Munn was ready to strike.

I could feel little pity for him, as he had brought this situation upon himself. But still, it was hard for me to reconcile what he had once been and what he had now become. I could see fear in his eyes. I had seen it back at the truck and it hadn’t been fear of being killed by any of us – his fear was of Munn.

We made our way through the narrow fissure in the rock, which led out to a narrow ledge running around the side of the mountain. Sparky sniffed the air, looked back at us and said, “This way.”

The path was narrow and one slip would have sent any one of us crashing down the side of the mountain. Low-flying cloud swept past and gave me the sense of being in another world. The mountain stretched up high above us, and below in the distance, I could just make out the huge crater that the Vampyrus had the humans digging. Vehicles filled with rock they had removed still came and went. Peeking through the cloud, the crater looked huge, like a giant mouth in the earth which was soon to spew hundreds or thousands of Vampyrus above ground to take to the skies and attack villages, towns, and cities across the country. I couldn't help but remember the nightmare I had while staying at Hallowed Manor. I'd dreamt of London being overridden by the Vampyrus. Black-winged creatures had flown through the sky, so many of them that they had blocked out the sun. St Paul's Cathedral had been reduced to rubble; Big Ben had been burning like a giant candle; vampires had rampaged through the streets feeding on any surviving humans. Had that been just a nightmare? Knowing now what the Vampyrus had planned, I knew that it was a premonition of what was to come. Why was I now so certain? I'd also dreamt of the London underground being overrun with Vampyrus and vampires and that had happened. Watching the T.V. back at Kenner's Farm as we had fled those vampire-cops, I had seen the news reports claiming that wild animals had gone berserk down below ground.

Knowing what was going to come didn't help. Perhaps it should have – I mean, who wouldn't want to know what their enemy had planned for them in the future? Any army would want to know that. But the task ahead seemed too much. There were only a handful of us against thousands upon thousands of bloodthirsty Vampyrus. Knowing that didn't inspire me – it scared me. And like the mountain we now climbed, the end of our journey appeared to be too far out of reach for me to be confident in an outcome that would save the human race. But whichever way I looked at it, the humans or the Vampyrus had to die and I had to decide that. However hard I thought of a way out of it, I couldn't see one.

Just say what Ravenwood had written in his letter was true. What if I did have to choose between the human race and the Vampyrus – how could I ever make such a decision? How could I let an entire species die? How would I decide? Spin a coin?

“I do not have to tell you that the burden on you is a great one. The fate of two entire races lies in your hands. The decision to destroy an entire race is not an easy one – so choose wisely, Kiera Hudson.” The words that Ravenwood had scrawled inside that book kept flashing across my mind and I wanted to scream out at them – tear them up, set fire to them. But I'd already done that and even as I'd watched those words disappear in a ball of flames, I knew in my heart they wouldn't really go. They would be burnt

into my mind until I made that terrible decision, and with every step I took around the mountainside, that decision was getting nearer and nearer.

Then, as if speaking in the wind that whipped about me, Ravenwood's voice whispered in my ear the passage from his letter that had haunted me since I'd read it.

"But be careful, Kiera, of who you befriend and love on your journey, for it is said that if Elias Munn can get the half-breed to love him as a father, or a brother, or a lover, then just like his first love – he would have taken your heart as his own and he will be given the power to choose which race lives and which race dies."

Without being able to help myself, I glanced back over my shoulder and could see Potter making his way around the ledge some way behind us. His head was down as if in deep thought or prayer. But, knowing Potter, he wouldn't be praying. There was something on his mind and it was more than just his fear that I might truly be in love with his best friend Luke. No, there was something else. If Potter really was Elias Munn, I knew that I'd fallen in love with him, and although that scared me, there was little voice inside me that said, *"Kiera, pass the decision to him. Let him choose which race survives. It wouldn't be your fault; no one can truly help who they fall in love with..."*

"No!" I hissed to myself. "That's the coward's way out!"

“What?” Luke suddenly said, looking back at me.

“What?” I said.

“You said something,” he smiled, looking bemused.

“Did I?”

“It sounded like you did.”

“Must have been the wind,” I smiled and glanced back again at Potter. This time he wasn’t looking down, but directly at me. I looked away.

Ahead, Sparky slowed, then came to a stop. The path had come to a sudden end and it led to a sheer drop down into the crater below.

“Is this some sort of a joke?” Seth asked, peering from beneath his snow-covered baseball cap.

“He’s tricked us,” Kayla spat, and yanked hard on Sparky’s leash.

“No, no,” Sparky winced as his head snapped forward as the noose was pulled by Kayla. “Look over there.”

We all looked in the direction Sparky was now pointing. Opposite was another mountain, and carved into the side of it was a doorway. It looked odd and out of place, a nondescript-looking wooden door set into the side of a mountain with no path, steps, or ladder leading to it.

“That leads down into The Hollows and that crater. See, I didn’t let you down. Not this time, Kiera,” he said staring at me with a pitiful look in his eyes.

“How do we get over to it?” Isidor asked, looking over at the door.

“What do you think God gave you wings for?” someone cut in, and we all looked back to see Potter had caught up with us.

“But I can’t,” Seth said, scowling at Potter.

“Not my problem, Seth,” Potter snapped. “Perhaps you should go back down the mountain and ask the good vampires down at that hole if they’ll let you in the front door.”

Ignoring Potter, Seth looked at Luke somewhat embarrassed, and said, “Would you carry me?”

“Why do you want to come with us anyway?” Luke asked back. “This is as far as you come. I’m not taking a Lycanthrope down into The Hollows.”

“Not unless I’m in handcuffs, eh?” Seth barked. “You didn’t mind dragging me down there when you thought you had captured your killer.”

“Oh, change your tune for fuck’s sake,” Potter groaned. “You’re getting on my tits now. You’re a killer, your entire race is nothing more than a bunch of mindless killers. You may not have killed those women – you now say it was your son – but you’ve killed plenty in your time. Now, do us all a favour and piss off back to those caves beneath the fountain of trolls or whatever it is you call it.”

“Souls!” Seth barked.

“Whatever,” Potter growled back.

“I’m sorry, Seth...” Luke started.

“Don’t be sorry, Luke, for crying out loud,” Potter shouted. “He led us into a trap back at that lake and that’s what got Murphy killed. When are you going to stop putting your trust in this scum? We’ve just followed the pizza-boy halfway up a mountain to some doorway set into a mountainside, and we don’t know what’s on the other side of that door!”

“Pizza-boy?” Sparky whimpered.

“I think he’s talking about those spots on your face,” Isidor said.

“Get used to it, he says that sort of shit to me all the time.”

“I’ve told you the truth,” Sparky howled at Potter.

“Truth?” Potter stammered in disbelief. “Your kind wouldn’t know what the truth was if your pathetic little lives depended on it.” Then turning to Kayla, he added, “Cut the mutt loose, we go on without the werewolves.”

“You can’t do this,” Seth barked. “I have the right to get revenge for the death of my son.”

“What about Eloisa?” I suddenly cut in, looking at Seth then quickly at Potter.

“What?” Seth said.

“Well Potter ripped her heart out. Don’t you want to avenge her death?” I asked him.

“I’ve many lovers, Kiera Hudson,” Seth half-smiled at me, his eyes glowing. “She was okay, but let’s just say I don’t like my lovers to be so willing – I like a woman who will offer some resistance – you know, play the victim.”

Looking into his crazy spinning eyes, I said, “You really are an animal, aren’t you?”

“Jeez, at last the penny has dropped!” Potter sighed. “What do you think I’ve been trying to tell you?”

Turning to face Potter, I said, “And you’re no better. You ripped her heart out just so you could get back at Seth – and he doesn’t even give a crap.”

Hearing my words, Potter almost seemed to flinch as if I’d slapped him hard across the face. He looked as if he wanted to say something, but before he had the chance, I’d turned my back to him to find Seth ripping the skin from his own face.

It fell away in fleshy strips and his snout sprung out, white foamy saliva spraying from his jaws.

“If I don’t go,” he snarled, “None of us go!” Pulling his chest apart, revealing a mass of bristling black fur, he rolled his head back and began to

howl.

Chapter Six

Seth's deep booming roar reverberated off the mountainsides like thunder. The whole mountain shook, sending rocks spilling down onto us from high above. The breath from his giant mouth was hot and blew my hair off my face.

Looking over the edge of the cliff, I could see the vehicles below stop; in fact, everything stopped as the vampires and Vampyrus below looked up to investigate. Within moments, there was an ear-splitting squawking noise as the Vampyrus launched themselves into the air and came racing up the side of the mountain towards us, their wings beating so loud that it almost masked the sound of Seth's continuous roar.

Peering over my shoulder at the advancing Vampyrus, Potter said, "We've got company!"

No sooner had the words left his mouth, Jack Seth's howls became a scream as Potter disappeared from beside me, only to reappear an instant later hovering in the air. If I'd blinked, I would have missed it, but with one mighty swoop of his claw he knocked Seth from the mountainside. The

wolf spun away into the air, and before it had disappeared into the cloud, it had taken human form again, and I was sure that Seth's yellow eyes were staring at me.

Sweeping around in the air, Potter watched Seth bounce helplessly against the jagged mountainside and disappear

"Now *that* was for Murphy, you piece of shit!" Potter said grimly.

Seeing one of his own die so suddenly and fearing he would be next, Sparky took the rope that was fastened to him and yanked at it. Loosing her footing, Kayla slipped on the snow-covered edge and went toppling over. She clung to the rope and Sparky cut through it with his claw.

"Luke!" Kayla screamed as she was snatched away from the side of the cliff face by one of the Vampyrus that had raced up towards us.

Tearing his crossbow from his back in a flash of movement, Isidor had released two arrows which sliced straight into the head of the Vampyrus who had his sister. Somersaulting from the edge of the cliff, Isidor was in the air snatching Kayla away from the now dead Vampyrus.

Launching himself through the air, his shirt flying away as his wings shot from his back, Luke took hold of Sparky's ears. With a quick flick of his wrists and a hideous tearing noise, Luke had torn Sparky's head in two. Lumps of brain splattered the cliff face like pools of hot, grey jelly. Sparky's body slumped onto the ledge, where it twitched and jerked

uncontrollably. Swooping out of the sky, Potter kicked out at it and I watched it roll down the mountainside.

Winking back at Luke, Potter said, “Just like the good old days. There’s nothing better than killing Lycanthrope!”

Smiling back at his friend, Luke agreed and said, “Just like the old days!”

Shocked at the speed and apparent heartlessness in which they had just slaughtered Seth and Sparky, I gasped and shouted, “You two are unbelievable!”

“Thanks, sweet cheeks,” Potter beamed, and it was the first time I had seen him smile since returning from the zoo with Luke.

“That wasn’t a compliment!” I screamed at him over the sound of the approaching Vampyrus.

Swooping past me so close that his face brushed against mine, he whispered in my ear, “I know, but secretly, you just can’t get enough of it!” Then he was gone, rocketing away and biting and clawing at the Vampyrus that were rapidly filling the sky all around us.

I looked at Luke who said, “I don’t know how we’re going to get out of this one!” Then he too was gone, spiralling through the air so fast that all I could see was a streak of black, like after burn coming from a jet fighter.

Throwing off my coat and rolling back my shoulders, I ran towards the edge of the ledge and dived into the air.

Please let my wings open! I prayed and shut my eyes.

Instead of falling, I felt myself soaring, and it was exhilarating. I could feel the cold air rush past me at an incredible speed. Opening my eyes, I looked down and had to stop myself from screaming. I didn't know how high I'd climbed but the crater now looked like a pinprick in the earth below. Tilting slightly forward, I started to plummet downwards, but I still didn't feel confident in my ability to fly. Looking back at my wings as they rippled on either side of me, I knew it was something I would have to master quickly or I would soon be killed by the two Vampyrus who were racing after me.

Rolling to my right, I cut through the sky and the two Vampyrus sped past me. Looking back I could see them momentarily disappear into a grey mountain of cloud, then come screaming out of it towards me. Flipping around, I angled my wings backwards and dropped through the sky. The air hit my chest like I'd just crashed into a brick wall and I feared that the pressure of it would break my ribs. My cheeks rippled and I felt as if I couldn't breathe. But I knew I had to, so breathing through my nose, I felt the icy cold air sting the back of my throat. Faster and faster I raced back towards the ground, and with every second I lost altitude, I feared I

would never be able to stop. How had I done it before? Had I arched my back somehow? Pushing out my chest and locking my arms tight beside me, I arched my back and at once, as if I'd stepped on an invisible set of brakes, I slowed.

The Vampyrus that were behind me rushed past, as if taken by surprise by my sudden stop. One of them had sharper reflexes and swooped away before smashing into the rocky ground below. But the other wasn't as quick, and I watched as it dive-bombed into a razor-sharp outcrop of rock. Its severed arms and legs bounced back into the air in a crimson spray of blood. Hovering, I watched as several vampires that had been forcing the humans to dig the crater, race over and begin to fight over the bloody remains of the Vampyrus.

It was then, as I raced back up into the dawn sky, that I saw the rest of the Vampyrus which had been protecting the crater soar up into the sky. As the Vampyrus raced amongst the clouds, the clouds changed colour. They were no longer reflecting the colour of the rising sun; they were turning grey, dark grey, charcoal, then black. Then suddenly, they began to separate as if falling apart into smaller pieces. These then broke up into smaller pieces, and then into black wispy fragments as the Vampyrus swarmed out of them and back towards us.

I saw Potter fly away from a Vampyrus he had just sliced the wings from, and it plummeted away through the sky. Banking, I raced towards him.

“Look! They’re coming out of the clouds!” I shouted over the roar of the wind.

“There’s hundred’s of them!” Potter yelled back.

The Vampyrus that had swept from the clouds swarmed around in the air as if preparing to attack. Then, to my horror, they came racing towards us. And as they came, they made those hideous squawking sounds that pierced the air. Their cries of hatred and anger seemed to penetrate right through me, making my heart thunder in my chest. I could see that their bodies were black, hairy and bloated. Although they closely resembled giant vampire bats, they had bony-looking legs and a set of wings that were transparent and covered in bristly hair. Just like I had seen Luke in his true Vampyrus form at Hallowed Manor, these creatures no longer resembled human beings, but giant winged creatures. Noses turned up, long pointed ears, and jaws full of razor-like fangs.

The Vampyrus were nearly upon us and as they drew within range, Potter banked violently, rolled to the left and sharply lost altitude. I felt my stomach leap into my throat as I banked and raced after Potter. Ahead, I could see Isidor, and Potter was racing towards him.

I caught up in time to hear Potter shout at Isidor. “I’m not usually one for retreating, kid, but we’d better get out of here!”

“To where?” Isidor roared back.

Then, as if from nowhere, Luke swept up beside us and pointing back towards the mountain, he bellowed, “Look! Over there!”

Turning in the air, we stared in the direction he was pointing. The doorway we’d seen earlier was now open and a winged man hovered before it. Raising an arm in the air, he beckoned us towards him.

“Who’s that?” Kayla asked as she came racing towards us.

“Felix Coanda, if I’m not mistaken,” Luke said peering ahead.

“Then what are we waiting for?” I said, looking over my shoulder at the approaching Vampyrus. “Let’s go!”

Curling my claws into a fist, I punched forward and soared back towards the mountain and the open doorway. Was this it? Was I really going to finally enter The Hollows?

Chapter Seven

I swept towards the door where Felix Coanda hovered in front of it. His wings were mottled-looking, like something you would find sticking out of the back of a moth. His skin, just like Potter's and Luke's, was corpse white. He had pale blue lips and a set of fangs that looked as sharp as knives. His hair was black and wiry and stuck out in thick clumps, giving him the appearance he had just crawled out of bed. His eyes shone a fierce blue and they kind of reminded me of Murphy's. He was older than Luke and Potter; I guessed about forty-years-old. He was stripped to the waist, but his upper body, although slim, was muscular. Black hair covered his chest and spread over his shoulders and down his arms, like a fine coat of fur. I had only ever seen one other Vampyrus have such a thick coating of hair even though they were in human form, and that was Ravenwood, but his hair had been snow white.

“Quick!” Coanda shouted, coaxing me forward with his giant claws. “Faster! Faster, I tell you!”

As I raced towards him, I could see that he was glancing nervously past me. Looking back, I could see Potter and the others racing behind me, followed by a mass of screaming Vampyrus. They clutched at them with their claws. Kayla streaked forward, her red hair gleaming in the morning sun, giving her the appearance of being on fire.

“Faster!” Coanda roared again, and I flipped round to see him holding the door open for us, and beyond it all I could see was darkness. A doorway hundreds of feet above the ground set in the side of a mountain, leading to a world hidden hundreds of miles beneath the Earth. Was I ready for this? I knew I had to be, as I shot through the open doorway and into a world of darkness.

The others rushed in behind me into the narrow passageway that, just like Sparky had said, had been gouged into the mountainside. Looking back over my shoulder, I saw the oblong shape of daylight disappear as Coanda slammed the door shut on the approaching Vampyrus. But almost immediately there was light again, just the faintest chinks at first. Then they grew longer and wider, as the Vampyrus on the other side of the door ripped it to pieces with their claws.

“This wasn’t part of the plan!” Coanda shouted as he raced past me, his wings brushing against my face.

“What do you mean?” I called after him.

“Couldn’t you lot use the front door like everybody else?” he snapped over his shoulder. “I heard you were all a bunch of mavericks, but this takes the piss!”

“You mean there’s a front door?” I breathed, looking back at the one that was now being ripped to splinters by the Vampyrus who flew about outside.

“There ain’t no front door, sweet cheeks,” Potter answered as he flexed his claws, readying himself for the Vampyrus that were breaking their way into the tunnel. “The guy’s an arsehole!”

“I didn’t think you knew him?” I asked.

“Never met him,” Potter snapped as he faced the door. “But I’ve heard he’s meant to be some hotshot flying ace – all the women love him, apparently!”

“They’re breaking through!” Luke roared, as the first of the Vampyrus stuck its hideous-looking snout through the gaps in the doorway.

“Then *run!*” Coanda shouted, as he made his way down the tunnel.

“Hotshot my arse,” Potter growled, as he lunged at the Vampyrus’ colossal head as it poked through the door, removing its eyes with his claws. The creature screamed, thrashing its head from left to right as if it had become stuck. Flicking its eyeballs from the tips of his claws, Potter looked at Luke, and grinning he said, “That should slow them down!”

Then he was gone, racing away down the corridor behind Coanda.

“Go! Go! Go!” Luke urged us, and without any further hesitation, Kayla, Isidor, and I fled into The Hollows.

The tunnel spiralled downwards, deeper and deeper it went. It was dark, so dark that even I had trouble seeing through it. But ahead I could hear Coanda drawing breath as he raced onwards. The others tripped and stumbled behind me, and a couple of times I had to stop and help Kayla up as she fell in the dark.

“Take my hand,” I told her. Gripping it, we raced forward.

Then from behind, I heard the sound of screeching and squawking, and in the confines of the tunnel the sound was deafening and terrifying. Hearing those sounds, I knew the Vampyrus had managed to break down the door and were now racing through the tunnel in pursuit of us. With my heart pounding, we raced on, faster and faster, navigating the twists and bends in the narrow tunnel. How far we had travelled down into the earth I couldn't be sure; we had raced at such speeds that I didn't know the distance we had gone.

Eventually the ground began to level, and in the darkness ahead, I could see a fork in the tunnel. Racing towards it, Coanda came to a sudden stop and we all nearly clattered into him. Kayla tugged at my hand and we veered to the right.

“Not that way!” Coanda barked, his bright blue eyes gleaming in the darkness. “That way leads to the crater and thousands more of those Vampyrus.”

“Which way?” Isidor gasped, the sounds of the approaching Vampyrus growing ever closer.

Looking at Luke and Potter, Coanda barked, “You two, give me a hand with this.”

“With what?” Potter snapped back.

“This!” Coanda said taking hold of a giant boulder that was set against the wall which blocked the left fork of the tunnel.

Together Potter, Luke, and Coanda, heaved the giant stone aside, revealing a small passageway on the other side of it. Screwing up my eyes, I could see that it was barely big enough to crawl into.

“What you waiting for, Christmas?” Coanda hissed. “Into the hole!”

Crouching on all fours, I forced my way into the hole and the others raced in behind me. Halfway down the tunnel, I could see a pinprick of light in the distance. Behind me, I could hear Coanda, Luke, and Potter dragging the boulder back over the entrance, and as they did, the sound of the approaching Vampyrus fell silent.

With only one way to go, I crawled forward towards that speck of light.

Chapter Eight

The white light ahead wasn't the end of the tunnel as I had first thought. It was a light of sorts, but not like any other I had seen before. It glowed - no it pulsed - a sickly yellow colour and it seemed to be coming from the walls of the tunnel ahead. As I grew closer still, I could see it was a plant that scaled the walls, lighting my way. It was thick and ropey, like illumines seaweed. It smelt too - sweet like toffee apples. I crawled further down the tunnel, the others behind me, and my hands hurt against the surface which felt as if it was covered in loose stone chippings.

Fixated on the glowing plant ahead, I failed to notice what was beneath me, and as if having all the air sucked from my lungs, I suddenly began to plummet downwards. The ground beneath me had suddenly fallen away. I dropped into utter darkness and couldn't help but scream. As I fell, I heard Kayla and Isidor cry out above me as they, too, started to fall.

Had we just been led into another trap by Coanda? Was he going to be someone else who had deceived me? With my mind scrambling, I couldn't really think about that now, and I clutched at the air for something

to grab onto. But there was nothing. Then, just like a parachute opening, my wings rolled open and I began to slow. They beat frantically on either side of me and matched the rhythm of my pounding heart. Then my eyes, as they always did, began to adjust to the darkness that smothered me like a rug. I looked left and right, then up. Above me I could see Kayla and Isidor as their own wings opened and slowed their descent.

“Where are we?” Kayla called out into the darkness, her voice sounding panicked.

“I don’t know!” Isidor called back, both of their voices echoed as if they were shouting into some giant well.

“Kiera, is that you? I can’t see you but I can hear your heart and wings beating!” Kayla shouted.

“I can see you,” I tried to reassure her. “It looks like we fell into some giant hole.”

“But we’re still falling!” Isidor yelled. “I can’t fly back up to the surface - it’s like we’re being pulled down.”

I knew exactly what Isidor meant. It was like the darkness was some kind of quicksand, which was sucking us further and further below ground.

“You’re in a drop shaft,” a voice said very close to me. I spun around in the air, Coanda was falling beside me. Then, half-smiling, he added, “There’s only one way you can go and that’s down.”

Before I had a chance to say anything back, he was gone, flying away beneath me.

Kayla and Isidor drew level with me.

“Did he say we were in a drop shaft?” Isidor asked me.

“I think so,” I told him, all the time being sucked into the darkness below.

“Wow,” Isidor breathed. “I’d heard about these things as a kid, but I thought they had all been sealed up.”

“Why?” Kayla asked.

“They had a tendency of collapsing...” he started.

“Just like this one!” Potter suddenly shouted as he nosedived past us and down into the blackness.

“What!” I called out, after him.

“Kiera, the drop shaft is gonna collapse!” another voice said, and by the time I realised it had been Luke who had spoken, he was gone, rocketing away beneath me.

The shaft began to vibrate, shake, then rumble. Within seconds, the sound of falling rock became deafening - it was louder than any thunder I had ever heard and I had a quick snapshot of my mum leaving the house that day in the thunder storm. Then the memory was gone and I was looking

up into the shaft as it began to cave in above us. But it looked odd. It was like a solid mass of darkness racing towards us like a tidal wave.

Shoving Kayla and Isidor out of the path of a falling piece of giant rock, I screamed at them, “Go!”

Without needing any further persuasion, the three of us dived down into the awaiting darkness. Rocks whisked past us and the tunnel soon began to fill with thick, gritty dust. It stung my eyes and burnt my throat and lungs, but still I raced on. The shaft made a hideous cracking noise as if the very core of the Earth was being ripped open. The dust and falling rock had now become so dense that I had lost sight of Kayla and Isidor and I couldn’t even call out for fear of sucking in a lungful of the burning dust that was now suffocating me.

So, with my arms held out before me, I lent further forward, mimicking the shape of an arrow and raced forward at a blistering speed. The wind rushed past me, my hair bellowed back from my brow, and my wings fluttered so furiously that I couldn’t even see them. Peeking through my long eyelashes, I snatched a look at those little black claws that had repulsed me so much and could see that they were batting away rocks that were heading towards me. They moved with a nimbleness and speed that was mesmerizing to watch as they plucked rocks out of the air and tossed

them out of harm's way. They were protecting me and I wondered if they were something that should be feared after all.

Closing my eyes against the grit and dark, I could feel the pressure of the falling debris behind me, and to my horror, I got the feeling that the shaft was actually becoming narrower. Why could nothing ever be easy for me? Just when I thought things couldn't ever get any worse, they usually did.

I feared that if I didn't reach the end of the shaft soon, the tunnel would collapse in all around me. Willing myself forward, I darted between lumps of rock, skirted past jagged outcrops that jutted from the shaft walls, and all the while the shaft became thinner.

As I panicked, I breathed deeper, and the deeper I breathed, the more of the burning dust I took in and I began to feel as if I were drowning - suffocating.

But I wouldn't be beaten - I couldn't be. So with the last of the breath I had within me, I tucked my arms tight against my body, lowered my head, arched my wings and just dropped like one of the rocks that soared past me. The fall was endless and just when I thought it was never going to stop, my heart suddenly leapt. There was a spot of orange light below me. I angled my body towards it. I don't know how long or how far I dropped, but I must have fallen hundreds of miles below the Earth's

surface. As I fell, the orange light didn't seem to grow larger though, and at first I couldn't work out why. Surely, if I were heading towards it, the hole would start to become bigger. But this hole wasn't growing in size; in fact, it looked as if it were getting smaller! The hole – my escape from the shaft – was filling in with the rock and earth which had overtaken me.

Then in that little chink of light, I saw the silhouette of a figure and it appeared as if it were looking up and waving frantically at me.

Potter? I wondered as I felt myself begin to lose consciousness. *Potter, help me!* I wanted to call out, but I couldn't, I had no breath left in my lungs. I squinted through the falling dust and rock one last time at the orange light with the waving figure.

Then, all of a sudden, that figure was grabbing at me, pulling me out of the collapsing shaft and taking me into their arms.

“Potter?” I whispered.

“Shhh,” the voice said, “It's me, Luke, I've got you. Welcome to The Hollows.”

Chapter Nine

“General outer appearance of the deceased...” the voice said. It was female and seemed to echo off stone. The voice said something else but the darkness took me again and there was nothing.

“The deceased appears to be mildly decomposed...” the female voice said again. “It has obviously been left out in the open for approximately forty-eight hours. Maybe less, but no longer.”

The voice was soft, but serious – professional. I swooned back from the darkness, my head feeling light although I could feel it resting against something hard and cold.

“Body is that of a female – approximate age early twenties...” the voice said and trailed off again as I slipped once more back into nothingness.

Surfacing again, I could feel fingers prodding me as if being examined by someone. The voice came again and I guessed that it was the owner of that soft, clinical voice who was performing some kind of inspection of me.

“The deceased has the first two index fingers intact on the left hand and the right has a thumb, forefinger and third index...” the female said.

“That’s impossible!” said another voice – a male voice.

“Shhh!” the female said.

Ignoring her, the male continued: “When we pulled her off that mountainside, she didn’t have any fingers! What you’re trying to tell me is, they’re growing back?”

“Photograph this,” the female said to another who was in the room.

Above the darkness, a sudden burst of white light popped. It startled me. I wanted to flinch but I couldn’t. I was paralysed. The female spoke again, and her voice came from above me, no longer sounding as if it were coming down a tunnel.

“The deceased is wearing black overalls, like combat clothing of some kind. On her feet she is wearing black boots. Around her neck she is wearing a chain and silver crucifix...”

“Here, let me have those,” the male voice said.

I felt my head being tugged at and my shoulders being lifted up off of whatever it was I was...

I’m lying down! I suddenly thought. They’ve laid me down! I tried to reach out and grab the hand that was removing the crucifix, but I couldn’t. Although my brain commanded my arms to move, they refused.

Have they tied me down? I didn't think so, but my arms felt heavy and unmoveable.

The female spoke again. "The head is fully covered with flesh and it is bald except for a few partial hair fragments. There is no visible left eye socket – this is also covered with flesh. The right eye appears to be partially formed and has omitted what appears to be blood and a milky-type fluid. Please photograph this and take a few samples for DNA analysis."

The male cut in and his voice was riddled with confusion. "That can't be possible! She didn't have any eyes an hour or so ago!"

"You must be mistaken," the female said. "She couldn't be growing her eyes back. Could she?"

"You tell me! You're the pathologist!" The male said.

PATHOLOGIST! I screamed inside my head. That one word sent a stream of vivid images through my brain. My father had been a pathologist. I saw myself as if from above, looking down at the scene. Lying on a mortuary table...

That's why I'm lying down. The surface is hard and cold because it's made of metal...and the female is a pathologist, recording every detail of the body on the slab before she starts her...that's why she was prodding me...she's carrying out an external examination...that's why they're photographing me so she has pictures of my condition before she starts...

the internal examination! “They think I’m dead! They’re gonna open me up because they think I’m dead!” I screamed inside.

The pathologist continued her external examination, but her voice had changed. There was a tremor to it. All I could do was lay and listen.

“The deceased has no nasal cavity or nose. The cause of this is unknown at this time. The mouth is only partially formed...”

“She’s growing a mouth now?” the male cut in.

“Shhh!” the female hissed. “If you can’t keep quiet, I’ll have to ask you to wait outside!”

“You can ask, lady, but I ain’t going anywhere,” the male spat. “I’m the lead police officer in this case and until I hear otherwise, I’m staying put. Look, I turned down a perfectly good steak ‘n fri...”

“The deceased has no lips and the jaw line is swollen,” the pathologist cut over him. “This is not the cause of death but may suggest that she was involved in some type of violent episode.”

“So what is the cause of death?” I heard the police officer ask.

“Well, I think the fact that she’s had her heart ripped out gives us a pretty good idea,” the pathologist said dryly.

“So who is she?” the male voiced asked.

“I’m Kiera Hudson!” I wanted to scream at them.

Chapter Ten

“So you’re Kiera Hudson? A voice asked.

I opened my eyes to see Coanda looking down at me. “Where am I?” I asked him, and I could still feel some of that rock dust in the back of my throat and between my teeth.

Handing me some water that came in a brown clay mug, Coanda said, “You’re in The Hollows.”

Sipping the water, which had a strange but sweet taste like candy floss, I looked about the small room that I now found myself in. It was lit by a series of small lamps that had been fastened to the walls. The room was in fact not a room at all, but more like a small cave that had been dug into the side of some giant red-coloured rock. There was a front door, and part of the room had been portioned off with a drab-looking curtain and from the bed that I was lying on, I couldn’t see if anything was hidden behind it.

Across from me was a small wooden table which was covered with odd-looking maps and plans. Beside this table was a chair and Coanda

lowered himself onto it. In the light of the lanterns, his face took on an almost florescent glow and his black, spiky hair appeared to shine like those models in the shampoo commercials. He was no longer stripped to the waist but wore a black combat-style jacket that was covered in a mass of pockets which bulged with whatever he had hidden inside them.

“Where are my friends?” I asked him. “Are they safe?”

“They’re safe, for now” he said matter-of-factly.

“What’s that supposed to mean?” I snapped, sitting up on the bed.

“Don’t get yourself excited,” Coanda said, waving at me to settle back down. They’re quite safe. They are getting ready for the journey ahead.”

“What journey?” I asked him. “How long have I been unconscious?”

“Not long, just a couple of hours,” Coanda informed me. “But long enough for me and my team to brief the others.”

“Team? Journey? Briefings?” I groaned. “You’re going to have to slow down.”

With a smile that bordered on satisfaction spreading across his face, Coanda looked at me as if marveling some rare find and said, “Ravenwood told me you were feisty, strong-willed, a go-getter, if you like.”

“What else did he tell you about me?” I asked, peering at him over the rim of the clay mug.

“That you were *the one*,” he said, his eyes growing wide. “The one that would bring peace to The Hollows and stop the annihilation of the human race.”

“As far as I can understand from the letter Ravenwood left me,” I started, “One race, either the Humans or the Vampyrus, have to be annihilated, as you describe it.”

“Ravenwood was right in what he told you,” Coanda said, and he looked at me with his big, cold blue eyes. “One of the species has to cease to exist, but they can die without the suffering that war brings. As soon as you decide which race goes, they just fade away, like shadows. There will be no pain, no suffering for them.”

Staring back at him, I said coolly, “I couldn’t care what happens because I’m not making any choice. I refuse to be the one who wipes out an entire race of people.”

Strumming his fingers against his thigh, Coanda looked at me thoughtfully and said, “I don’t think you understand, Kiera...”

“No, it’s you who doesn’t understand,” I said, placing the mug on the table with the maps. “I am not making any decision. I didn’t ask for this.”

“But Kiera, you have to,” he said. “That’s why you were chosen. A half-breed...half of each race...someone who can really see - feel - which species deserves to go on.”

“I know of two other half-breeds you could have chosen,” I snapped at him. “Why not let Kayla or Isidor make the decision?”

Looking at me as if I was failing to understand something, Coanda said, “Kiera, would you really want to pass such a burden to your young friends? Do you really think that either of them would want to...or be strong enough to make that choice?”

“What makes you think that I’m strong enough to choose?” I said, fighting the urge to scream at him.

“I don’t think anything, Kiera,” Coanda said calmly, “It’s the elders who have chosen you.”

“But why me?” I pushed.

Coanda shrugged at me and said, “You’ll be able to ask them soon enough.”

“How come?”

“That is the journey that we have to make,” Coanda started to explain.

“Before I go anywhere with you,” I said, swinging my legs over the edge of the bed and sitting up, “I want to know exactly who you are.”

“Isn’t Ravenwood’s word enough?” Coanda asked, standing up.

“Let’s just say I’ve got trust issues,” I said with a wry smile. “Now tell me, why was there a locker back at that facility with your name on it?”

“Is it still there?” Coanda grinned as if remembering happier times.

“I don’t suppose you came across my flight goggles, did you?”

“Flight goggles?” I asked bemused and wondered if he wasn’t just stalling me.

“Believe it or not, I used to be a Royal Air Force test pilot,” he said, sitting again on the chair. “Not wishing to brag, but I was pretty awesome. Women love a test pilot you know,” he said glancing up at me.

“Do they?” I said, cocking an eyebrow.

“Some do,” he half-smiled. “I think it was the uniform and all the danger.”

“Danger?” I asked him.

“Believe me, Kiera, I flew some of the most dangerous planes they secretly designed in that place,” he began to explain. “See, that facility was once owned by the Military of Defense. It was a secret test site for experimental planes they were working on, it was my team’s job to fly those machines that those crazy sons of bitches dreamt up. But being a secret Vampyrus, I had my own little secret, which gave me an advantage.”

“Wings?” I cut in.

“You’ve got it,” he smiled with a look of satisfaction. “I pushed those machines harder and faster than any other test pilot. I knew that if those planes broke up mid-flight, I could always just fly away.” And he made a swooping motion in the air with his hands. “Humans have this fascination with wanting to be able to fly; I was interested to see if they could ever design anything that could fly as fast as I could. I got a reputation of being a bit of a madman, a risk taker, but they always let me be the first to test the machines that they dreamt up. But then everything changed. They got rid of the planes and started doing other sorts of tests there. Tests that I wanted no part of.”

“What sort of tests?” I asked him.

“They were messing with DNA and trying to breed...”

“Half-breeds,” I finished for him.

“You got it, Kiera,” he said. “That’s where I first met Doctor Hunt and Doctor Ravenwood. It didn’t take them long to realise that the Vampyrus who had taken over the facility weren’t interested in finding a cure for the half-breeds, but a way of enhancing their abilities to become some deadly race they could help to overrun the Earth with. As soon as we discovered what was being planned, both Ravenwood and Hunt left and I went back down into The Hollows.”

“Didn’t you try and stop them?” I asked him. “Destroy the work that they’d been doing?”

“Not at first,” Coanda said, and he looked away as if ashamed. “But things started to change in The Hollows. There were rumours that Elias Munn was real, that he was behind the rise in crime in The Hollows, the murders, and steadily increasing lawlessness. Rumours started to spread that the humans were planning to come and ravish The Hollows, ruin it, and take whatever they could find; that our women and children would be taken back to the surface for their own perverted pleasures. But some of us knew this wasn’t true. Those of us who had lived amongst the humans knew that they didn’t even know of our existence. They were too busy killing each other to worry about a race of hairy winged freaks beneath them. But the lies were spread by Munn and his agents and those lies took root in the hearts of many Vampyrus. They started to hate the humans, even though most of them had never stepped foot above ground. But if you tell a lie often enough, it becomes the truth. So when Munn’s agents started to spread the word that the Vampyrus should fight back, invade above ground before the humans got below ground, there was no shortage of volunteers to go to war. Most of the murders were blamed on the humans. The story spread that human spies were sneaking below ground and killing Vampyrus. But I knew that it wasn’t true and there were plenty of others who felt the

same way I did. The fear was and still is that if the Vampyrus attacked the humans, then they would counter attack and the wars that were fought thousands of years ago by our two races would come of age again.”

“So what did you do?” I asked him, as I slowly learnt how Elias Munn had started his campaign against the humans.

“I went back above ground,” he said as if the answer was an obvious one. “I went and sought out Ravenwood and Hunt.”

“But why?”

“The last time I had seen them, they had been involved in trying to create a cure for the half-breeds that had been born out of the secret marriages between Vampyrus and their unsuspecting partners. I was hoping that their work had failed as I’d heard rumours that Munn and his agents wanted to use it to develop this super-breed as a weapon against the humans.

“I tracked them down to this vast manor house, where they had some sort of hospital wing hidden in the attic. There were children there - sick half-breed children. I begged them to stop what they were doing and it was then that Ravenwood and Hunt explained the true nature of their work.”

“And what was that?” I asked him, my heart sinking as he looked back at me.

“They were working on the cure just in case they ever needed to save you,” he said. “When Hunt and Ravenwood had discovered what the Vampyrus were working on at the facility, they sought an audience with the Elders in the Dust Palace. And it was here that they learnt of how only one could undo the work that Elias Munn had set in place. They told Ravenwood and Hunt of how a half-breed would come who would bring peace to The Hollows. After explaining the burden that this half-breed would carry, the Elders ordered Ravenwood and Hunt from the Dust Palace, sealing the door to their kingdom, stating that it wouldn’t be opened again until the half-breed came to them.

“Therefore, not knowing who this half-breed was or even if they had been born yet, every half-breed that was delivered sick, Hunt and Ravenwood tried to keep alive with the cure that they were so desperately working on. So while Hunt and Ravenwood played doctor and nurse in their makeshift hospital hidden in the attic, I returned to The Hollows and formed the resistance.”

“The resistance?” I asked him.

“The Vampyrus who hadn’t been deceived by Elias Munn’s lies and believed that the Elders had let them down. I felt the same about them,” Coanda said. “They sat back, entombed in their Dust Palace and let Elias Munn build an army. They stayed away and it was as if they had given up.

But I couldn't do that. I couldn't just sit back and watch this Munn lead two worlds into war. So I gathered a small number of like-minded individuals. We were small in number at first. Then more men and women came, and we created small groups. We had spies that could provide us with first-hand intelligence; we built escape networks, like the one you crawled through to get here, Kiera. We dug holes and trenches that led us behind enemy lines so we could spy on what Munn was planning. More male and female Vampyrus came and we became known as the resistance. They came from all walks of life – there are teachers, artists, and I think there are even some priests who came to fight. We have Vampyrus above ground too – those who got themselves into positions of power to react when the attack above ground comes. We have a series of coordinated attacks planned to try and defeat Munn's armies. But you can change all that, Kiera – you can make a choice."

Looking across the small cave-like room, I said, "I can't make that choice, Coanda. I can't be responsible for wiping an entire race from the Earth and from history. I will not do it."

"Then war it is, Kiera Hudson," he said matter-of-factly.

"There has to be another way," I whispered.

Ignoring me, Coanda stood as if readying himself, and looking down at me he said, "We leave tonight for the Dust Palace, the Elders are

expecting you. But first we have to go to the Light House.”

“The Light House?” I asked him. “Why would you need a light house? We must be hundreds of miles below ground.”

“Believe me, Kiera, below ground gets very dark,” he smiled, his eyes shining bright. “The Light House is at the very core of The Hollows. We’ve received word from our spies in the Dolce region that Munn’s agents have captured the Light House.”

“What’s so special about this light house?” I asked confused.

“It is like a beacon,” Coanda explained. “It shines its light throughout The Hollows. It turns at the same speed as Earth and its light creates our nights and our days, just like the Earth spins around your Sun. As the Light House turns, the regions of The Hollows that are caught in its light celebrate day and those caught in its shadow celebrate the night.”

“So why has Munn’s armies taken it over?” I asked, somewhat in awe of what Coanda had just told me.

“They are going to use it to coordinate their attack above ground,” Coanda said, with a grim look. “Through its waves of light, they are going to give the orders to attack. They will use echo waves...”

“Is that similar to echolocation?” I asked him, trying to get my head around what he was telling me.

“Similar,” he said. “One of the greatest senses we Vampyrus have is that of hearing. It doesn’t work like human hearing – we hear in vibrations and waves, like echoes. Munn is therefore going to send messages out in the pulses of light that come from the Light House. In that way, he can have complete control over his armies that are spread around the world, just waiting to attack. But there is one who has the heightened sense of hearing – hearing like no other Vampyrus.”

Knowing immediately who he was talking about, I said, “Kayla?”

“That’s right,” Coanda said. “We want to take her to the Light House and listen to the waves that are being sent out. We can’t get close enough ourselves as the very vibrations of our movements will be detected and the alarm will be raised that we are close. But with Kayla, we could be some miles away and we are hoping she will be able to listen into the messages, those instructions and orders that are being beamed out to Munn’s armies.”

“Will it be dangerous for her?” I asked him, hoping for a straight answer.

“We will be with her,” Coanda assured me. “Once we know their final plans, we will make our way to the Dust Palace and if you still refuse to make your choice and we do end up at war, then at least we will know their plan of attack and have an early advantage against Munn.”

“But I can’t ask her to put herself in danger,” I told him firmly.

“Kayla has been through too much already.”

“Then make your *choice*, Kiera Hudson,” he snapped at me. “And this can end – there will no more war!”

“And what if I chose the Vampyrus to die?” I barked back. “That means you die!”

Shrugging his shoulders, he looked straight into my eyes and said, “Either way, I’m dead. You don’t think this is a war we can win, do you?”

Looking away, I said, “There has to be another way.”

Sighing, Coanda went to the wooden door which led from the cave, and looking back at me he said, “There are some fresh clothes for you behind that curtain. Get yourself changed; we’re heading for the Light House.

Standing, I went over to the curtain, but before I’d had the chance to pull it back, Coanda said, “Kiera, keep the reason we are going there to yourself. Don’t tell anyone.”

“Not even Kayla?” I asked, looking back over my shoulder at him.

“Not even Kayla,” he said sternly. “One of your friends is a spy and that’s the truth whether you believe it or not.”

“But you can’t suspect Kayla,” I gasped.

“No, I don’t,” Coanda said. “But if this spy finds out why we are going to the Light House, they might not want her to make it and you will undoubtedly be putting her life in great danger.” Then, before I could say anything back, he swung open the wooden door and was gone, closing it behind him.

Chapter Eleven

Behind the curtain, I found a large bowl of water, a rough-looking sponge and a neat pile of clothes that had been placed on a chair along with a towel.

Kicking off my boots and removing my clothes, I dipped the sponge into the water and washed the grime and dirt from me. The fall through the drop shaft had left me covered in black soot and dust. The water was lukewarm, but it was better than nothing. The sponge wasn't like a sponge at all really – not like the ones I had in my bathroom back home in Havensfield. This was harder, coarse, and was more like some kind of wild plant. It had a mint smell that was at least refreshing.

I toweled myself dry and put on the clothes that had been left for me. I looked down at myself in the black overalls, which looked like I was just about to take part in some kind of guerrilla warfare. In a way, I guess that was what I was about to do. There was a belt and I tied it around my waist. Rummaging through my old coat pockets, I found my iPod and

Murphy's crucifix. I put the iPod into one of the many pockets that covered my combat-style overalls and hung the crucifix around my neck.

For luck! I thought to myself.

Stepping from the other side of the curtain and back into the small cave, my head rocked back as a bright light went off in my mind like a firecracker. In that brief explosion of light, I saw myself laid down somewhere, dressed exactly as I was now. But there was a voice and it was as if it was coming from way off.

"I will now carry out an examination of the teeth, starting with the upper left side," the voice said. *"Eight present. Seven present. Six missing. Five missing. Four present...Wait a minute! The deceased has fangs!"*

Then the voice was gone and so was the bright light.

Leaning forward, I reached for the door to the cave to steady myself, as fragments of a dream scattered themselves across the front of my mind. But deep inside, a cold chill ran through me. In that dream, I knew that I was dead.

Shaking my head to clear those thoughts and fears, I pushed open the door and any thought of dying faded in an instance as I got my first proper look at The Hollows.

I don't even know how to start describing it. I sucked in a breath, dazzled by the sheer radiance of the world that the doorway from the cave

had opened into. The ground was covered in a thick carpet of what I can only describe as a lime green moss. It was soft and spongy, like walking on a deep-pilled carpet. There were trees, thousands of them. They looked as if they had been planted in the ground upside down. Their trunks were the colour of burnt embers and they stretched upwards like frail arms. Vines hung from them, and were coloured red, yellow, orange, and so many more. It was like being in New England during the autumn, only the colours were way more intense, almost blinding. I looked up and there seemed to be no end. It was like staring up into the reaches of the highest cathedral. Giant granite rocks spiraled heavenward. They almost seemed to entwine with each other, forming pillars that supported the world I now found myself in.

The sky, if that's what it was called, seemed to twinkle with life, with the brightest stars on the darkest of nights. I stared up at them and realised that they were not stars at all but the pointed tips of stalagmites that hung down from above. There were millions of them. My description is inadequate, but there are no words I know of which could describe the sheer wonder and beauty of The Hollows. But there was a feeling too; the whole place felt as if it was charged with electricity in some way. It tingled – it was alive – if that makes sense.

I could remember Potter telling me as we had lain in each other's arms in the caves beneath the Fountain of Souls, how beautiful The

Hollows were; but 'beautiful' seemed like such an insufficient word. I doubted there was a word that could describe The Hollows.

Why would anyone want to leave this place, I wondered. Why would the Vampyrus want to poke their head above ground for the briefest of seconds when they lived in such wonder? But more importantly, how could I ever make the decision to destroy it?

In the distance there was a large open area of that lime green moss and it was covered for as far as I could see with tall structures made of red rock. There were rows upon rows of them, and caves had been carved in each one. They were the strangest looking apartment blocks I had ever seen. Male and female Vampyrus soared between them, and they looked preoccupied and even sad as if they were all deeply troubled. How could such looks of sadness be possible? But as I watched them, I guessed that these were members of the resistance that Coanda had gathered and they were preparing to defend themselves against Munn. So, however beautiful their world was, a great shadow had been cast over it for them.

Some of them swooped up into the sky and spread their wings. They flew in formation as if practicing and practicing for the hour they would have to take to the skies and defend their lives, their homes, their Hollows. I watched breathless as they soared up amongst the stalagmites, then come sweeping down again. Their wings reflected the light from the stalagmites'

tips and they shimmered. They looked like angels – no gods – and that’s what they were. And in my heart, I suddenly realised Elias Munn’s desire to be above ground. These creatures were too beautiful, glorious, and wonderful to be hidden.

But weren’t humans just as beautiful in their own way? Weren’t they angels too? Sure, they couldn’t fly, but they were just as magical in their own right. Didn’t humans have an overwhelming desire to strive onwards, to better themselves? Weren’t they also capable of creating great works of beauty, art, music, writing, and so much more? Didn’t humans have a wonderful capacity for kindness, to love and find great joy in the world around them? Couldn’t the Earth look beautiful too? There was good and bad in every race, and with tears spilling onto my cheeks, I was dreading the hour when I was going to be asked to make a choice between the two of them.

Chapter Twelve

“Why are you crying?” someone asked, and I looked round to see Luke coming towards me. We were dressed identically, in black overalls and boots. His dark hair was swept back from his brow, and his green eyes shone as brightly as the moss beneath my feet. Thankfully, he had shaved his tatty beard off and he looked so much better.

Wiping the tears from my face with the backs of my hands, I said, “It’s just that this place is so beautiful, why would anyone want to bring war here?”

“I guess not everyone sees it with your eyes, Kiera,” he said, gently wrapping his arm about my shoulder and pulling me close.

“They see it differently then?” I asked him.

“They just don’t see its beauty anymore,” he said softly.

“That’s so sad,” I whispered.

“Do the humans still see their world as beautiful?” he asked me.

“Do they not take their world for granted? Aren’t they destroying it day by

day, hour by hour? Maybe that is both the Vampyrus' and the humans' failure."

"What is?" I asked, looking at him.

"That both species are flawed," he said. "We both destroy ourselves."

"I can't accept that," I told him. "There is good in people – both human and Vampyrus."

"Is there any good in this Elias Munn?" he asked me. "Aren't we on the brink of war because of that man?"

"If there is good in him, I will see it," I said.

"And how will you see it?" Luke asked his eyes wide as if not quite believing what I was saying.

"Because he could've killed me already and he hasn't," I told him.

"So why hasn't he?"

"Because he's in love with me," I said thoughtfully.

"In love with you?" Luke asked, sounding shocked. "How can he be in love with you? He doesn't even know you."

"I think he does," I said, staring back at him.

"Who is he then?" Luke said, sounding almost angry. "Tell me who Elias Munn is and I'll rip his heart out right now!"

"You can't take his heart, Luke," I said.

“Why not?” and I could sense the frustration in his voice.

“Because if he does love me, then there is good in him,” I said. “No one can truly love another if their heart is solely full of hate.”

“Don’t tell me you are seriously going to try and reason with this guy?” Luke snapped.

“What choice do I have?” I asked, looking into his eyes. “There is no way I will choose between the Vampyrus and the humans. If this Elias Munn has love in his heart, then he can be saved and there will be no need for war, no need for him to -”

“Kiera!” Luke barked. “You can’t be serious? Firstly, you have to love this guy too, that’s how love works – true love.”

“And what’s the second reason?” I pushed him.

Breaking my stare and looking away, Luke said softly, “The second reason is that I love you, Kiera.”

“Please, Luke...” I started.

Then turning to look at me again, Luke said, “Why can’t you say it, Kiera?”

“Say what?”

“That you love me,” he replied, his eyes losing their glow.

I looked away.

“Is there someone else?” he pushed.

I couldn't answer him.

"My God, you're saving yourself for this Elias Munn, aren't you?"

Luke gasped. "You think that you can stop all of this and lift the burden you carry by giving yourself to him. But you have to love him back, Kiera and if you do, you'll give him the power to make the decision for you!" Then taking my hand, he looked into my eyes and said, "Kiera, let's run from this place together. We'll hide, have a life together. Let them have their war – it doesn't have to affect us. We could be happy together. You might not love me right now, but I know you have feelings for me, I've felt them. How can you possibly know your true feelings? You've been through so much. But away from here, from all of this, your feelings might become clearer. Please, Kiera, let's run away together and get as far from here as possible."

Slipping my hands from his, I looked into his sad eyes and said quietly, "Luke, I don't run away from anyone or anything, it's not my style."

Stepping away from me, Luke gave me a half smile, but I could see fear beneath it. "You've already fallen in love with Elias Munn, haven't you?"

"Don't be ridiculous," I sighed. "I don't even know him." Then turning away, I saw Potter leaning against one of those upturned trees and he was staring at me.

I went towards him, but on seeing me approach, he flicked the cigarette away that had been dangling between his fingers and walked away.

“Potter!” I called after him, but he didn’t stop, he didn’t even look back.

I turned back towards Luke, but he had gone too.

Chapter Thirteen

“Kiera!” someone shouted, and I looked over my shoulder to see Kayla running towards me. She was with Isidor and she had a look of wonder and excitement splashed across her pretty face.

“Isn’t this place amazing?” she cried. “Have you ever seen anything like it?”

“No,” I said shaking my head and smiling at her.

“Isidor has been telling me all about where he grew up,” she almost seemed to squeal with pleasure. “You’re going to take us there, aren’t you Isidor?”

“Sure,” he said, then he looked at me. I could see in his eyes that he didn’t look as happy about being back in The Hollows as Kayla did at discovering them.

“What’s wrong?” I asked him.

“Nothing,” he replied with a shake of his head. “It’s just weird being back, that’s all.”

“Aww, take no notice of him, Kiera,” Kayla beamed. “he just doesn’t want to share this amazing place with anyone.”

“It’s not that,” Isidor told her.

“What is it then, grumpy?” Kayla teased.

Looking about him, Isidor said thoughtfully, “The place just feels different than how I remembered it. It feels tense, like there is something bad coming.”

I didn’t know if Isidor could sense something different as this was my first time in The Hollows, but I knew he was right about something bad coming. Before he’d had the chance to explain further, we were joined by Coanda.

“Ready?” he asked us, but was staring at me.

“Sure,” I said.

“For what?” Kayla asked me.

Glancing at Coanda and remembering what he had told me, I said, “We are going to make our way to the Dust Palace. I’m going to meet with these Elders and see if we can’t figure a way out of this mess.”

“The Elders will never see you,” Isidor warned. “The Dust Place is sacred ground. No one is welcome there unless they are invited.

“She’s been invited alright,” Coanda said dryly. “I wouldn’t be surprised if they didn’t roll out the red carpet for her.”

“What’s so special about you?” Kayla asked me.

“I’ll -” I started, but Coanda cut over me.

“Explain on the way,” Coanda finished. “We don’t have time to lose. My spies inform me that Elias Munn has already set off for the Dust Palace.”

“He definitely won’t be invited in,” Isidor said.

“If he goes with an army, he won’t need to be invited in,” Coanda said, “He’ll just break down the door. Now let’s get moving.”

We left the resistance camp behind and Coanda briefed them to wait for his signal. Heading out through the upturned trees, the soft, covered ground soon gave way to a harder, rocky road that spiraled away into the distance. The road cut across a vast and desolate-looking land. It was red and arid, totally unlike the camp we had left behind. It reminded me of pictures I had seen on the internet that had been beamed back to Earth by exploration vehicles sent to Mars.

It was just turning dusk, and I pictured the Light House turning away from us, but its light still burnt fiercely on the horizon ahead, spinning its golden rays between the tips of two ragged mountains.

“What are those mountains called?” Kayla asked Isidor as we walked together.

“They’re called The Weeping Peaks,” he said.

“The Weeping Peaks,” Kayla mused. “They sound nice.”

“Do they?” Isidor said, and I detected a note of dread in his voice. Then he sped up just slightly, just far enough not to have to engage in any further conversation with Kayla. Perhaps he wanted to be on his own.

The sight of the landscape was awe inspiring and even though I had seen and experienced so much over the last several months, the realisation that I was now racing across The Hollows filled my heart with inspiration. I tried to absorb every detail, every shard of light that glinted through those mountains and every rock that glowed like embers on the surface of this incredible world. I looked back at the way we had come, and in the distance I could see the tops of those upturned trees glistening. Some distance away, I could see Potter and Luke. I couldn’t tell if they were talking, but they walked apart.

“The Hollows is beautiful, don’t you think?” Kayla asked, her voice soft.

“Mmm?” I said thoughtfully as I stopped watching Luke and Potter and faced Kayla again.

“The Hollows are amazing, aren’t they?” Kayla said again.

“Incredible,” I replied, as I watched the jagged scenery slip into the shadows cast by the revolving Light House.

“So why are the Elders expecting you?”

Over the next couple of hours as we walked towards the Weeping Peaks, I told Kayla everything I had read in the letter Ravenwood had left for me. I explained to her all about the history of Elias Munn and how he despised the human race because he had been rejected by one of them. Kayla thought Munn's story was tragic and sad. I told her about the importance of the half-breeds and one in particular, me. As I explained to her the decision I had been born to make, and how whichever one I chose to survive, we would take on that species form permanently, Kayla took my hand and I saw tears spill from her eyes and slide silently down her face.

"Why are you crying?" I asked her gently.

"I don't want to change, Kiera," she said. "I want to stay as I am."

"But I didn't think you liked being a half-breed – you know, with how you used to be bullied and everything," I said.

"That was back then," she sniffed. "That seems like it happened to a different person. I've just gotten used to the idea of who I really am – I don't want to go through anymore changes."

"So if you had to choose," I asked her, "What would you do?"

Then slowing, she looked me straight in the eye and squeezed my hands with hers. "Kiera, I'd rather die than make that choice." She walked away, and I watched the dying light shine off her flaming hair.

No pressure then, I thought to myself and walked on, lost to my thoughts.

We walked until it grew dark, my head down. Then without even noticing at first, we had drawn close to the foot of the Weeping Peaks.

“Why have we stopped?” I asked Coanda.

“This is as far as we go by road,” he said, as both Potter and Luke sauntered towards us. They reminded me of two naughty school boys who were sulking because they’d had their toys confiscated.

Coanda waited for them to catch up then said, “Let’s get going. We have a mountain to climb!”

Potter glanced at me then up at the mountain. He then made his way towards it. I looked up at the first Weeping Peak which stretched so far into the sky, that more than half of it seemed lost to darkness.

“Welcome to the Weeping Peaks,” Luke said, and brushed past me.

“We’ve really got to climb that?” Kayla asked breathlessly.

“Indeed we have, so the sooner we get going the better,” Coanda grinned.

“Can’t we just fly?” Kayla sighed.

“No. We can’t risk being tracked by echolocation,” he snapped, then started to climb.

Kayla and I went after him, followed by Isidor, who still seemed quiet. The gradient of the mountain wasn't steep like I had expected it to be, but was more like climbing a hill. Coanda stormed ahead.

As we climbed, the last of the light faded as night drew in all around us. With it came a chilly wind that whipped up a blanket of rusty-coloured dust. We climbed for what seemed like hours, and my stomach began to rumble with hunger. And it was then that I realized that since being in The Hollows, I hadn't craved human flesh. I wondered if that was the same for Kayla and Isidor.

After a few more hours of walking, Coanda stopped ahead of us. He had come to rest on a jagged piece of rock that jutted out from the side of the mountain. Rubbing his huge hands together, he looked at us as we gathered around him and said, "We'll take some rest here for a few hours and start again at dawn."

I watched Potter and Luke walk away from each other like two fighters preparing to duel at first light. Both slumped against some nearby rocks. Luke lay on his side, and using his hands as makeshift pillows, he closed his eyes. Potter took a cigarette from his pocket, lit it, and then looked at me as he blew smoke up into the night. Isidor and Kayla lay on the ground nearby and snuggled close to one another next to a fire that Coanda had started. Wanting to be alone, I walked some distance away. I

lowered myself onto the ledge of a nearby rock. Stretching out on the ground, I winced at the pain in my calf muscles. The walk had been a long one and my eyelids felt heavy with tiredness.

Taking my iPod from my pocket, I thumbed through the tracks. Putting in the earphones, I rolled onto my side and fell asleep listening to *Run* by Leona Lewis.

Chapter Fourteen

“I’ve had my heart ripped out!” I wanted to scream at her. But just like my arms had refused to move, so did my mouth. I could feel the words working their way up the back of my throat, but they had become entangled around my tonsils and just couldn’t free themselves.

Then I felt a finger force its way into my mouth. It wiggled up and down then left and right. It prodded my tongue and it tasted of rubber.

“I can taste rubber!” I screamed inside. “Please don’t cut me open! I can taste rubber! You can’t open me up if I can taste rubber!”

The finger ran itself over my teeth and I realised it was covered with a surgical glove.

Of course she’d be wearing gloves! She’s doing a medical examination. They can be messy especially when it comes to cutting...

The pathologist continued her examination of me and said, “Teeth present. I will start with the upper left side. Eight present. Seven present. Six missing. Five missing. Four present...wait a minute...!”

I didn't know if it was the sound of her soft voice counting backwards, but I could feel my head floating again, falling backwards... falling backwards into darkness. The nothingness took me again.

I woke. Not in the very sense of the word. I woke up inside. My mind was awake again, but I wasn't sure if my body had woken. But this time my awakening was different. Everything was red. The world was covered in a red film. There were shadows and these were red too. The shadows took on forms and shapes. They were people. One lent over me. She was female. Her hair was pulled back into a ponytail and her face looked flushed scarlet. Her hands were covered in rubber gloves and they looked pink. At first I thought they were covered in blood...

My blood?

Then, I realised it was just the red film of blood covering my eyeball that was making them that colour. I managed to swivel my eye in its socket and the red got darker almost black. Then three thoughts hit me at once.

I can move my eye! And the red is blood. I can move my eye and it's covered with blood! And it's cold...why is it so cold?

Swivelling my one good eye, I tried to look down the length of my body. I couldn't see my toes, but I could see my chest and that was enough.

I'm naked! They've removed my clothes! Why have they taken off my clothes?

The pathologist spoke again. “Moving down the body, all internal organs seem to be intact apart from the heart.” She prodded my abdomen with her pink glove and continued. “There are no signs of bruising, puncture wounds, or lacerations, apart from those above her left breast.”

Through the red haze, I watched her turn to another shape in the corner. “Can you take a sample for blood group analysis?” she asked the shape.

The shape moved towards me, needle in hand.

“Please no needles. I hate needles!” I shouted inside.

I looked at the shape that came towards me. I couldn’t tell if I had been stuck with a needle, all I could feel was coldness. I looked at the male working on me and guessed he wasn’t the owner of the voice I had heard earlier. Hadn’t that voice said he was a police officer?

Police officers don’t take blood samples. I knew that because I used to be one. My thoughts were broken by the sight of something bright and gleaming passing in front of my field of vision. It looked sharp – pointed.

What was that?

Then the pathologist said, “I’m now going to start the internal examination. Is everyone in the room happy?”

“HAPPY?” I screamed inside. “YEAH I’M OVER THE FREAKING MOON! YOU’RE ABOUT TO OPEN ME UP AND...”

“Wait a minute!” The police officer said. “I think I saw her eye move!”

“Impossible!” The pathologist said. “I’ve checked for all vital signs of life and...”

“I think you’d better check again, sweetheart,” the police officer’s voice came again, this time from the right-hand side of me.

“Yeah that’s right! LOOK! LOOK! My eye’s moving!” I yelled inside and moved my eye frantically from side to side and as I did the enormous shape of the police officer appeared like a giant red shadow beside me.

“Oh Sweet Jeezus!” The police officer hollered. “She’s alive I’m telling ya!”

“Yes! Yes!” I’m alive I wanted scream but...

Chapter Fifteen

...a hand fell over my mouth and I woke with a start. It was pitch-black and I was cold. With my heart thumping in my chest, I stared through the darkness and could see Potter leaning over me, his hand clasped over my mouth.

“Shhh!” he whispered in my ear. “I want to show you something.”

Gently, he removed his hand from over my mouth.

“What in the hell...” I started.

Then placing his forefinger against his lips, he stared hard at me and said, “Shhh!”

Taking me by the hand, he pulled me to my feet. I placed my iPod into my pocket and went with him.

I followed him in silence until we were far enough away from the others to not be overheard. I then asked, “Where are you taking me?”

“I want to show you something,” he whispered back at me. “What?”

“You’ll see when we get there,” he said, leaping from the side of the mountain and dragging me with him. We plummeted into the night sky,

opening our wings and soaring into the night.

“We shouldn’t be flying,” I said as I glided next to him. “Coanda said that the Vampyrus could pick us up using their echo -”

“The guy’s a Muppet,” Potter grinned back at me. “It’s not far, and if we keep low we should be okay.”

“But...”

Then Potter was banking away so I followed. We skimmed just inches over the red, hard-panned landscape. Dust blew up in our wake, and my hair tossed out behind me. In the distance I could see an orange glow, like a crack in the night. As we drew closer, the crack grew bigger and it no longer looked like a mere split but an opening in the centre of the Earth. We raced towards it and the air grew warmer.

Potter began to slow, and I spread my wings to keep alongside him. Arching his wings back, Potter hovered in the air, then taking hold of my hand, we gently floated towards the ground.

Leading me over to the giant fracture in the rocky ground, I watched as bright orange lumps of what looked like molten lava shot up into the night like a series of fireworks. Taking me towards the very edge, the air blew hot and arid. Dust swirled around us and it was as if we had become separated from the rest of the world. I looked at him, and his rugged looks glowed red and orange from the light that seeped from the abyss beneath us.

“Where are we?” I breathed, feeling breathless at the sight before me.

“A promise is a promise,” he smiled back at me, and I loved that smile. It wasn’t his cocky smile, the one I’d so often wanted to wipe from his face, but it was the nice smile – the one that I had so often wanted to kiss, the one that made my heart race.

“What are you talking about?” I asked him.

“Remember in the caves beneath that fountain I told you about that canyon?” he asked me. “Talles Varineris. I made you a promise that one day I would take you to see it. Well, this is it.”

I looked down into the abyss, and it was like staring down into an erupting volcano. Red, yellow, and orange lava bubbled, hissed, and spat way below me.

Taking a deep breath, Potter said, “The canyon runs for miles, it’s a fracture that runs across the centre of the Earth. Like I told you before, some Vampyrus have undertaken expeditions to try and find its start and its end, but none ever returned. Some say that they fell in or went mad and got lost in the millions of gorges and tunnels that twist and turn through the Talles Varineris.”

Unable to take my eyes off the sight before me, I said, “I remember you telling me that if you stand right out on the very edge and stare down

into the canyon, it's like looking into the Earth's soul. I didn't know what you meant back then, but I do now." I continued to watch the lava shift and move below as it took on the most incredible shapes of beauty. It was like my mind was playing tricks on me. The flames looked like horses galloping through hot orange waves, dolphins diving up into the air then melting into a spray of boiling lava. It shifted and rolled, and it was as if I could see all of Earth's creations bathing in the great, writhing sea of lava below. It was like the whole of creation had started down there in its depths and with each plume of lava that shot up into the air, it carried the spirit of that creature up into The Hollows, soaring higher through the layers of the earth and above ground.

"Enough already," Potter suddenly said, taking my arm and pulling me back from the edge of the canyon. "I told you that many have gone mad, mesmerized by what they see down there."

"But..." I started looking back over my shoulder at it, just wanting one last glimpse of its beauty.

"That's a sacred place down there," Potter said, turning my face in his strong hands. "It's to be respected, not understood."

Looking at him, I said, "You told me you came here with your mother and father."

“Yes,” he said, looking away. “I don’t have many good memories of them, especially not my father. But this place seemed to ease his temper somehow.”

“You have a temper, Potter,” I said, now turning his face back to look at mine.

“What’s got into you?” he suddenly asked. “You’ve barely said two words to me since I came back from rescuing Luke.”

“Im scared of you,” I told him, as the sky lit up with jets of molten lava.

“Scared of me?” he scoffed. “Why would you be scared of me?”

“Why did you kill Eloisa?” I asked him straight out. The time for misunderstandings and untruths had passed. I wanted him to be honest with me.

“To get back at Jack Seth for playing his part in the death of Murphy,” he growled at me.

“I don’t believe you!” I yelled. “Stop lying to me!”

“She was a child killer, Kiera!” he shouted back. “Isn’t that enough of a reason?”

“It isn’t the reason why you killed her and I know it!” I raged at him, clenching my fists by my sides.

“What part of being a child killer do you not understand!” he roared, and the veins on his neck stood out like wires running beneath a carpet.

“For hundreds of years, Eloisa and her kind have snatched children from their beds, strangled them, disemboweled them, fed on them, then discarded them like pieces of litter. For fuck’s sake, Kiera, stop being so naïve. She was nothing but child-murdering scum and she deserved to die.”

“Not like that,” I said, staring at him. “Not to have her heart ripped out and chucked on the floor at the feet of Seth. No one deserves to die like that.”

“That’s how Murphy died!” Potter almost seemed to scream at me. “Jesus, Kiera, you just don’t get it, do you!”

“Get what?” I hollered at him.

“You’ve never known what it’s like to have your father punch you in the side of the head and tell you that you’re a worthless piece of shit and that you would never amount to anything. You’ve never known what it’s like to see your father come home and beat up on your mum, to have to listen to her screams coming from the bedroom while you lay in bed feeling helpless. Murphy was more like a father to me than my own ever was.”

I watched Potter throw his hands over his ears, as if he could still hear his mother’s screams. In the glow of the light from the canyon, I saw tears glistening on his cheeks. Then, staring at me, he said, “That’s why I

killed her, because she murdered children, she took their innocence – she took their lives! And however much she claimed to have made amends for her past, you can never redeem yourself for doing something like that. So, I’m sorry if I scared you, Kiera, but however scared you felt seeing that, it couldn’t come close to the fear she put into the hearts of the children she murdered.”

I looked at him as he took his hands away from over his ears, his mother’s screams now fading away. “I’m sorry,” I said, going towards him.

Holding out his hand as if to stop me from coming closer, Potter said, “Please, Kiera, just leave me alone.”

Ignoring him, I took his hand in mine and lowered it. “I’m sorry,” I whispered again.

“What do you care anyhow?” he asked, unable to look at me. “I’m just Potter, the hired muscle, the gopher, the joker in the pack.”

“What’s that supposed to mean?” I asked.

“I’ve seen you and Luke having your private little chats since he came back,” he said. “I saw you walking hand in hand up that mountain.”

“We weren’t holding hands,” I said.

“Whatever,” he huffed, pulling away from me. “I won’t stand in your way now that Luke’s back. I know you’re in love with him and who could blame you? I mean that guy is the only one I know who can get the

shit kicked out of him and still look good enough to appear in an Armani commercial! And then there's me with the crooked nose from too many fights..."

"Will you just shut up before *I* break your freaking nose?" I hollered at him. "I don't love Luke. It's you I'm in love with, Potter!"

"Look, sweet cheeks, you don't have to let me down lightly, I can take it," he continued as if he hadn't heard what I just said.

"Potter, will you shut that mouth of yours for once and listen?" I screamed at him. "I love you!"

Then looking at me as if I had just punched him straight in his jaw, he said, "What did you just say?"

"I said, I love you. Even though you can be the most infuriating asshole I've ever met, you smoke like a goddamn chimney, you're arrogant, foul-mouthed, and -"

"Okay, so they are all my good points," he cut in, "What don't you like about me?"

"You scare me," I whispered as he came close.

"I thought I explained that," he said.

"No, it's more than that," I said, looking into his eyes. "There's a darkness about you, but I'm drawn to it, even though I get the feeling that I'm going to get hurt. I can't help myself."

Then, pulling me against him, he said, “I won’t ever hurt you, tiger.”

Before I had a chance to say anything else, he had covered my lips with his and we were sinking onto the ground as the night sky shone orange and red from the lava that created its beautiful shapes below.

Chapter Sixteen

The warm air rising from the canyon kept our naked bodies warm. I fumbled for my iPod in the pocket of my overalls which lay strewn across the ground where Potter had thrown them.

Handing it to him, I said, “Find us a song.”

He took it from me and without saying anything, he scrolled down the list of songs. Then, placing it on the ground next to us, *Wonderwall* by Oasis started to play.

I lay on my back and looked up into the night sky. Plumes of lava sprayed up into the night like a fireworks display. Watching them create their magical shapes, I noticed what appeared to be two irregular-shaped moons shining brightly back at me.

Potter caught me staring at them and said, “They’re pretty cool, aren’t they?”

“Are they moons?” I asked him.

With his head tilted back, he spoke quietly as if he were in the presence of some great power. “We call them our moons, but in fact, they

are two captured asteroids.”

“Asteroids?” I asked confused. “Don’t they belong in space?”

“It’s what we call them. I guess they are just two old rocks that float around up there and no one really knows why. Asteroids sound better than just boring old rocks!” Then pointing up into the sky with one long finger, he added, “We call that one Phobos and the other Deimos.”

“They’re incredible,” I agreed. “They are just as beautiful as the moon.”

Potter remained silent as he continued to stare up at the two bright asteroids, or rocks, that bathed us in their milky light.

I thought about above ground and realised I had never looked at it in the same way I looked at The Hollows with its two moons. Perhaps I had taken my own home for granted. Perhaps it was as beautiful as The Hollows, but I had just never truly appreciated it.

“Above ground is beautiful too,” I sighed thoughtfully, as the music continued to play.

Potter rolled onto his side, and brushing my hair from my face, he traced his fingers down the length of my neck, over my breasts, and laid his hand gently across the flat of my stomach. I looked at him and smiled, then stared again up at Phobos and Deimos again.

“Where do we go from here?” I whispered.

“Ask Coanda, he’s the man with the plan,” Potter said.

“I didn’t mean that,” I smiled back at him.

“What did you mean, sweet cheeks?” he muttered as he lightly kissed my neck, making my skin tingle.

Taking his hand from my stomach, my heart beginning to race, I asked, “Are you Elias Munn?”

“What?” Potter stammered, his eyes widening. “This is some kind of joke, right?”

“No joke,” I said, staring back at him.

“Why would you even think that?” he asked, sounding more confused than angry.

“Elias Munn killed his lover by ripping her heart out,” I told him.

“So?” Potter said, staring back at me, his eyes so black I could see the lava that was shooting up into the sky reflecting back in them.

“That’s how you killed Eloisa,” I whispered, breaking his stare.

“And that’s how Phillips killed Murphy,” Potter reminded me.

“Perhaps he’s this Elias Munn. Ever thought about that?”

“No,” I whispered.

Pulling me close to him, he held me in his arms and said, “Kiera, I don’t know where or how you got this crazy idea into your head, but I’m not *him*. I promise.”

Then, looking up into his face, I whispered, "I'm scared, Potter."

"Why? I'll keep you safe," he tried to assure me.

"I don't need looking after," I told him softly. "I'm scared of this decision I've got to make. If I choose the Vampyrus to live, then the humans die and I can't do that. But if I choose them over the Vampyrus, then you die."

"Listen to me, Kiera, Ravenwood was just a crazy old man," he said. "Wait until we get to the Elders, they will tell you what the truth is."

"But it's not just Ravenwood's letter that spoke of this choice I have to make," I said. "There was someone else too."

"Who?"

"Coanda," I told him.

"Coanda is full of shit!" Potter groaned. "The guy thinks he's a freaking legend. Yesterday was the first time I met the guy, but I've heard the stories about him. He thinks he's the Evel Knievel of the skies!"

"But he's built this resistance..." I started.

"Resistance my arse!" Potter spat. "That's not a resistance - that's a bunch of fucking groupies! He's probably screwed half of them! The guy is an arrogant, womanizing, Biggles-wannabe. Don't listen to him."

"But..." I started, then stopped.

"But what?" Potter pushed.

“It’s nothing,” I said, looking away.

“Tell me, Kiera,” Potter insisted. “What has he said? Or more importantly, what has he got planned?”

“He told me not to tell anyone,” I told him.

“Where is he leading us?” Potter asked, his voice full of concern.

“Kiera, listen to me, that guy has pulled so many crazy stunts in his time, he could have his own series of ‘Jackass’. He could be leading us into a whole heap of shit!”

Turning to look at him, I said, “I promised him I wouldn’t say anything, for Kayla’s sake.”

“Kayla!” Potter barked. “What has she got to do with this?”

“I can’t...he told me not to trust anyone,” I whispered.

“But it’s okay to trust him?” Potter hissed. “That’s rich coming from the guy who is so far up his own fucking arse he thinks he’s one of the Wright Brothers! He’s more like one of the Marx Brothers! The guy’s a clown!”

I looked at Potter and he stared back.

“If you love me, Kiera, you will trust me,” he pushed.

“He’s taking us to the Light House,” I whispered, fearing that someone other than us might hear.

“The *Light House!*” Potter almost choked.

“Shhh!” I hissed, and glanced back over my shoulder.

“Are you taking the piss?” he asked in disbelief.

“No, that’s where Coanda is leading us,” I said.

“Kiera, this isn’t like any ordinary lighthouse,” he cried. “It’s not tall and white, with a pretty-looking light on top and it isn’t set on the shores of some beautiful coastline.”

“What is this Light House like, then?” I snapped back.

“Your worst fucking nightmare, that’s what it’s like!” he hissed.

“I don’t know so much, I’ve had some pretty intense nightmares lately,” I told him.

“The *Light House* is a needle of rock that towers out of the ground.”

“That doesn’t sound so bad,” I told him.

“When I say that it towers out of the ground,” Potter said, “It juts out of the Earth’s core! Coanda must be smoking crack if he thinks we can go to the Light House.”

“Why?”

“We call that splinter of rock the Light House, because it reflects the light from the centre of the Earth, which, if you didn’t know already, is a hideous, raging, inferno. The tower is unstable and floats on a whirlpool of burning, molten lava, and as it turns, it showers its light across The Hollows, creating day and night.”

“Coanda explained that part to me,” I told him.

“That was big of him,” Potter scowled. “So, where does Kayla fit into all of this?”

“Coanda knows that she has heightened hearing,” I explained, “So he wants to get as close enough to the Light House as possible.”

“Why? What the fuck is he hoping to hear?”

“That’s where Elias Munn is going to coordinate his above ground attack from,” I told him. “He’s going to send his orders by echo-waves via the light radiated from the Light House.”

“So what’s he planning to do, even if Kayla does hear some gem of intelligence?” Potter asked, sounding unconvinced.

“It will give him and the resistance a chance to outwit Elias Munn,” I said.

“That is the craziest idea I’ve heard,” Potter groaned. “It’s not even an idea, its suicide and I’m not going to be a part of it and neither are you.”

“Please,” I said, “We’ve got to go along with it. Otherwise, Coanda will know that I’ve told you.”

“But it could be a trap,” Potter warned me. “Where did he get this information from?”

“One of the resistance who was spying on the Vampyrus,” I tried to assure him.

“What about Kayla? We could be putting her in danger,” he said, staring at me with his dead, black eyes.

“That’s why we mustn’t tell anyone what Coanda has planned,” I warned him. “Please don’t say anything.”

Potter looked at the jets of lava that continued to shoot up into the night sky. Then, turning slowly to look at me he said, “Okay, I’ll go along with it for now, but I’m warning you, Kiera, the first sign that we are heading into a trap and I’m walking - with or without you - and I’ll be taking Kayla with me.”

Chapter Seventeen

We arrived back at the camp just before the dawn – or before the Light House completed its cycle and started to spread its light over the Weeping Peaks.

Landing on the side of the mountain, Potter kissed me gently on the mouth, then we split, so if any of the others were awake, they wouldn't know we had left the camp together. I went back to my spot on the ledge that jutted from the side of the mountain, and closing my eyes, I drifted into a dreamless sleep.

Just before dawn, I was gently shaken awake. Opening my eyes, I could see it was Luke who had woken me.

“It's time we made a move, sleepyhead,” he smiled down at me and I knew that he had chilled a little from the crossed words we had shared back at the resistance camp.

Looking up into his face, I knew that I couldn't put it off for much longer; I had to tell him about Potter and me. But how was I going to tell him that I had fallen in love with his best friend? I knew that it would hurt

him. After all, he had saved my life on so many occasions, dived into a burning church, taken a beating in the caves below the mountain for me, and while he'd been imprisoned, I'd fallen in love with his best friend. However I told him, it was going to hurt.

Handing me another of those clay-type mugs, he asked, "Are you okay, Kiera?"

"I'm fine," I lied, taking a sip from the mug. The contents were warm and bitter, and I screwed up my face.

Laughing, Luke said, "You'll get used to the taste in time."

"What is it?" I asked, staring down into the yellow liquid that sloshed around the inside of the mug.

"Sloff," he said, as if that should mean something to me. Then, seeing the look of confusion on my face, Luke added, "It's like tea or coffee, I guess. Anyway, drink up. Coanda is keen to get moving."

Luke went to walk away, but before he'd gone too far, I called out to him. "Luke!"

Turning, he looked at me and said, "What's up?"

Making sure that I couldn't be overheard, I asked, "What do you make of Coanda?"

"A bit of a flyboy, but he's okay, I guess." Then he said, "Why do you ask?"

“No reason,” I smiled back at him. “Give me five and I’ll catch up.”

Holding me in his gaze for just a moment longer, he finally turned and sauntered away. I took another sip of the Sloff, and turning up my nose, I ditched the rest of it over the side of the mountain.

I joined the others as Isidor was kicking ash over what was left of the burning embers. Potter stood on the other side of the camp and seemed protectively close to Kayla. He looked at me, but his face looked emotionless. He held my gaze as he stuck a cigarette in the corner of his mouth and lit it. I half-smiled back at him, then looked away.

Once Isidor had kicked out the fire, Coanda clapped his giant hands together and said, “Okay, let’s get moving.” He then turned and started back up the mountain.

“I don’t want to be a pain in the arse, but where are we actually heading?” Potter called out after him.

I shot Potter a look, but he was staring at Coanda.

“We’re heading for the Dust Palace,” Coanda smiled back at him. “I thought I’d explained that, Potter.”

“I might be wrong, as I’ve always been pretty shit at geography, but I thought the Dust Palace was more to the East. We seem to be heading more inland,” Potter said.

“I know a different route,” Coanda smiled again. “A safer route.”

“Safer?” Potter mused as he chewed the end of his cigarette. “Are you expecting trouble then?”

“No trouble,” Coanda said, and although he smiled, I could tell it was forced. Potter had rattled him, but then again didn’t Potter rattle everyone?

“Just checking,” Potter smiled back at Coanda. “Lead on.”

Turning his back on us, Coanda marched off up the mountain.

I looked at Potter again and he winked at me, then headed off after Coanda, Kayla by his side. Isidor slung his crossbow over his back and set off too. He looked sullen as if he had the weight of the world on his shoulders. His head was hung low and he looked tired as if he hadn’t slept too well. I didn’t want to walk with Luke, not just yet, not until I knew how I was going to tell him about Potter and me, so I caught up with Isidor.

“How are you doing?” I asked him as we made our way up a path that spiralled around the outside of the Weeping Peaks.

“Fine,” he said.

“Are you sure?” I pushed gently.

“Sure,” he said back without looking at me.

“How are your cravings?” I asked.

“For human flesh, you mean?”

“Yes.”

“Gone, but then again I always knew they would be once I came back home,” he said.

“Are you glad to be home?” I asked him.

“I guess.”

“So what’s wrong?”

Turning on me, his little chin beard bristling in the breeze, he said, “How many ways have I got to tell ya, Kiera, there’s nothing wrong.” Then he was gone, striding ahead on his own.

“I’m sorry, Isidor,” I called out after him, but he was gone, lost to his own personal thoughts, and I couldn’t help but feel anxious about what was worrying him.

“Leave the boy be,” someone said, and I looked back to see that Luke had caught up with me.

“I guess,” I said, looking at Isidor, desperately not wanting to make eye contact with Luke.

“He’s obviously got something on his mind,” Luke said.

“You’ve noticed it too?”

“Whatever it is, he’ll tell you when he’s ready.”

“I’m sure you’re right,” I sighed, stealing a quick glance at him.

Luke was looking at me and said, “Fancy walking together?”

“Sure,” I smiled at him. I didn’t feel I could say no, even though I wanted to.

“I’m sorry about yesterday,” he said.

“Sorry for what?” I asked, although I knew exactly what he meant.

“Coming on heavy like that,” he said. “It’s just I can’t help my feelings for you, Kiera.”

Glancing sideways at him, I said, “You’ve got nothing to be sorry for, Luke.”

“Have you thought any more about what I said?” he asked.

“Can’t we talk about this another time?” I asked, desperate to avoid the issue.

“Sure,” he said, looking a little embarrassed. “What do you want to talk about?”

“How did you get out of the zoo?” I asked him.

He paused for a moment as if a little surprised by my question. “I escaped.”

“Yeah, I figured that out for myself, but how?” I pushed, interested to hear all about it.

“They had me held for months in this little cell beneath the zoo,” he started. “At first I didn’t even know that it was a zoo, not until I came above

ground. They fed me the red stuff and I'm ashamed that I ate it – but I knew that if I were to ever rescue you and the others, I needed to be strong.”

“I thought they had killed you,” I told him. “After the beating you took in the caves, I feared that perhaps you were dead.”

“I was already in pretty bad shape when those vampires dragged me from that lake,” he said. “They were going to kill me, but Phillips said he wanted me alive to be used as a bargaining tool in case you refused to eat the red stuff. I guess that’s why they never killed me in the zoo. Phillips and Sparky had figured out that we meant something to each other, that we were friends, and they knew they could use me.”

“So how did you get out?” I asked him again, keen to see if his escape had been as grueling as mine.

“In the end it was easier than I thought it would be,” he said. “They just opened up the doors.”

“How come?” I was surprised to hear this.

“They just suddenly deserted the zoo and left,” Luke told me. “But I knew why they had fled that zoo, something had scared them. I’d overheard two of the Lycanthrope talking about how some virus was loose in the zoo and some of the half-breeds had died. At first I panicked as I thought they were talking about you, Kayla, and Isidor. But within a matter of days, they had all left. I stayed in my cell for a few days more, and when on the fourth

day those werewolves hadn't brought anymore of that meat to me, I realised I hadn't heard a sound from anyone in days. I knew that they had vacated the zoo. So, suspecting that no one was going to stop me or raise the alarm should they hear me, I tore down the cell door. It was only when I made it from the basement that I realised where I had been kept.

“My suspicions had been right, the zoo had been deserted. I searched every empty cage and cell for you and the others, but couldn't find you anywhere. Not knowing if Phillips and the others would return at any moment, I fled the zoo. But within moments of me escaping, a storm had started. Not too sure exactly where I was or what direction I should head in, and not wanting to fly for fear of being recaptured, I walked half-naked in the freezing snow. For hours I staggered blind through the blizzard until I became totally disorientated. When I thought I couldn't go on any further, I saw a shape in the distance coming towards me. Not knowing if I should draw attention to myself in the hope that I might be rescued, I hid behind an outcrop of nearby rocks. And like an apparition appearing out of the snow, I saw that it was Potter. Barely able to stand, I stumbled out from my hiding place and into his path.

“Potter took off his coat, and wrapping it about my shoulders, he led me to a nearby overhang set into the side of a hill. He lit a fire, skinned

some rabbit, and we waited for the storm to ease. He said at first he hadn't recognised me through my long beard and hair. I owe him my life."

"Why do you think they abandoned you in the zoo like that?" I asked him. "Why not kill you before they fled, or take you with them for future bargaining opportunities?"

"At first I wondered if, in their haste to leave, they just forgot about me sitting down there in the basement," Luke said. "Then I feared that perhaps you were dead, and that I no longer served any further purpose, so Phillips was happy to just leave me to starve to death. After all, who was going to rescue me?"

"Potter," I said.

"Exactly," Luke said, "And that was Phillips' mistake – he underestimated the power of true friendship. Potter and I are like brothers and I know he would never do anything to hurt me."

To hear Luke boast of his friendship with Potter made my heart ache. How was I ever going to tell him that his best friend had fallen in love with me and I had fallen in love with him?

Chapter Eighteen

We walked in silence. Not because Luke wanted to, but because I had nothing to say. I guess that's not exactly true; I had lots to say – stuff that I needed to tell Luke, but I just didn't know how. I didn't even know where to start. As we walked onwards up the mountain, in my mind I played out the hundreds of ways I could tell him how I felt about Potter and how he felt about me. But the only way was truthfully – Luke deserved that at least. When did I tell him, though? Because once something like that was out, there was no way of taking it back. How much longer did I put it off? I knew in my heart that time was running out.

Throwing Luke a sideways glance, I watched him as he walked silently beside me. His head was down, and he looked deep in thought. He knew that things weren't quite right between us – they weren't like they had been before. Would he ever be able to forgive me? But did that matter? What mattered more was if he would be able to forgive his best friend, Potter. He had already lost Murphy, and although he hadn't spoken about that, I guessed he couldn't face it. So much had happened while Luke had

been locked away in the zoo. I could see the hurt in his eyes every time I looked at him, and I was just going to add to that hurt and deep down, I wondered if I could do it to him.

But to not tell him about Potter and me, however painful it might be, was unfair on him, so forming the words in my head, I gently touched him on the arm and said, "Luke, there is something I need to tell you."

Raising his head, he looked sideways at me and said, "Oh, okay. What is it?"

Before the words I had planned had reached my lips, Kayla came running up to us and said, "We're being followed!"

Staring at her, I asked, "Who's following us?"

"Dunno," she said, her eyes wide, almost scared looking.

"How can you be so sure?" Luke asked her.

"I can hear them," she said, tapping her right earlobe with the tip of her finger.

"What's going on?" Potter asked, coming back to join us.

"Kayla says we're being followed," I told him.

Looking at Kayla, then at Luke, Potter said, "C'mon, Luke let's go back and see if we can't find them."

"No!" someone said, and we all turned to see Coanda looking at us.

"I don't take orders from you," Potter snapped back at him.

“Listen to me,” Coanda said, coming forward, Isidor just behind him, crossbow raised. “We keep moving forward and we don’t split up. We will be safer together.”

“But if we’re being tracked...” Luke started.

“Then we lose them,” Coanda said firmly.

“How?” Kayla asked.

“We go into the willows,” Coanda said.

“Bad idea,” Isidor said, and Coanda glanced back at him as if unaware that he was there.

“Why?” I asked, reading the concern, no, fear in Isidor’s dark eyes. “What are the willows?”

“Haven’t you asked yourself why these mountains are called the Weeping Peaks?” Isidor replied, his voice now no louder than a whisper.

“For crying out loud -” Potter started.

But this time, Isidor cut over him. “I couldn’t have said it better myself, Potter. If we go amongst the willow trees, you will be crying out loud.”

“Just a load of old hocus-pocus nonsense,” Potter sneered. “You’ve listened to too many bedtime stories, kid.”

Stepping towards Isidor, I said, “Take no notice of him. Tell me what happens amongst the willow trees.”

“Some say they are haunted,” Isidor started. “But not by ghosts.”

“Then by what?” I pushed.

“All that has ever made you sad,” Isidor said, staring into my eyes.

“The willows are meant to evoke all those feelings of unhappiness you have ever felt.”

Then coming forward to stand at my elbow, Potter lit a cigarette and said, “See, what did I tell you? Just a bunch of old crap!”

“We should go!” Kayla said, tugging at my sleeve. “Whoever is following us is close.”

Turning and leaving the path, Coanda said over his shoulder, “If it’s just a bunch of hocus-pocus, Potter, then you won’t mind following us into the willows.” Then he was gone, striding forward towards a dark shadow of trees that loomed in the distance.

Pitching out his cigarette, Potter looked at me and said, “Watch your back.” And just like Coanda, he headed for the willows.

Looking back over her shoulder, Kayla said, “Whoever it is, their heartbeat has quickened. They’re running!”

“In which direction?” Luke asked her.

“Ours!” Kayla breathed, setting off towards the trees.

With crossbow still raised, Isidor sniffed the air and said as if to himself, “I can smell them.” Then, he was walking away after his sister,

and Luke and I followed.

The trees leaned from the side of the mountain, forming a thick, wooded area that, from a distance, looked like a giant beast with many writhing tentacles. The drooping branches of the thousands of willow trees swung to and fro like leafy curtains. As we approached them, I couldn't help but be reminded of the crop of weeping willows that surrounded the children's graveyard on the grounds of Hallowed Manor, and to think of it made my flesh shiver with goose bumps.

Reaching the edge of the woods, I heard something, almost like a whisper on the breeze. At first I thought it was just the wind playing tricks with my hearing, but as I followed the others amongst the willows, I was sure I could hear the sound of weeping. The woods were dark, and very little light from the Light House penetrated through the overhanging branches of the trees. We walked in silence, Coanda always ahead of us, peeling back the branches with his muscular arms. The sound of weeping continued, and as we moved further amongst the willows, the sound of crying grew louder. It sounded like a nation of people crying out as if all were suffering the most terrible nightmare. The weeping was filled with sorrow and anguish; I just wanted to cover my ears with my hands to block it out.

I looked to my left and then quickly to my right only to find that I was on my own.

Where are the others? I wondered. *How had I been separated from them?*

“Potter?” I called out, but it was as if my voice had been drowned out – smothered – by the continual sound of crying.

Then, just ahead amongst the trees, I saw someone. “Hey!” I called after them. “Luke, is that you?”

The figure disappeared amongst the willows and I lost sight of it. Speeding up, I ran amongst the trees in search of the figure. With my heart pounding and the sound of sobbing all around me, I pushed the swinging branches aside like rows and rows of curtains. Then, just ahead of me, I saw the figure again. But this time, it stood motionless with its back to me.

“Hey you!” I yelled, desperate not to be alone in this place.

Hearing me call out, the figure turned and looked straight at me. With my legs almost buckling beneath me, I threw my hands to my face and drew a shallow breath.

Hooking his finger into the shape of a question mark, he beckoned me forward, then turning, he disappeared amongst the willows again.

“Dad!” I called out. “Dad wait for me!”

Chapter Nineteen

My first thought should have been, “*What is my dad doing here? He’s dead, isn’t he?*” but to see him again filled my heart with joy, so much so that I thought it was going to explode.

I raced between the trees to where he had been standing. “Dad!” I called after him. “Don’t go, wait for me!” Reaching the spot where I had last seen him, I clawed back the branches of the tree to find him sitting against the trunk reading a book. Hearing the rustle of the branches, he looked up at me and smiled.

“Dad?” I breathed.

“Hey, Kiera,” he said softly, placing the book open on the grass beside him. I looked down at the cover and could see that he had been reading his favorite book, *Hamlet* by William Shakespeare.

Going to him, I dropped to my knees and threw my arms around his neck. And all at once, the smell of him and the feel of his touch filled me with sadness and longing. All those feelings of loss I had felt since his death washed over me like a tidal wave. The times I had needed him, missed him,

wished that he had been there for me, took hold of my heart and it felt like agony.

“Dad,” I began to sob, and my own weeping joined the chorus of unhappiness that haunted this place. The joy I’d felt at seeing him had now vanished. “Dad, I miss you so much,” I told him. Then he was gone, like vapor slipping from between my arms.

“Don’t leave me again!” I cried. “I need you!”

Standing, I spun around on the spot, desperate to find him again. And there he was, sitting against the tree, his favorite book in his hand. Seeing me, he placed the book open on the grass just like he had done before. Again, my heart leaped with joy.

“Dad?” I whispered.

“Hey, Kiera,” he smiled up at me.

Falling to my knees again, I hugged him tight. The smell of *Old Spice* wafted beneath my nose, and my head swam with images of me on his lap as a child. Those feelings of being safe, secure, and loved came flooding back. I tried to hold onto them as tightly as I held him in my arms.

“Dad,” I whispered against his cheek and it felt soft, freshly shaved. “I need your help. I have to make a decision – a choice – and I can’t do it. I don’t want to do it, Dad.”

He remained silent in my arms, but I didn't want to let go just in case he disappeared again. With my tears dampening his cheek, I said, "Please tell me what to do."

Silence.

"Tell me how I should choose," I begged him.

Silence.

"Please tell me I don't have to make the choice," I sobbed. "If there is a way, let this decision I have to make pass me by. Take it from me."

Silence.

"Tell me who this Elias Munn is," I whispered through my tears. "At least tell me that."

Then he was gone again, like smoke lingering around my fingers. But this time, there was something different. Although my dad had gone, this time he had left his book behind. Picking up the copy of *Hamlet* and looking down at the page he had been reading, I noticed a smudge of blood across the page. It was like he had highlighted it for some reason. Wiping away my tears, I looked at the words beneath the crimson smear and it read, '*One may smile and smile, and be a villain!*' I laid the book back on the grass beneath the willow tree, just in case he came back for it.

Then, from a short distance away, I heard the sound of sobbing, but it wasn't the deep weeping sound that meandered on the breeze, it was

something more. Standing, I pulled back the branches of the tree. There was another figure, this one smaller, slender in the distance and I knew at once who it was. I looked back once more at the book, but it had gone. There wasn't even a bent blade of grass to show that my dad had ever sat there against the tree.

Wiping the tears from my cheeks with the backs of my hands, I headed through the trees towards Kayla. I didn't rush; I took my time, not wanting to intrude on her personal grief. Like the woods on the side of the Weeping Peak had brought my personal feelings of grief to the surface, they had also stirred something deep within Kayla.

As I approached her, I could see that she was standing before her own weeping willow, her face in her hands as she wept. Kayla's shoulders shuddered as she rocked back and forth, the sound of her sobbing blending with those that surrounded us. My first instinct was to go to her, hug her in my arms and to comfort her as much as I now needed to be comforted. But I held back, just on the other side of the branches that draped around her. Unseen by her, I peered through the leaves and watched her.

"I love you," she whispered, looking up as if talking to someone standing by the trunk of the tree.

Turning my head so I could hear her over the sound of the weeping willows, I wondered who it was from her past that had visited her in these

woods. Was it her father, Doctor Hunt? Or perhaps her mother, who had been murdered by Sparky?

“I know what I have to do,” Kayla murmured. “I know the decision that Kiera has to make.”

Hearing Kayla mention my name, I snapped my head front and stared at her through the branches.

“I know that I have to be strong until the end,” she continued as she looked ahead as if someone only she could see were standing before her.

From the snippets of her conversation I could hear over the sound of the continuous sobbing, I guessed it was her father she had found in the woods, just like I had found mine. I imagined that he was telling her that she had to be strong for me – after all, if the legend was to be believed, both Kayla and Isidor had been sent to help me.

Then I heard something, another voice, but it was lost amongst the rustling branches of the willows. Kayla continued to stare ahead at the trunk of the tree, tears spilling down her cheeks as her red hair billowed about her shoulders.

“I love you,” she said again and buried her face in her hands. I couldn’t bear to see her suffering any longer, so pulling back the branches, I revealed myself to her. Snapping her head around, she glanced at me, then, quickly back at the tree. I went towards her, my arms open; and with

thoughts of my own father in my head, tears began to roll from the corners of my eyes.

“Kayla, it’s okay,” I whispered as I folded my arms around her. But she never hugged me back, she felt rigid in my arms like a waxwork dummy. Then, looking over her shoulder at the tree, I could see a set of footprints in the grass where someone had been standing. Unlike my father’s ghost, Kayla’s had left a trail of footprints that disappeared back into the woods and out of sight.

“We should go,” she said against my chest, as I continued to stare down at the tracks which had been left behind. Why hadn’t I seen them? Because whoever Kayla had been talking to had been hidden from my view behind the trunk of the tree. She hadn’t been looking at the tree at all – Kayla had been talking to someone who had been hiding behind it.

“Who were you talking to?” I whispered.

She made no reply. Then, pulling herself free of my grasp, she turned and headed back into the woods. I looked down at the footprints again and could see by the size that they belonged to a male. But there was something else; with my heart turning cold in my chest, I crouched down and picked up the discarded cigarette butt that had been left by the base of the tree.

Chapter Twenty

“Kayla!” I called after her, but she had gone. Not wanting to lose track of her in the woods, I flicked the cigarette butt away and raced after her.

Tearing aside the branches that blocked my path, I ran in the direction she had gone. At first I feared that I had lost her, then ahead I caught sight of her.

“Kayla!” I yelled. “Wait for me!”

She didn’t stop, or even slow, so I raced after her. Reaching out, I took hold of her arm, spinning her around. “Kayla, are you all right?” I asked her.

“I guess,” she said, looking at me, and I could see the tracks of tears running the length of her face.

“Why did you run away from me?” I asked her.

“Run away from you?” she said, looking confused.

“Back there,” I said pointing back over my shoulder. “You were crying and I hugged you.”

“Hugged me?” she asked, staring blankly at me. “You never hugged me.”

“Yes, I did,” I insisted.

“Kiera, we’ve been looking for you for ages,” Kayla explained.

“You went missing just after we entered the woods.”

“But I was with you over there just a few moments ago,” I breathed.

“Impossible,” someone said, and I glanced back to see Luke and the others coming towards me.

“I know what I saw,” I said. “You were by one of those weeping willows and you were crying.”

“Not me,” Kayla said and she did look genuinely puzzled.

“She’s been with me the whole time,” Luke added. “We’ve been looking for you.”

“Kiera,” Isidor said, coming close. “I told you these woods can play with your mind, your sanity.” And he gently squeezed my shoulder.

“What else did you see, Kiera?” Luke asked, and his voice was soft and caring.

“My father,” I said, now feeling utterly confused.

“But your father is dead,” Luke whispered and touched my hand.

“It’s these woods,” Isidor insisted. “I told you we should never have come in here. I knew something like this would happen.”

“Okay, Nostradamus,” Potter growled, pushing Isidor aside. “Let’s just get out of here.”

“I agree,” Luke said, taking me by the arm.

Pulling away from him, I snapped at them all, “I know what I saw!” Then turning, I stormed off through the weeping willows.

The others followed, and it was as if a dark blanket had fallen over all of us. It was more than just the oppressive atmosphere of the woods. There was a darkness seeping between us as a group – a group that had once been tight now seemed to be splitting apart, being unwound at the edges like a frayed rug. But why was this happening and who was yanking on the threads that were tearing us all apart?

Had I really seen Kayla? Had I really seen my father? Isidor had said that the woods messed with your head, that they were haunted by past feelings of sorrow that we had buried deep within us. But why hadn’t the others been affected? I knew all of them were haunted by feelings of loss for loved ones. They had all been hurt. But why, then, had I seen Kayla? If she had just been a ghost, why had she been beneath that weeping willow? Kayla had never caused me any sorrow.

With my head feeling as if it had been wrung through a mangle, I saw the edge of the woods and hurried towards it, just wanting to be free of

those weeping willows. Stepping back onto the side of the mountain, I could see that the light from the Light House had faded. The stalagmites which hung above me sparkled, and from where I stood, they did look like a sea of stars. How long had we been inside the woods? It was as if I had lost all sense of time. But how long did it take the Light House to turn? Did it rotate on a twenty-four hour cycle like the sun? I didn't know, and part of me didn't care. I just wanted to get to this Light House, get Kayla to hear whatever it was that Coanda hoped she might hear, and then...then what? Make our way to the Dust Palace and...decision time.

Pushing that thought from my mind, I stood and waited for the others to catch up. I watched them clear the edge of the woods and come towards me. They walked together and part of me felt left out, almost excluded from the group.

"It will be night soon," Coanda said as he strode towards me. Pointing ahead, he said, "We'll make camp just on the other side of that ridge."

Looking at Kayla, who was standing close to Potter, or was it the other way around? Was Potter standing close to Kayla? "What about this person who has been following us?" I asked.

"They've gone now," Kayla told me.

"How can you be so sure?" I asked her.

“Because I can’t hear them,” she half-smiled at me.

“Okay?” Coanda said, eyeing me.

“I’m fine,” I told him, setting off towards the ridge where we were to make camp for the night.

The rest of the group hung back, as if sensing that I wanted – needed – to be alone. I scrambled over the ridge of rock and found myself in a circular clearing. The ground was rocky and uneven in places. The area was shielded by trees and I was relieved to not see one of those weeping willows, even though as the wind blew by, I was sure I could still hear them sobbing.

Walking to the outermost edge, I leant against a large rock and watched the others climb into the clearing. Potter glanced across at me and winked. Leaving the others, he came towards me.

“How you doing, tiger?” he whispered, popping a cigarette in the corner of his mouth.

“Just leave me alone,” I told him.

“If you say you saw your dad in those woods, then I believe you,” he said hunkering down beside me.

“And what about Kayla?” I hissed.

Shrugging his huge shoulders, he blew smoke from the corner of his mouth and said, “Did you really see her, Kiera?”

“I saw her!” I snapped and stared into his eyes.

Staring back into mine, Potter said, “Okay, I believe you.”

“My dad was a ghost, I can accept that,” I told him. “But Kayla wasn’t. She was really there.”

“Okay,” he said. “I don’t claim to understand why, but I believe you.”

“Why?” I pushed.

Looking back over his shoulder at the others and then back at me he whispered, “Because I saw one or two of my own demons hiding out in those woods.”

“Who?” I breathed.

“You wouldn’t know him,” Potter said.

“Who?” I insisted.

“A Lycanthrope,” he told me, not meeting my gaze as if he felt ashamed in some way. “His name was Drake, and he paid the price for crimes he didn’t commit.”

“Why didn’t you say this back in the woods?” I hissed. “Why did you let everyone think I was going mad?”

“Because I’m starting to believe that this Elias Munn wants you and everyone else to believe you’re going mad. He wants us to question your judgment, Kiera – to stop people from having faith in you.”

“And what about you?” I asked him. “Do you have faith in me, Potter?”

“Does a bear shit in the woods?” he smiled and winked at me. Then, without saying another word, he stood, dropped his smouldering cigarette butt, ground it out with the heel of his boot, and walked away. I sat and looked at that cigarette butt and recalled the one I had seen by the weeping willow. I continued to look at it while the others set up camp and the sky turned black.

Taking my iPod, I switched it on. Rolling onto my side and closing my eyes, I lay and listened to Will Young sing *Leave Right Now*, and I wished that I could.

Chapter Twenty-One

“She can’t be!” The pathologist murmured as she hovered over me, scalpel only inches from my good eye.

“I’m alive in here!” I screamed inside my head. Got to get that scalpel away from me! Got to get that...

Then, without thought, more by instinct, I thrust out my hand and took hold of the pathologist’s wrist. I curled the three fingers on my right hand with such force that the pathologist screamed, fearing her wrist bone would disintegrate.

“Get that thing away from me!” I yelled, but the words didn’t sound anything like that. They came out sounding slushy, like water lapping against the side of a bath. My tongue rolled against the inside of my mouth and spittle sprayed from the small, circular opening where my lips had once been.

“Slet sat sing sway rom smeee!” I screamed again, jerking the pathologist’s arm to the right and sending the scalpel flying across the lab. The guy with the needle ducked, then slipped backwards and crashed into a

silver trolley that toppled over and sent surgical equipment clattering across the room.

The police officer backed away and began fumbling for his radio which was attached to his shirt. Groaning, the pathologist fell away, holding her wrist to her chest. I swung my legs over the edge of the mortuary slab and stood naked before them. My legs began to buckle in the middle and I staggered forward, leaning against the tiled wall of the mortuary to keep my balance.

“Slothes!” I screeched at them, holding out the two fingers that dangled from my left hand. “Slothes!”

“What?” the Pathologist mumbled, her face as white as her medical coat.

“Slothes!” I said again, through the hole in my face.

“She wants her clothes,” the police officer said, stepping away from the wall on the opposite side of the mortuary.

I looked at him with my one bloodshot eye and nodded in agreement. “Slothes,” I said again, holding out what was left of my hands. “Slothes spleese.”

“Give the girl her clothes,” the officer ordered to the lab assistant.

I watched as the assistant gathered my clothes from a nearby workbench. Everything appeared to be in infrared. The assistant came

towards me like a child nearing a dog that had a history of biting. When he was within a few feet of me, the lab assistant chucked the clothes in a ball at my feet.

Bending, I picked up the black overalls and threaded one of my legs into them. Lurching from side to side, I looked at the lab assistant and shouted, "Selp smee!"

The assistant looked at me, trying to decipher what it was that I wanted.

"Help her put her clothes on," the officer said as he tried to remove his radio from his shirt hoping he hadn't drawn my attention to what he was planning to do.

Coming forward, the assistant bent down and pulled the legs of the overalls up to my waist. I leant against him for support and the assistant shuddered under my icy touch and...

Chapter Twenty-Two

...I was woken by the sound of screaming. Sitting bolt upright, I could already see that Potter was on his feet and staring into the trees that surrounded the camp. Luke jumped up, followed by Coanda, but where were Isidor and Kayla? And who had been screaming?

Tucking my iPod away, I raced into the centre of the camp. The fire that had been made was now nothing more than a pile of smouldering ash. It was still night and those stalagmites continued twinkle above us.

“Who was screaming?” I asked the others, but before any of them had a chance to answer, Isidor came staggering from amongst the trees and into the camp. His hands were held out before him and something black dripped from them. He made a gasping sound in the back of his throat, as if he were having difficulty in breathing. He looked down at his hands, his mouth open.

“Isidor?” I yelled as I raced towards him. “What’s happened?”

As if in answer to my question, he held his hands up and I could see they were covered in blood. “Isidor, have you hurt yourself?” I asked,

feeling my own panic start to rise inside of me.

Staring at me from between his bright red fingers, he shook his head and mumbled, “Kayla.”

“Kayla!” I snapped at him, fighting the urge to shake some sense into him. “Where’s Kayla? What has happened to her?”

Then, turning slowly, he pointed one blood-soaked finger back towards the trees and I watched as it dripped with red stuff. Realising I wouldn’t get any sense from him, I brushed him aside and ran towards the trees. Screwing up my eyes, I stared into the slices of blackness between the trees. I could see where they had been broken down and bent aside where Isidor had made his way towards them. Following the tracks he had left behind, I raced amongst the trees.

“Kayla!” I hollered. “Kayla where are you?”

I could hear the others come floundering through the trees behind me, and I cursed them under my breath as I feared that they could well be destroying any tracks that might have been left behind. But I didn’t have time to give them a lecture in crime scene preservation right now, so I pushed on. Then just ahead, I could see something that made my heart stop. My fears of there being a crime scene were correct as I spied Kayla lying dead on the ground just feet from me. I stood rooted to the spot and looked down at her. Kayla lay on her back, her arms splayed out on either side of

her. Her eyes were open and blank-looking. Her hands were curled into fists and her head looked misshapen and covered in blood. Her thick, red hair lay in bloody stripes across her face where it had stuck to the blood. The urge was to run to her and cradle her in my arms, but I had to bury my feelings deep inside me. If I ever had to keep control, it was now. I wouldn't do Kayla any justice if I raced forward and destroyed any clues that might have been left. I would catch whomever had done this to her and rip their fucking heart out. So fighting back my own tears, I looked over my shoulder at Luke, Potter, and Coanda who raced towards me.

“Stop!” I ordered, showing them the flat of my hand. “Don't come any closer.”

“What's going on here?” Coanda barked. Then, peering over my shoulder and looking down at Kayla's corpse, he whispered, “Oh for fuck's sake!” But he didn't say it as if he was upset by the death of my friend, he sounded annoyed that it was going to hamper with what he had planned at the Light House.

Luke and Potter joined us and seeing Kayla spread dead before them, Luke turned away and Potter just froze, his eyes fixed firmly on the sight before him.

“Who did this?” I heard Luke whisper. “She was just a child.”

“That’s what I want to find out,” I whispered back, fighting the urge to cry.

Potter made a move towards her body. Taking him by the arm, I looked up into his face and said, “She’s dead, Potter. If you want to help her, stand back and just let me...just let me see. Okay?”

Swallowing hard, he looked at me and nodded.

Turning, I hunkered down and taking a deep breath, I ran my fingers over the surface of the ground around Kayla’s body. Screwing up my eyes so I could penetrate the darkness, I searched the area. Moving forward inch by inch, I let my eyes wander over the crime scene. When I was happy I had seen everything, I turned my attention to Kayla. Taking hold of her feet, I lifted them gently and let my fingers dance over her boot laces. I ran my fingers up the length of her overalls. At the neck, I unzipped them. Folding back the material to reveal her chest, I winced at the sight of the gaping wound and bite marks just above her right nipple. I placed my fingertips on the inside of her clothes, letting my fingers brush over the material. Once I was satisfied, I turned to her hands. I uncurled her fingers and gasped. In each palm she clutched a severed ear. Looking briefly at her fingernails, I then held my breath and gently brushed away the hair that covered her face. As I feared, both of her ears had been bitten off and it was those which she clutched in her fists.

Closing her eyelids, I heard Potter say “Well?”

Standing, I looked at them and could see that Isidor had worked his way back through the trees and was cowering just behind Coanda.

“What did you see, Kiera?” Luke asked, his eyes wide.

“Kayla was murdered by two people. One male, the other female. She came out here to meet them as if it had already been planned,” I started. “She knew them well. She took her clothes off for them, why, I’m not sure, but she definitely removed her clothes. She didn’t put up a fight so it’s as if she knew she was coming out here to die. A sacrifice, perhaps?”

“How can you be so sure of this?” Coanda asked. “How do you know there were two killers? And that she removed her clothes? Look, she’s wearing them!”

“She’s wearing her clothes now. But at the time of her death she was naked,” I started to explain, crouching over Kayla’s dead body again. “Look at her bootlaces. These weren’t tied by Kayla, they were tied by someone else.”

“Don’t tell me your gift is so powerful that you can see finger prints on a piece of string in the dark,” Coanda scoffed.

“It’s way easier than that,” I said, not bothering to look at him.

“Anyone can see this stuff if only you took the time to look. If Kayla had tied them herself, the first loop in the laces would be facing the inside of the

boot, but these don't show that. The loop faces the outside of the shoe; therefore, they had been re-tied by someone else as they stood over her. She had to be naked at the time of death as her heart has been ripped out and that causes a fountain of blood. But the thing is, there is no blood down the front of her boiler suit, but plenty on her chest and down the front of her body. Again, this suggests that she was redressed once she was dead."

"So how do you know that she knew these people and had planned to meet them out here?" Coanda asked, still sounding unconvinced by what I was telling him.

"Would you take your clothes off for just anyone?" I asked, cocking an eyebrow at him. "Knowing Kayla like I did, she would have put up a fight and I've seen Kayla in too many fights to know that she attacks with her claws first. There are no signs of flesh or blood under her fingernails. No, she didn't fight back, she got undressed willingly. If she had come out here for any other reason than to meet somebody, she wouldn't be dead now. Let's just say she woke up and needed to pee, so she came out here. She would have heard them creeping up on her. As you know, Coanda, she had an amazing sense of hearing. As soon as she knew someone was close, she would have fled or stood her ground and attacked. But as we can see, she did neither of those things."

“But you said something about a sacrifice?” Luke quizzed me, and I could see that all the colour had drained from his face in shock.

“Even when she was having her heart eaten from her chest, Kayla still didn’t fight back,” I said. “Apart from her clean fingernails, there are no signs of a struggle in the area; and besides, we weren’t that far away, we would have heard it. You try and eat somebody’s heart out of their chest and bite their ears off, they will put up a fight.”

“They bit her ears off?” Coanda breathed, and behind him, Isidor threw up.

“Yes,” I said, trying to keep my own emotions under wrap.

“Why would they have bitten her ears off?” Potter asked, his face grim-looking and hard, as if chipped from stone.

“There was something the killers didn’t want her to hear, I guess,” I shuddered.

“Hear what?” Luke asked looking at me.

But before I could say anything, Coanda came towards me with a look of realisation on his face. “They knew where we were heading, that’s why they killed her. They knew we wanted her to listen,” he said in disbelief.

“Listen to what?” Luke snapped impatiently.

Then gripping me by the arms, our noses almost touching, Coanda hissed, “Only you and I knew where we were heading, Kiera. I told you not to tell anyone. Didn’t I tell you that her life would be put in danger, that Munn would try and stop her from ever reaching the Light House?”

“Light House?” Luke muttered. “What are you going on about? I thought we were heading for the Dust Palace.”

Ignoring Luke, Coanda shook me by the shoulders and roared into my face, “Who did you tell, Kiera? Who did you tell that we were heading for the Light House and what Kayla was going to do once we got there?”

There was only one person I had confided in, and looking over Coanda’s shoulder, my heart sank to see that Potter had now vanished.

Chapter Twenty-Three

“What’s going on here?” Luke asked. “And where has Potter gone?”

Hearing this, Coanda gripped my shoulder and barked, “You told him, didn’t you!”

Yes I had told Potter, but I trusted him. He would never have hurt Kayla. He wasn’t part of this. I glanced over at Isidor, who stood looking at me, his hands still wet with his sister’s blood. His eyes were dark, the rings beneath them looking like two half-moons.

I broke his stare and looking at Coanda, I snapped, “Potter isn’t a part of this!”

“How can you be so sure?” Coanda roared and I could see the anger in his eyes.

“I asked him if he were Elias Munn and he said he wasn’t,” I told him.

“Oh well that makes everything all right then,” Coanda sneered.

“Are you freaking stupid or what? Do you honestly think he would admit to

something like that when we are so close to the Dust Palace? He's lied to you!"

"He wouldn't lie to me!" I snapped back at him.

"And what makes you so sure about that?" Coanda seethed, and he stared at me so intently that his icy blue eyes seemed to penetrate my very soul.

"Because he loves me," I whispered, lowering my head.

"What did you say?" Luke asked, stepping forward.

"Potter is in love with me," I said, but couldn't bring myself to look at him.

"He loves you?" Luke murmured, sounding lost and confused.

"Since when?"

Raising my head, I looked into his eyes and said, "I'm in love with Potter, I'm sorry Luke." To see the expression on his face broke my heart. He looked as if someone had snuck up on him and punched him in the guts. "I'm so sorry," I whispered and reached for him.

Knocking my hand away, he said, "This can't be true. You're just saying this to cover the fact that you've told him this secret you and Coanda were keeping from us. You don't know what you're saying."

"Luke, I do know what I'm saying," I told him softly. "I love Potter."

“But why?” he asked in disbelief.

“Why not?” I said back.

“Where do you want me to start?” he snapped and I could see his hurt turning into frustration. “Isn’t the fact that he’s Potter reason enough?”

“The same Potter who risked his life to rescue you from the zoo?” I said, trying to hide my rising frustration with Luke. “The same Potter who has risked his life on countless occasions to save all of us? Why shouldn’t I fall in love with someone like that?”

With an exasperated look on his face, Luke said, “But I thought we...you know...I thought there was something between us. And I’ve saved you too, Kiera.”

I thought of how Luke had risked his life back at The Ragged Cove, how he had dived into the burning church and countless other times, but I didn’t want to get into an argument about who had been the most gallant. I couldn’t help the way I felt about Potter. Why do we fall in love with anyone? Do any of us really know the answer to that?

“I know you saved me too, Luke,” I told him. “But Potter...”

“Is arrogant, offensive, violent...do I need to go on?” Coanda cut in.

Looking at the both of them, I said, “I see more than that in him. I see through all of that.”

Then as if from nowhere, Isidor brushed past us and said, “If you don’t mind, I’m gonna go and bury my sister while you stand and bicker about your love lives.”

“Hey Isidor,” I said, trying to take his arm. “I’m sorry, you’re right. We’ll help.”

“Don’t bother,” he said coldly, kneeling down and gently scooping Kayla up into his arms.

“Isidor,” I said softly, but he ignored me and all I could do was watch helplessly as he carried his sister away amongst the trees.

“I’m going back to the camp,” Coanda said, shaking his head, not in sorrow but frustration that his plan had now been thwarted.

Luke and I stood and looked at each other and the silence was louder than any sound. When I thought I couldn’t bear it any longer, Luke said, “And what if Potter really is this Elias Munn, are you going to still love him then?”

“He’s not Elias Munn,” I insisted.

“Potter got you to fall in love with him, which is what Munn has wanted the whole time,” Luke said. “He got you to tell him about Coanda’s plan. Kayla’s dead and Potter has disappeared. Can’t you see that, Kiera? I thought you could see things.”

Luke's words went around and around in my head and I thought of the letter that Ravenwood had left for me.

'Elias Munn plunged his fist into her chest and tore her heart out, screaming that if he couldn't have her heart than no other man could.'

Again those images of Potter tearing Eloisa's heart from her chest came back to haunt me. The woman Elias Munn had killed, had she really been this Sophie that Potter had told me about? The girl he had fallen in love with – his first love? After all, I only had Potter's word that he flew from her bedroom window that night – leaving her alive and in tears at the realisation he was a Vampyrus. Could Sophie be the woman Ravenwood referred to in his letter to me?

Staring at Luke, I said, "Can you honestly say you believe Potter is Elias Munn?"

"I don't know what to believe anymore," he said, shaking his head. "I believed Potter and I were friends. I thought we were like brothers. What sort of brother would go after the woman I had fallen in love with? Tell me that, Kiera. What sort of friend is Potter when he does something like that to me?"

"But it wasn't just Potter," I tried to explain. "It was me too."

"I don't believe that," Luke said. "Potter has seduced you – tricked you like he has tricked me. He's tricked all of us. I thought I could trust

him, but while I was imprisoned, which only happened so I could save your life, Kiera, he went behind my back and stole you from me.”

“I’m not some kind of prize, you know,” my frustration starting to boil beneath the surface. “Potter didn’t steal me from anyone – I knew what I was doing. I couldn’t help the feelings I had for him.”

“So that’s it then?” Luke said, and again his eyes were awash with that look of hurt. “It’s you and Potter.”

“I do care about you Luke, honestly I do,” I said, I wasn’t trying to soften the blow; I did really care for him.

“You have a funny way of showing it,” he snapped, then at once he shook his head, and added, “I’m sorry, Kiera, I didn’t mean that. I’m just hurting you know. I’ve lost you and my best friend in the space of a few minutes.”

“You haven’t lost me,” I told him. “I’m your friend.”

“But friendship isn’t enough for me, Kiera, I’m in love with you,” he said.

“Please, Luke, don’t say that,” I whispered.

“But it’s true.”

“I’m sorry.”

“So am I,” he whispered, turning and heading back towards camp.

I stood alone in the woods and felt totally and utterly lost. Covering my face with my hands, I started to sob. What had I done? Had I really been tricked by Potter? Had I really been responsible for the death of Kayla by telling him Coanda's plan?

Why had he disappeared when Coanda realised I hadn't kept his confidence? There were so many questions and I hated myself. Not because of what I had done, but because I just couldn't see. All my life I had been able to see what others had missed – the finer details – but now when I needed to the most, I couldn't see anything, it was like I was blind.

I couldn't believe that Potter had deceived me. But was that just me trying to convince myself I was too smart to be deceived by him? Was it my pride and own arrogance getting in the way? Was that what was blinding me?

But still there was something deep down that told me

Potter was not part of this. It was something very small, but big enough for me to grab onto. All I could see in my mind's eye was that cigarette butt left by the weeping willow in the woods. And it was that single cigarette butt which kept me hoping that Potter wasn't Elias Munn.

Chapter Twenty-Four

There was a sound behind me and I spun round to see Isidor coming back through the trees into the clearing. I could see that he had been crying, and he cuffed away a stream of snot from beneath his nose with his sleeve. Wiping my own tears away, I went towards him, but before I got to him, he raised a hand indicating for me not to come too close.

“I’m so sorry, Isidor,” I said.

He stood and stared at me and he had that haunted look again, the one he’d had since returning to The Hollows.

“What’s wrong, Isidor?” I whispered.

“What do you think is wrong?” he came back at me. “My sister has just been murdered.”

“But there’s something more than that,” I told him. “You’ve not been right since we got here. Please talk to me, Isidor.” Again, I tried to move closer to him, but he stepped backwards, maintaining the gap between us.

“Whatever’s wrong, Isidor, you’re going to have to talk about it sooner or later,” I said. “Keeping it to yourself won’t help.”

Lowering his head so I couldn’t see into his eyes, he said, “It’s Kayla...” then stopped.

“What about Kayla?” I asked him.

Straightening up, he looked at me and said, “It’s nothing.” Then, he was gone, slowly walking back to camp with his crossbow slung over his shoulder.

Alone again, I peered back into the dark in the direction Isidor had come. I wanted to say my own goodbye to Kayla. I couldn’t just leave her lying alone on the side of the mountain. So, following Isidor’s tracks back through the trees, I came across a mound of disturbed earth. Kneeling beside it, I ran my fingertips over the dirt and it was hard for me to accept that she lay just beneath my touch, battered and bruised, heart and ears missing. How had it come to this? This wasn’t the way her life should have ended. Kayla deserved better than that. I remembered the time I’d watched her giggling in the dark at Hallowed Manor as she taught herself to fly, and tears began to roll down my cheeks.

“I’ll miss you, Kayla,” I said.

Then I felt a hand fall on my shoulder. Stifling a scream, I looked up to see Potter standing behind me. I jumped up, and within an instant my

claws were out, as were my fangs, and I launched him across the small clearing. Potter flew backwards under the weight of my punch and slammed into the trunk of a large tree. It shook in the ground and leaves showered down from above. Before he'd had the chance to regain his composure, I was on him, my claws around his throat, my fangs inches from his face.

“Did you kill her?” I screeched.

“No!” he groaned beneath my grip.

“Why did you run?”

“Because I’m being set up,” he wheezed.

“By who?”

“I don’t know.”

“How do I know you’re not lying to me?” I spat, spittle spraying from my fangs and covering his face.

“You don’t, but you’ll have to trust me,” he croaked.

“Who did you tell about the Light House?”

“No one, Kiera.”

“So if only three of us knew about it, one of us is the killer and I know it isn’t me,” I hissed.

“Do you really believe I killed Kayla?” Potter mumbled, and I could see his lips were turning blue.

In my heart I didn't believe he had murdered Kayla; so slowly, I released my grip on him. I looked at him as he rubbed his throat and prayed I had done the right thing by letting him go. Stepping away, I went back towards Kayla's grave.

"I didn't kill Kayla," Potter said joining me, his voice still sounding raw from where I had strangled him. "But somebody wants you to believe I did."

"Who?" I asked, not looking at him.

"Elias Munn."

"And who is he?"

"Someone close to us," he said. "I didn't think I would ever say this, but I think Murphy was right, someone in our group is a traitor."

"So what's changed your mind?"

"Being framed for Kayla's murder is probably a good start," he said, taking a cigarette from his pocket and lighting it. Then looking through the cloud of blue smoke at me, he added, "You don't look too surprised by the whole idea of me being framed."

"Put the cigarette out," I ordered him.

"What?" he said, looking bemused. "I've only just lit it."

"Put the goddamn thing out, Potter!"

Without taking his eyes off me, he took the smouldering cigarette from the corner of his mouth, dropped it onto the grass, and ground it out with the heel of his boot.

Staring down at it, I asked, "What do you see?"

"A waste of a perfectly good smoke," Potter grimaced.

"Tell me what you see," I pushed.

"You're doing that Miss Marple thing again, aren't you?" he sighed.

Ignoring him, I knelt down and ran my fingertips over the cigarette and the blades of grass. In my head I could see the cigarette left by the tree where Kayla had been crying. I compared the two images in my mind.

"Come here," I told him.

Sighing, Potter knelt beside me.

I picked up the cigarette butt and held it up to him. "It's crushed to pieces."

"Even I can see that," he said.

"Just like the other one," I whispered.

"What other one?" he asked me.

"The one by the weeping willow," I breathed. "But there is a difference."

"What are you talking about?" he asked, gripping me by the shoulder.

“There was a cigarette left by the weeping willow where I discovered Kayla crying. She had been talking to someone. At first I thought it was the ghost of her father, just like mine had visited me. But when I went to her, I could see that it hadn’t been a ghost at all, but a living person, as I could see their footprints in the grass as if they had run away. Whoever had been standing there left one of your cigarette ends. Knowing I would see it, they hoped I would think it was you she had been talking to.”

“So what makes you think that it wasn’t me?” he asked.

“The cigarette had been ground out beneath the heel of your boot, because it was crushed just like this one,” I told him holding up what was left of the cigarette. But look at the grass. See how it is all bent over and disturbed where you ground it out with the heel of your boot? Well, the grass beneath the willow wasn’t. The cigarette hadn’t been put out there; it had been planted by whoever wanted to frame you. But by who, I don’t know.”

Standing, Potter looked at me and said, “And whoever put it there killed Kayla. Somehow they knew you had confided in me about the detour to the Light House, so they planted the cigarette and then killed Kayla hoping you would put the facts together and would suspect me.”

“But there was only one other person that knew that we were heading for the Light House,” I told him. “And that was Coanda. Why

would he kill Kayla when it was his idea to take her there in the first place?”

“What about Isidor?” Potter asked. “I’ve always thought that guy was a bit weird.”

“Isidor?” I breathed. “Never.”

“That’s just what I don’t get,” Potter said. “There’s been something wrong with the guy ever since we got here. He’s been moody and distant – he’s hardly said two words to anyone. Isidor is the one who found Kayla’s body. He was the one who came staggering from the woods smothered in Kayla’s blood and no one suspects a thing? It’s like the kid is fireproof or something!”

“But he wouldn’t have murdered Kayla,” I said.

“Neither would I,” Potter said razor quick. “But that hasn’t stopped everyone from pointing the finger at me. I wasn’t the one sniffing her dead body.”

“What do you mean?”

“I watched Isidor bury Kayla from the shelter of the trees,” Potter explained. “At first I thought he was kissing her goodbye or something, but then I realised he was sniffing her dead body. Now why would he go and do a thing like that?”

“I don’t know,” I said thoughtfully.

“Whatever the reason,” Potter said, “There’s something wrong with that kid.”

“I still don’t think he murdered Kayla,” I told him.

“Someone did and it wasn’t me,” Potter insisted.

“I believe you,” I said, looking at him. “But what are you going to do now?”

“Hang back,” he explained. “I’m going to follow you from a distance. This Elias Munn, whoever he might be, is close and I reckon he wants to get to the Dust Palace as much as you do.”

“I thought you didn’t believe in him – just like Father Christmas,” I reminded him.

“Being framed for a murder you didn’t commit gives you a different perspective on things,” he said. “Now you go and I’ll watch your back, I won’t be far away. I’ll follow you to the Dust Palace, that’s where I think this Elias Munn will reveal himself to you.”

“And what happens if he does?”

“Then we finish it,” Potter said. “We finish him.”

“And then what?” I asked, taking Potter’s hands in mine.

“What do you mean?”

“Will we get some time together?” I asked, looking up into his black eyes. “What I mean is, we have spent our whole time on the run so far. It

would be so nice to...you know...go on a proper date or something. I'd like to get to know you, for you to get to know me. All I really know about you is that you have a tendency for *WHAM* songs! I don't know what your favourite food is, your favourite movie...I don't know anything about you."

Taking my face gently in his huge hands, Potter leant close and said, "I'd love to go on a date with you, Kiera Hudson, but for that to happen you're gonna have to choose the Vampyrus over the humans, because if you don't, I'm dead."

Then, before I had the chance to say anything, he kissed me softly on the mouth, stepped into the shadows beneath the trees and was gone.

Chapter Twenty-Five

The others were waiting for me by the burnt out embers of the fire. It was still dark, the Light House had yet to complete its circuit for the night. The embers smouldered angrily and a thin line of smoke trailed up amongst the stalagmites.

Luke glanced at me as I re-entered the camp, then looked quickly away. Isidor stood, ashen-faced and tired-looking, his crossbow in his hands. He fixed me with a stare, but unlike Luke had done, he didn't look away.

"You took your time," Coanda grumbled at me, eager to get going. "What were you doing back there?"

"Saying goodbye to Kayla," I said, and I couldn't bring myself to look at Isidor.

"Let's get going," he said, turning as if to leave the camp.

"Go where?" Isidor asked him.

"To the Light House," Coanda said as if it should've been blatantly obvious to him.

“What’s the point?” Luke asked. “Kayla’s dead. The mission has changed. I think we should head straight for the Dust Palace.”

“No,” Coanda shot back at him. “Elias Munn has agents there ready to send out his signal. Kayla might not be with us anymore, and you’re right, the mission has changed, but if we can’t intercept the messages, then we will kill those who are planning to send it.”

“I think Luke is right,” I cut in. “Potter told me that going to the Light House was suicide.”

“And when exactly did he tell you these words of wisdom?” Coanda sneered, his clear blue eyes clouded with distrust.

“When I told him about your plan,” I explained. “He said -”

“I’m not interested in anything he had to say,” Coanda barked at me. “Potter’s not to be trusted.”

“But if Potter is Elias Munn, or some kind of traitor like you believe him to be,” I snapped back, “Then won’t he be expecting us to head for the Light House?”

“Not without Kayla,” Coanda went on. “He wouldn’t believe we have the balls to go and attack his agents there. He’d expect us to go running to the Elders with our tails between our legs. But that ain’t my style, Hudson. I don’t shy away from a fight.”

“So I’ve heard,” I muttered.

“What did you say?” Coanda asked, jutting his chin in my direction.

“Nothing,” I said back.

“Then let’s get going,” he growled, turning his back on me and marching away from the camp.

With his head bowed forward, Isidor slowly set off after him. Luke was next to leave the camp. “So you are just going to go along with him?” I asked Luke.

Ignoring me, he continued after Coanda. I trotted after him, and taking Luke by the arm, I said, “How do we know we can trust Coanda? He could be leading us into a trap.”

Luke prised my fingers from his arm, and looking at me he said, “I thought I could trust you and Potter once, now I don’t know who to trust anymore.”

“Luke,” I breathed, not sure what to say next.

But before I’d had the chance to say anything, Luke said, “Kiera, do me a favour and leave me alone for a while.”

I watched him walk away, his shoulders slumped forward, and I hated myself for hurting him. But I couldn’t take it back now, even if I wanted to and I wasn’t sure that I did. I disliked myself even more for feeling that way.

The four of us walked through the night in silence. We reached the top of the mountain where it flattened out into a hard-panned surface. It was so hard and arid that it was covered in deep grooves and cracks. Just like the ground Potter and I had raced over to reach the canyon, the ground was an orange-red colour and was covered in a fine ash. Did it ever rain here? I wondered. And I doubted that it did. But nothing would have surprised me about The Hollows or so I thought.

Just as I began to consider the possibility of rain falling in this new world I had fallen into, it started to snow. I stared, mesmerised up into the dark as giant white flakes began to seesaw down towards me. They covered the ground ahead, laying a white carpet before us.

“Snow?” I gasped in wonder.

“Ash!” Coanda grunted.

“Ash?”

“We’re nearing the Light House,” Coanda said, and it was as if his voice had taken on a tone of reverence. “The lake of lava that it floats on blisters and bubbles at such temperatures that almost everything it touches burns, sending up clouds of ash.”

“Almost everything?” I asked him.

“Except the Light House,” he said. “No one knows why it hasn’t eroded into the lake – no one truly understands its power.”

“Look at that,” Isidor said, short of breath, pointing into the distance.

I looked in the direction he was pointing and drew a deep breath. The horizon glowed – in fact it pulsed like a sunrise seeping from the ground. The sky in front of us burnt crimson, pink, and gold. The light splayed across the night like electric fingers. Ash flew up into the air like giant flakes of glistening ticker tape. But the light rose quicker and brighter than any sunrise I had ever seen.

With my forearm across my eyes, I said to Coanda, “Where has the light come from so quickly?”

“We’re close to the Light House and it’s turning towards us,” he seemed to roar in excitement and awe. “C’mon, we don’t have time to admire its beauty!” And he was off, racing across the hard-panned ground towards the light.

Without question, we followed him. As we grew near, I noticed what looked like a black splinter running the length of the light. With my eyes almost shutting against the glare and my skin starting to prickle with heat, I could see that it wasn’t a crack in the light at all, but the Light House. Just as Potter had described it to me, the Light House was a needle of rock that towered out of the Earth’s core and up into the night. It was narrow and wizened-looking, like a decrepit spine that had had its flesh picked from it.

As we drew nearer, the light grew brighter, and the heat more intense. My skin prickled and beads of sweat rolled from my forehead and onto my cheeks. The ground before me shimmered with heat rays and the horizon looked as if it were bending back and forth, melting in front of my very eyes. Bending forward, we ploughed through the falling ash, which was now knee-deep and hot to the touch. It sparkled like the burning embers of a fire. We walked in a line, Luke to my right, Isidor and Coanda to my left. Then, the night or was it now day, was filled with a crackling, hissing, and spitting sounds.

Raising one of his bony hands into the air, Coanda ordered us to stop. "This is as far as we go." He looked down at his feet which were covered in ash, and I almost screamed.

Before me was an abyss. It ran away from us into the distance like a river of seething sunlight. Covering my eyes, I peered down through my fingers as the lava sloshed in giant waves against the foot of the Light House. They crashed against the rocks, spraying up plumes of fiery surf.

I looked to my right at Luke and his face glowed red from the glare of the seething lake below and in that moment he looked like a god. His finely chiselled face, green eyes and that black hair that always fell across his brow reminded me of what had originally attracted me to him. As if sensing that I was looking at him, he turned to face me, and instead of

glaring at me like I feared he would, he gave me the warmest of smiles and said, “It’s incredible isn’t it?”

“It’s beautiful,” I whispered back.

“But they’re not so beautiful,” someone said from behind me.

I looked back to find Coanda staring up at the jagged tip of the Light House. Peering through the light, I could see a swarm of Vampyrus circling. Their wings were spread and they looked as if they were protecting the Light House, defending it until they were summoned to send out the order to attack.

“The Light House will soon have turned our way and we will be seen,” Coanda said. “We find shelter from its heat today, and make our move tonight.” Then he was striding away towards a wide crack in the ground that zigzagged away from us like a giant wound.

I looked at Luke and Isidor who, without saying a word, followed Coanda as he climbed down into the fracture in the ground. Before following them, I looked back over my shoulder, scanning the horizon and hoping I would see Potter. But he was nowhere to be seen. So turning away, I climbed into the crack.

Chapter Twenty-Six

The fracture in the ground was deep, and by the time I had levered myself over the edge, the others were already at the bottom. The sides of the crack were made of hard, red rock and were warm to the touch. With care, I lowered myself to the bottom, finding myself in something not too dissimilar to a cave. It stretched away for as far as the eyes could see in both directions, becoming narrower and narrower.

The area we now stood in was open and vast. The rock above me formed a lip, which Coanda climbed beneath. We followed, only to find ourselves in a compact alcove. Coanda pulled a flashlight from one of the many pockets that adorned his overalls. He switched it on and cast a cone of bright white light across the walls. No sooner had the light splashed across them, then they began to glow a luminous green. I could see the walls were covered with that seaweed-type plant I had seen in the tunnel when first crawling into The Hollows.

The seaweed, if that's what it was, sent a sickly glow across the alcove, painting our faces the colour of Halloween masks. I glanced at Luke

and he no longer looked like a god, but sallow and sick, as if just getting over some prolonged illness. I looked at Isidor and Coanda, and they too looked ill. Isidor removed his rucksack and crossbow, placing them on the ground and sighing as he arched his back. In the distance I could hear the sound of water dripping, and to think that there might be water in such an arid place seemed strange to me. The sound of it made me realise how thirsty I was, and my throat felt as if it had been coated in a layer of dust.

“How come I hear water?” I asked Coanda.

“Why is that so strange?” he shot back.

“It’s just that this place, up above, seems so dry,” I said.

“Come with me and I’ll show you something,” he said turning away and walking to the furthest reaches of the alcove. I followed him, Isidor and Luke trailing at my heels. When I thought Coanda was going to walk straight into the wall, he turned sharply to his left and squeezed himself through a narrow gap. Drawing breath, I snuck through the gap and stepped out onto a ledge. Luke and Isidor joined me, but neither of them looked upon the sight with the same amount of awe I did. Perhaps they had seen it all before, but the vines that hung from the ceiling were beautiful in this cave I now found myself in. The ledge ran along the side of what looked like a giant bowl, and from above hung an intricate weave of vines and roots, like those of a giant tree. They curled and wrapped themselves about

one another like the most carefully platted length of hair. The roots and vines glowed green just like the seaweed-type plant that covered the walls in the alcove. They glistened wetly with a yellow liquid which dripped from them like some kind of honey.

Coanda knelt on the ledge. Steadying himself with one hand, he reached into the vast bowl with his other hand and dipped his fingers into the gloopy liquid which had collected there. He pulled his hand free and held it up before me, his eyes gleaming in the yellow light that the substance was omitting. Then, without taking his eyes off mine, he ran his tongue up the length of his fingers as if savouring a lollipop. The goo ran from his lips and it looked sticky and wet as if he had just gone berserk with a bottle of lip gloss.

Once he had licked his fingers clean, and with a look of sheer delight on his face, he smacked his lips together and said, “Root Juice - there’s nothing like it.”

Without hesitating further, both Luke and Isidor were on their hands and knees, reaching down and taking a fist full of the yellow goo. Holding their hands to their mouths, they slurped and sucked the liquid from between their fingers.

“Go on, Kiera,” Coanda said, and it was the first time on our journey I had seen him smile – well, half-smile if I am to be honest.

“It doesn’t look as if it will quench my thirst,” I said, watching it drip in thick steams from Luke’s fingers. “It looks kinda sticky.”

“Just try it,” Coanda urged.

With my throat in need of any kind of moisture, I knelt down and tenderly dipped my fingers into the liquid that dripped from the roots sprouting from the rocky ceiling. It felt warm, and just as I had suspected, very sticky. Gingerly, I raised my fingers to my mouth and closing my eyes, I prodded the liquid with my tongue. At once my whole body tingled, as if it had just drank from a mountain spring. Although it had felt warm to the touch, it felt ice cold against my tongue. Sticking my fingers into my mouth I sucked the Root Juice from them. The inside of my mouth seemed to explode to life as the sticky substance ran down my throat. At once, my thirst was quenched and I could never imagine myself feeling thirsty ever again. But it wasn’t just the icy cold, mouth-watering sensation, it was the taste. It was as sweet as honey but sharp as a lemon, and I wanted more.

I licked my fingers clean and reached into the giant bowl again. Before my fingers even touched the goo, Coanda gripped me by the shoulder and pulled me back from the edge.

“No more, Kiera,” he said, as if in warning.

“Why not?” I asked him, trying to hide my disappointment. “It’s wonderful.”

“In small amounts,” Luke cut in. “Too much of the stuff can make you go crazy and you’ll just want more and more.”

“What’s wrong with that?” I asked. “It tastes amazing.”

“Just enough will kill your thirst,” Coanda said. “But any more and it will kill you.”

“What, like poison?” I gasped, wishing now I hadn’t tried it, however nice it had been.

“It will drown you,” Luke told me.

“Drown me?”

“How quickly did it cure your thirst?” he asked, staring at me.

“With just one drop.”

“Just imagine, then, what a handful, or a bottleful of the stuff would do,” Luke continued. “No one knows why, but the Root Juice retains water, that’s how plants and trees survive in The Hollows. A cup full of the stuff will keep a tree watered for months. So when it reaches your stomach it turns to a water-like substance. And you’ll just want more and more, and even when your stomach is bloated full and your bladder is screaming to be emptied, you’ll want to carry on drinking and drinking until there isn’t any more room in your stomach. Your lungs will start to fill and even when you are gasping for air, you’ll be slurping up that wonderful-tasting Root Juice until you suffocate - until it smothers you.”

“You won’t need water for hours now, maybe even a day or two,” Coanda said, and patted his flat stomach as if he himself were content. “The small amount you had will be enough to keep you hydrated just like it does the trees and the plants in The Hollows.” Then, without saying another word on the matter, Coanda slipped back into the narrow gap and was gone.

I looked over at the roots that hung from the roof of the cave, watching the gloopy Root Juice dripping from them.

“Don’t be tempted, Kiera,” Luke said, then he too disappeared, leaving Isidor and me alone.

Isidor stood on the ledge and looked down into the hollow of the cave and at the goo laying there. He had that haunted look in his eyes and I took the opportunity of being alone to speak with him.

“Neat stuff, huh?” I started.

“I guess,” he said back, but his voice sounded dreamy as if coming from a long way off.

Standing next to him, so close that my arm brushed against his, I said, “You never told me that you came from such an amazing world.”

“You never asked,” he replied thoughtfully.

Then, resting my hand on his arm, I said, “Please talk to me, Isidor. I know you are hurting about Kayla. I am too. We could help each other.”

“I don’t need any help,” he said, but not in anger or in resentment, but with a tinge of sorrow.

“I’ll find out who murdered Kayla,” I promised him. “I know how much you had grown to love her, Isidor, and I loved her too. You were her brother but she was like a sister -”

“Somebody else loved her,” Isidor suddenly said.

“Sorry? What did you say?”

“Someone else loved her,” he said again. “Or they told her they did.”

“Who are you talking about?” I quizzed, now feeling totally confused.

“She believed him,” Isidor said, “In her own way, she looked up to him, admired him, wanted to be like him. So when he told her she was special, that she was beautiful, she was so willing to believe him.”

“Who are you talking about?” I gripped his arm.

“I saw him kiss her at the resistance camp. When she was on her own, I asked her what was going on,” he explained in a dreamy, far-off manner. “I couldn’t believe my eyes. Why would she be kissing him? She swore me to secrecy and said that I wasn’t to say anything.”

“Who kissed her?” I demanded.

“So I didn’t say anything,” Isidor sighed, turning to look at me for the first time. “I kept my promise to her and now I wish I hadn’t. You were right, Kiera, I saw them talking together beneath that willow tree.”

I wanted to scream at him, “*Stop rambling – just tell me! Who was it you saw with Kayla?*” but I had waited this long for him to start talking, so I didn’t want to interrupt him for fear that he might clam up again, so I let him continue.

“The night Kayla was murdered,” Isidor continued. “They had been together. As I laid her in her grave, I could smell him on her. I don’t know if he was the one who killed her, but they had definitely been together.”

Almost on the verge of screaming at him, I took a deep breath and said, “Isidor, who is *he*?”

With a look of sadness, Isidor said, “I’m so sorry, Kiera, I wish I didn’t have to be the one to tell you this as I know it’s going to break your heart, but I think Elias Munn is -”

Before he could finish, there was a swishing sound like a blade being cut through the air. And then Isidor was clutching at his throat.

Chapter Twenty-Seven

Isidor's eyes spun in their sockets as he grappled at the wooden stake which was now protruding from his neck, just above his Adam's Apple. Blood pumped from between his fingers and ran from the corners of his mouth in thick, black lumps.

"Isidor!" I screamed as he wobbled before me.

Taking him in my arms, I cradled him against me. I looked around frantically to see if there was anything close at hand I could use to stem the flow of blood from his throat.

"Help me!" I screeched. *"Somebody help me!"* And it was then that I saw it: Isidor's crossbow propped against the wall in the gap we had slipped through earlier. Someone had shot Isidor with his own crossbow.

Isidor shook violently in my arms as if he were having a fit and his eyelids flickered. "Don't you dare die on me, Isidor!" I roared at him "Don't you dare! Do you hear me?"

Opening his eyes, he peered at me and made a gargling noise in the back of his throat. A black bubble of blood formed between his lips, then

burst, showering me in a fine spray of blood. Knowing I was losing him and still desperate for answers, I lowered my face next to his and said, “Isidor, who did you see with Kayla? Who was it that betrayed her?”

His eyes flickered again, then closed. Shaking him by the shoulders and with tears rolling down my cheeks, I cried out loud, “Who did this to you?”

With his eyes still closed, Isidor took one blood-stained hand from his throat and gently ran it down the length of my face, taking my tears with it. Then, his hand flopped away and he fell still in my arms.

“*No!*” I screamed until my throat felt raw.

With my arms around him, I pulled him close, and all I could do was cry. I felt as if my heart had been crushed inside of me. “Isidor, wake up! Please,” I begged him. “I can’t lose you *and* Kayla! I can’t!”

I looked down into his face and could see those black flames tattooed up his neck now smeared crimson. His little tuft of beard jutted out and his eyebrow piercing gleamed green in the light of the roots that hung down from above us.

“Isidor,” I sniffed. “Please don’t leave me – *please!*”

But there was only silence apart from the drip-drip sound of the roots behind me. For how long I sat there and cradled him, I didn’t know. It

was probably only minutes or perhaps just seconds before the others came running.

Coanda was first through the gap and onto the ledge, Luke at his heels.

“What’s gone on here?” Coanda asked, but I was too numb to say anything.

Luke rushed over and gently took Isidor from me. I was reluctant to let him go at first, but Luke prised him from me. I watched as he laid Isidor out upon the floor and pulled the stake from the puncture wound in his neck. He then laid his head against Isidor’s chest as if checking for a heartbeat. Slowly, Luke raised his head and looked at me.

“What happened?” he asked, sounding breathless. “Who did this?”

“You tell me,” I spat, and Luke recoiled as if my voice was full of venom. “One of you is a fucking killer and I want to know who!”

“Kiera, what are you talking about?” Luke asked, his eyes wide as he stared at me.

“Can’t you see what’s happening here?” I hissed, getting to my feet. “First Kayla, now Isidor - we’re being picked off one by one! There’s a freaking murderer amongst us and it isn’t me!”

“Kiera,” Coanda started, coming towards me. “What happened?”

“What do you think happened? Are you fucking blind?” I barked in sheer disbelief at him. “Somebody shot Isidor with his own crossbow!”

“But why would anyone want to do that?” he asked, glancing down at Isidor’s corpse then back at me. “It doesn’t make any sense.”

“Isidor thought he knew who had murdered Kayla,” I started, looking at both Luke and Coanda. “Apparently, whoever killed her had become close to her in the last few days of her life.”

“But who was it?” Luke demanded.

“You tell me, Luke,” I said staring into his eyes. “It could’ve been you who killed her.”

“It could’ve been - but it wasn’t...” he said flatly.

“And what about you, fly-boy?” I snarled turning on Coanda.

“What’s that s’pose to mean?” he shouted.

“We don’t know you - apart from the wild stories you tell about yourself, none us *really* know you. It was you who led us out here. It was your idea to come to the Light House. And why didn’t you really want me to tell anyone? Huh? Was it so you could murder us one by one and no one would ever know? You could be Elias Munn!”

“And what about you?” Coanda said. “We only have your word that Kayla died the way you said she did. It was only you who examined her

body. That could've all been some elaborate show just to hide your own tracks."

"Oh my god!" I gasped. "That's ridiculous!"

"Is it?" Coanda went on and even Luke was now eyeing me with a look of distrust. Or was that just my own paranoia kicking in? "It's you standing there with Isidor's blood on your face and hands. The crossbow is just over there in that gap, within easy reach I'd say. We only have your word that he told you this stuff about Kayla. For all we know, he could have been accusing you of being the one who killed Kayla and you silenced him before he could tell anyone else."

I stood and stared back at Coanda and Luke and both stared back at me. "Do you really believe that's what happened?" I breathed. "Do you really believe I could kill Kayla and Isidor? I loved them like a brother and a sister. Do you really believe this, Luke?"

He was quiet for a moment as if contemplating his answer. Eventually he said, "I don't know what to think anymore, Kiera. Everything seems to have changed."

"But you can trust me," I said, searching his eyes.

"Like I trusted you with my best friend, Potter," he reminded me. "I honestly didn't think you were capable of doing something like that to me."

“Luke, you make it sound as if we were engaged to be married or something,” I gasped. “We were good friends, that was all.”

“I thought we were more than friends,” he said. “I thought we had something special. You didn’t turn me down when we were together in that underground lake.”

“Okay, so I fell in love with Potter, your best friend, but that doesn’t make me a murderer,” I insisted.

“But it’s okay for you to point the finger of blame at us?” Coanda asked. “And as far as I can see, neither of us have done thing to raise anyone’s suspicion; yet you are happy to point the finger of blame at one of us. I thought you could see things, Kiera Hudson. Why can’t you see who this Elias Munn is?”

“I don’t know,” I said, trying to mask my own frustration.

“Maybe he has already blinded you?” Coanda said.

“How?”

“With his love,” Luke said, and I detected a note of sadness in his voice.

“You’re talking about Potter again, aren’t you?” I asked.

“Well where is he?” Luke asked. “No one has seen him since Kayla’s dead body showed up. Now Isidor is dead and there’s still no sign of him.”

“Have you seen him since he disappeared?” Coanda pushed.

“No,” I whispered.

“Is that a lie?” Coanda came at me again, and I felt as if I was being interrogated.

“No,” I said again without looking at either of them. But of course it was a lie. I had seen Potter and he had told me he was going into hiding and that he would follow us from a safe distance. But where was he now?

Coanda came towards me, and leaning in close he said, “If I were you, Kiera, I’d take a very long look at your lover, Potter before you go pointing the finger at me again.” Then turning, he growled at Luke, “Help me lay this boy to rest.”

I watched them silently carry Isidor from the cave. Taking his crossbow, I cradled it against my chest and began to cry.

I leant against the wall and slid to the floor where I rolled onto my side and closed my eyes. Taking my iPod from my pocket, I switched it on and began to listen to *Wherever You Will Go* by Charlene Soraia. I couldn’t help but think of Potter and that cigarette end I had found by the weeping willow. Had he put it there? He knew me well enough by now to know how I worked – how I could see things. Had my love for him blinded me just like Coanda thought? I hated thinking like this about Potter but so many roads Elias Munn had laid led to him. Would he have murdered Kayla? But

then I remembered how he had suddenly been so protective of her when I'd explained Coanda's plan to him. Why? The message my father had left for me in that book: '*One may smile, and smile, and be a villain!*' Half-smiling to myself through my tears, I wondered if that single passage didn't actually take Potter off the suspect list. After all, he didn't smile that often as he always seemed so cranky and pissed off.

With so many thoughts going around my head, it took me a while to fall to sleep but when I did, I said...

Chapter Twenty-Eight

“Sloat,” and pointed a finger at the floor. The assistant helped me to dress and when he was done, he scampered to the other side of the mortuary. I looked over at the police officer and could see he had worked his radio free.

“SNOW!” I yelled through the hole in my cheek, which flexed in and out like a valve.

“Snow?” the officer asked confused.

“She’s saying no!” the pathologist said. “She doesn’t want you to use your radio.”

“Too bad!” the officer said, raising the radio to his mouth. “I’m calling in!”

Something told me that more cops would be a very bad idea, so I stumbled towards him, falling against the mortuary table. The officer pressed the transmit button with a fat thumb. Seeing this, I placed my two fingered hand against the table and shoved it towards the police officer. In a blink of an eye, the heavy metal table was spinning across the mortuary, its

legs screaming against the stone floor like fingernails being raked across glass. The table smashed into the officer's legs and pinned him against the wall. It hit him with such force, that the sound of his thigh bones snapping would haunt anyone who heard it for years. The police officer screamed and dropped forward, his forehead smacking into the mortuary table with a dull thud. The radio shot from between his fingers and spun across the room.

Whirling round, I spotted it with my bloodshot eye. I staggered across the lab and buried the heel of my boot into the plastic panel across the front of it. The radio split open like an old wound, spilling its wires and microchips across the floor.

"Crwoss!" I said to the pathologist who cowered in the corner of the lab. "Crwoss" I said again, holding out my deformed-looking hand.

Knowing exactly what I wanted, the lab assistant grabbed the silver crucifix from an evidence bag and laid it on the mortuary slab. I picked Murphy's crucifix up with my two fingers and tried to place it around my neck. Fumbling with only five fingers between two hands, I looked at the pathologist. Without saying anything, she came forward on her knees. She stood and fixed the necklace into place for me. The pathologist stared at my face. I could feel hair now sprouting from the bald patches that covered my head. It was black with threads of blue running through it. But it wasn't just

my hair that was growing back. Stumps were now appearing where I was missing fingers. I held my right hand up and watched as the skin on my hands almost seemed to split apart as my fingers grew back. My right cheek felt as it were being pinched and pulled to the right as my mouth began to take shape. I could feel my teeth pushing through my gums and blood washed into my mouth.

I looked at the pathologist with my bloodshot eye and she looked away in revulsion. The cop had been right – I was reforming – almost as if I were being reborn in some way.

The pathologist took one quick glance back at me, then turned and scurried back into the corner of the mortuary. I tightened my overalls about my waist, rummaging through its pockets. I found an iPod and a red bandana that was soaked with blood. Struggling, I placed the iPod back into my pocket.

The police officer was now lying on the floor, clutching his thighs and screaming in pain. His face was red and sweaty, and his eyes bulged in their sockets. The lab assistant still cowered in the corner of the room and couldn't take his eyes off me. I turned to face the pathologist, who didn't look scared anymore, but curious.

“Sank-you,” I said, and as my mouth started to reform, so my words sounded more like I intended.

“What are...who are you?” she asked.

*I looked at her, my red eye now weeping blood onto my cheek, which
I mopped away with the bandanna.*

“What do you want?” she said.

*Then, the mortuary door crashed open on its hinges and two figures
came rushing in and...*

Chapter Twenty-Nine

...shook me awake. I opened my eyes to see Luke staring down at me. His face glowed green from the light shed by the twisted roots that continued to make that drip-drip sound.

“It’s time we got moving,” he said, and any anger and resentment I’d heard earlier in his voice was now gone. “It’s dark out and Coanda doesn’t want to waste any more time. He’s eager to take out those Vampyrus that are guarding the Light House.”

“He’s crazy if he thinks the three of us can do it alone,” I groaned, pulling myself to my feet.

“Are you okay?” Luke asked me.

“No, not really,” I replied.

“I’m sorry about earlier, Kiera,” Luke started. “If it helps, I don’t really think you’re a killer. You’re the last person I would ever suspect of hurting Kayla or Isidor. I know how much they meant to you.”

“It didn’t sound like that earlier,” I said, brushing red rock dust from my overalls.

“Well maybe we both said stuff we didn’t really mean,” he said.

“But whatever has happened between us lately, we’re going to have to put that to the side for the time being or we’ll never get through what’s coming next.”

Luke then turned and headed back towards the gap in the rock. Before he was out of my reach, I took his arm and said, “Do you really believe that Potter is Elias Munn?”

Then, looking at me he said, “Like I said last night, Kiera, where Potter is concerned, I don’t know what to believe anymore.” Then he was gone, slipping between the rocks.

I took one last look back at those roots that hung from the ceiling of the cave like some intricate plant, and throwing Isidor’s crossbow over my back, I slipped through the crack and back into the fracture beneath the ground.

Coanda was peering up into the sky which was now dark and shimmering with the glow from the stalagmites that hung down like ragged, prehistoric teeth. He heard me enter and looked in my direction.

“Ready?” he asked, and his voice was toneless.

“I guess,” I replied, and looked over at Luke. “Where did you bury Isidor?”

“Down there,” Luke said, pointing into the narrow passageway.

“I’d like to go and say goodbye,” I said to him.

But before Luke could say anything, Coanda cut in. “There’s no time. Anyway, all you can see is just a bunch of rocks. The ground was too hard for us to dig.”

“I’m not going anywhere until I’ve said goodbye to Isidor,” I said firmly.

“We don’t have time,” Coanda started.

Heading in the direction Luke had pointed, I looked back at Coanda and said, “No one’s stopping you from leaving, I’ll catch up.”

Coanda grumbled something under his breath, but he was too far away for me to hear, and to be honest, I didn’t really care what he had to say at this moment in time. I lowered my head and stepped into the passageway. Squinting, I peered into the darkness and just ahead, I could see a mound of rocks that had been piled on top of one another. The area in which they had buried him was cool, but all the while I could hear that drip-drip sound coming from the root in the adjacent chamber.

I knelt down beside the rocks which entombed Isidor. Words seemed inadequate, so I just sat in silence with my eyes closed. I didn’t pray, I didn’t know how to. Besides, what was left to pray for, when everyone I cared about was being snatched from me? But, one thing I did know was that death wasn’t going to pass me by, either. In my heart, I knew I wasn’t

going to leave The Hollows alive. Perhaps somewhere inside of me, I had always known this was going to be a one-way trip. If I was going to die down here along with my friends, I wanted to die on my terms; I wasn't going to be cut down like Kayla and Isidor had been.

I took Isidor's crossbow from my back and laid it gently on top of the pile of rocks and whispered, "See you in a while crocodile." Then, getting to my feet, I went back to where Coanda and Luke were waiting for me.

Chapter Thirty

“We’re up here!” someone called down to me, the voice echoed around the giant crack in the ground we had sheltered in. I looked up and could see Luke peering down at me from high above.

Without any further hesitation, I placed one hand in front of the other and began to climb up the rock face. As I climbed, there was a part of me that just wanted to climb back down again, crawl back into the narrow passageway, lie down next to where Isidor was buried, close my eyes, and never wake up. It wasn’t that I was scared of what was lying ahead for me; it was knowing that I had to make that decision. I’d already decided in my heart that I wasn’t going to choose between the human race and the Vampyrus. And where did that leave me? If I wasn’t going to choose between them, did that mean death? Well if it did, let me just die now then, and let the Vampyrus and humans fight it out amongst themselves. After all, I belonged to neither race – I was a half-breed just like Kayla and Isidor had been. I was the only one left. I didn’t owe either race any favours – let them both be damned to hell for eternity- what did I care?

But that was the problem. That's why I kept putting one hand in front of the other so I could pull myself up that rock face. Deep down I did care what happened. I cared deeply about all those innocent people, just like the townsfolk from Wasp Water who would suffer because of Elias Munn. And that's why I couldn't really choose between the humans and Vampyrus, because I didn't want to be the one who caused suffering and pain to either race. Why me? Why had I been damned like this? If there was a God, I wanted to renounce him, I wanted to turn my back on him. I didn't want this. Why had He picked on me?

I reached the top of the fracture and holding out his hand, Luke pulled me up. Scrambling to my feet, I looked into the distance. The light from the Light House turned away from us and cast us into a shadow. The ash continued to float through the night and cover everything, including us, in its silver dust. A warm wind blew and my hair fanned out behind me. Covering my eyes with my hand, I peered up at the Light House and could see the same flock of Vampyrus circling like buzzards searching for food.

Pulling open his overalls, Coanda looked at us and said, "I count twenty, but there could be more. With the element of surprise on our side and if we act fast, we can take them." Then, flexing his back muscles, his wings unfolded from his back. Shaking his wrists, his claws sprang out, and

when he glanced at me again, I could see that he now had fangs. “What are you both waiting for?” he barked at Luke and me.

Just like Coanda had done, Luke pulled the top half of his overalls apart, revealing his muscular chest and stomach. Arching his back as if in pain, Luke’s wings sprang from his back and the tips trailed in the ash. Clicking his knuckles like a boxer preparing for a fight, his long, ivory-like claws shot from his fingertips. Luke could see me watching his transformation and it was as if he knew I was remembering those stolen moments we had shared together. Luke looked divine in every way. He half-smiled at me, and I saw his fangs glisten. I looked away, reached round, produced my claws and ripped the back of my overalls open. As if desperate to be released, my wings thumped out of my back and fluttered open on either side of me. Those black, bony claws snatched at the ash that fell all around us. Running the tip of my tongue over my front teeth, I could feel that my fangs had also come through.

Luke stood watching me, my wings rustling in the wind, my hair flowing back off my face. His eyes glowed green. “You look beautiful,” he whispered.

“Oh please,” Coanda cut in. “You’re gonna make me puke in a minute. Save the lovey-dovey stuff for later, pretty boy.” Then, without another word, he was rocketing away through the sky.

I smiled back at Luke and those feelings of guilt gnawed at me again. “Watch your back,” I said in warning, and then I too was racing towards the top of the Light House.

I drew level with Coanda, and as he looked at me, he shouted, “Drop!”

Looking left, then right, I saw two of the Vampyrus zooming in at us from either side. Luke swooped over me as I shot downwards. Banking, I immediately climbed sharply again, the wind and ash rushing past me. The two Vampyrus that had been heading in our direction zoomed beneath me and smashed into each other. On impact, the Vampyrus’ wings became entangled and they spun out of control towards the ground way below. They screeched frantically as they fought to untangle themselves, all the while plummeting to their deaths.

Luke spun around in the air and roared, “Coanda, there are too many of them. This is crazy!”

No sooner were the words out of his mouth, when Coanda grabbed both of us and we were corkscrewing through the air in a desperate attempt to avoid another onslaught. I screwed my eyes tightly shut and gripped hold of Luke.

As we spun through the air, I heard Luke shout, “We’re gonna die!”

“Stop whining and fight or I’ll kill you myself!” Coanda roared at Luke. Sensing that we were both out of immediate danger, Coanda let go of us and said, “Now fight!”

I sped away, through the air in pursuit of a Vampyrus that had just raced past me. I looked back and could see Luke sweeping away after another Vampyrus. Looking front again, I screamed, as a black shadow raced towards me. Before I had a chance to react, it had hold of me. The shadow stopped fluttering and I could see who it was.

Potter winked one of his black eyes at me, and said, “Sweet-cheeks, two o’clock!”

“What’s happening at two o’clock?” I breathed, shocked at seeing him.

“I’m holding a tea party,” he smirked. “What do you think I mean when I say ‘two o’clock’?”

I spun around in mid-air to face two o’clock. Without realising it, my claws were pointed out before me and I swiped them at one of the approaching Vampyrus. The sound of its bony ribcage snapping against my long, pointed fingernails made me wince as it flew backwards, spinning towards the molten lava. I watched as it plummeted through the sky and thumped into another of its kind which soared below. This Vampyrus fell backwards, pin-wheeling through the sky, the claws at the tip of each wing

frantically clutching at the air as if in some way they could hold onto nothing and save itself.

My attention was drawn away from the freefalling Vampyrus as one of Potter's claws went soaring past my face.

"Whoa!" I yelled, spinning around to see Potter tearing away in a spray of black shadows. As he snaked back and forth through the air, he screamed in rage, and as he did, I prayed he wasn't Elias Munn. As if being able to hear my thoughts, Potter snatched a quick look back over his shoulder at me with his dead, black eyes. He grinned, then sliced off the head of an approaching Vampyrus. A jet of blood shot up into the air, then showered down again, covering Potter's naked chest.

Still, another and another came at him. I watched as Potter's claws ripped into the Vampyrus. They shrieked in agony and spun away. One of them almost seemed to roll onto its back as it clawed at the wound that Potter had opened in its swollen-looking belly. Its wings fluttered uselessly on either side as it spiralled through the air towards the ground. Another of the Vampyrus zoomed in close, banked sharply as if needing to gain momentum, then came racing back towards us.

"We're too outnumbered!" I shouted at Potter. Then, scanning the sky, I added, "Where's Luke and Coanda?"

Potter ignored me as he concentrated on killing the Vampyrus that sped towards us in unrelenting waves. I straightened myself and began to beat my wings, sweeping this way and that and clawing at anything that came near. I glanced at Potter and he looked wild – insane – and again I caught a fleeting glimpse of his dead, black eyes. They looked like they had when he'd killed Eloisa – soulless. He moved with such speed that he became almost a blur. Potter extended his arms on either side of his body and spun his claws like a set of helicopter rotary blades. He leapt through the sky, and as he went, he slashed at the air in several quick and precise movements, slicing through an approaching Vampyrus and removing its bony legs. The Vampyrus spat and hissed in anger as its legs floated harmlessly away. The loss of its legs caused the Vampyrus to fall into an uncontrollable spin, as if by losing them it had lost its ability to balance.

I searched the sky frantically for Luke and Coanda again, but couldn't see them anywhere.

"We've lost Luke and Coanda!" I warned Potter as I raced towards him.

"No we haven't, they're over there!" Potter shouted back, pointing ahead of us with one hooked claw.

I looked in the direction he was pointing and could see Luke straddling one of the Vampyrus as his claws sliced and whooshed through

the air. Coanda was zooming back and forth, lunging at passing Vampyrus and ripping lumps of black flesh from them with his fangs. As each of the Vampyrus screeched in agony, Coanda roared insanely with anger and punched the air with his claws. He looked as if he was enjoying every second.

Luke swooped through the air on top of the Vampyrus as he cut and thrust his way through any of the creatures that dared to fly too near to him. Luke's arms moved with lightning speed. At no time, as he hacked and jabbed, did I see the slightest glimmer of emotion on his face.

My attention was drawn by the sound of screeching from above and I glanced up to see one of the Vampyrus racing above me. It was so close that I could see the long, black hairs that hung from its legs snagging in the wind. Before I had the chance to lash out with my claws, it snatched hold of Potter and was now racing away with him up into the air. Potter kicked out wildly with his legs, but he couldn't work himself free from the creature's grasp.

"Bring him back!" I hollered, as the Vampyrus soared away.

"We've got to get him back," I heard Luke shout.

I looked to my left and could see that he had drawn level with me and was hovering only a few feet away. Then he was gone again, driving on ahead and dissecting anything that got too close to him.

“I thought you hated him!” I yelled.

Looking back at me, Luke half-grinned and shouted, “I don’t want them to kill him, I want to do it!”

I could see Potter way ahead in the distance as he dangled beneath the Vampyrus, his arms and legs waving and kicking desperately about. Tucking my arms in beside me, the little black fingers at the tip of each wing clutching at the air, I shot after him. I banked to the left a little then to the right to avoid approaching Vampyrus. Then, with my wings beating so fast on either side of me that they were just a haze, I zoomed after Potter.

Giant Vampyrus dived towards me on either side. As I grew more confident in flying, I tried to do a back flip out of their way – but I still had a lot to learn. The aerial-acrobatic move I performed was more like a cartwheel, and I came crashing down on the approaching Vampyrus. With my claws extended before me to break my fall, I unintentionally skewered one of the Vampyrus in its fury belly. There was a popping sound, and I looked down in disgust to see the creature’s entrails spill from it. They flew out behind the Vampyrus in a black stream, like an aircraft ditching its fuel. It screamed in pain and dropped through the air like a stone.

I glanced up to see Potter was only feet away from me now. I swooped along beside the Vampyrus that had hold of him and began to slash at it with my claws. The Vampyrus turned to look at me, its face

contorted in a mask of rage. Its jaws flapped in the rushing wind and its eyes grew fat and wide.

“You can’t win, Kiera Hudson!” the creature screamed at me, and hearing it say my name made me falter.

“Elias Munn has led you into a trap!” it roared.

“Where is he?” I screamed back over the roar of the wind that whipped all around us, and I clawed at the creature again.

Then, shaking Potter so savagely with its talon-like claws, the Vampyrus sent Potter flying through the air. I watched him spin away, and instead of unfolding his wings and soaring up, he continued to fall towards the lava below. He looked to be unconscious. The Vampyrus who had flung Potter through the air started to change shape. I watched in horror as its body rippled, its coarse, black hair fell away to reveal Phillips.

Chapter Thirty-One

“Oh Kiera, don’t look so surprised,” he mocked. “We knew you were coming. Do you really think we would protect the Light House with just a handful of us? The Light House is the heart of The Hollows.”

“Who is he?” I screeched and flew at him, my claws tearing at his eyes. Smiling he flicked me away. I somersaulted through the air and came at him again.

“Look all around you, Kiera,” he smiled. “You’re trapped. You can’t possibly win.

I looked around to see a mass of black clouds racing through the sky towards us.

Clouds? I wondered. Do they have clouds in The Hollows?

Looking up again, I saw that they were changing, breaking apart, becoming smaller. But as my heart began to race in my chest, I could see that these weren’t harmless pieces of vapour. Each tiny piece had formed into the shape of a winged creature, a Vampyrus. Then, as if being punched in the face, the nightmare I’d had back in the Ragged Cove where I’d been fleeing along the shore hit me. In that nightmare, or as I now realised it to

have been a vision, the clouds had broken up into pieces, thousands of pieces, each one taking on the form of a Vampyrus, just like they were now. Everything that I'd seen in my nightmares – *visions* – was now finally coming true. And in that instant, I could see running feet – they were booted. I was in a car and there were sirens wailing all around me. There were scratch marks, screaming – oh my god there was so much screaming. I was being swept up into the air. I was falling, I was being chased and the visions faded.

I looked down at the hard-packed ground and in the distance I could see shadows racing across the wasteland that we had crossed. But just like the approaching clouds, these weren't really shadows. And as they raced forward, I could see their white faces, their red, burning eyes that gleamed like brake lights in a traffic jam. They were stripped to the waist and their chests looked bony and bent out of shape. A series of sharp, pointed ribs protruded through their pale, yellowy-white skin. These creatures were so sickly-looking, I thought they were ill in some way.

With my heart racing into my throat, I realised they looked strangely familiar. They looked like deformed copies of Kayla, Isidor, and me. They were the half-breeds Elias Munn had manufactured. Somehow, he had managed to produce them; not perfect copies, but grotesque imitations of us, like the reflections you see in those distorted mirrors at the fairground.

That's why the facility had been deserted and only a few left behind. He had known we were coming and had moved them. The disc! How had I been so blind? On the disc there had been drawings, diagrams of glass-like coffins – pods – there had to be another facility where these half-breeds had been kept. Like Hunt had been used as a decoy, Munn had led us to Ravenwood and the deserted facility so his army could be hidden and a cure for the virus could be found. But whatever he had used, the cure hadn't been perfect.

The half-breeds' skin looked oily, almost greasy, and I imagined that it would be slippery to touch. Their heads were long and narrow, with eyes fixed into the sides of their faces like birds. Their mouths were stretched open as if they were permanently screaming and they were crammed full of black, razor-sharp teeth. From the tops of their heads sprouted large, black, silky feathers, which they wore like Indian headdresses, and I wondered if this hadn't been a side effect of the half-human and half-Vampyrus DNA not being decoded properly. Munn had created a tortured-looking race – mutants – that bore some tragic resemblance to Kayla, Isidor, and me.

“What have you done, you sick fucker!” I screamed and grabbed hold of Phillips.

“I think they look quite beautiful,” Phillips smiled, looking pleased with himself as he started to wrestle with me.

“What did you use?” I screeched at him. “The DNA that Hunt used was corrupted with a virus. What did you use?”

“Don’t you think we knew Hunt had deceived us? In your desperate attempt to leave the zoo, you cut your hands, remember?” he beamed. “You left some of that blood behind. We only needed a few drops, Kiera.”

“But they’re mutants! Freaks!” I roared at him in horror as we grappled with one another. “They’re nothing like me!”

“And that’s just how we want them,” Phillips leered. “Jesus, I couldn’t think of anything worse than an army of do-gooders like you, Kiera Hudson. We don’t want our army to be weak like you! What happened to you, Kiera? You were meant to be the chosen one, a great leader, a warrior who was going to lead us above ground and destroy the humans. But instead we were sent some bleeding heart, someone who loves humans. You might have been raised by humans, but you are not one of them!”

“And I’m not a Vampyrus either, Phillips!” I spat, trying to claw at his face, but he was too strong and knocked my hand away. “I’m a half-breed!”

“And like your friends, Kayla and Isidor, you will die a half-breed,” he barked. “You had it in your power, Kiera, to make your friends great, but

instead you led them on this pointless journey. You could have made them true Vampyrus!”

“What, and end up like you?” I hissed, my face inches from his. “Bitter and twisted and full of hate? I’d rather they be dead, and so would I!”

Out of the corner of my eye, I saw Coanda sweep in beneath Phillips.

“Dead, you say?” Phillips laughed. “I can arrange that!” And then he was lunging for my face, his fangs spraying hot bile.

With one deadly swipe of his claw, Coanda separated Phillips’ head from the rest of his body. Immediately, his head spun away, but it was as if for just a few fleeting seconds he was unaware of what had just happened to him. As his head flew away, Phillips’ mouth was opening and closing as if he were trying to say something to me.

“It’s a trap!” I roared at Coanda, pointing to the mass of Vampyrus that raced towards us through the sky, and the thousands of half-breeds that charged across the wasteland beneath us.

“I think you will find it is they who have been trapped,” Coanda grinned back at me with a wild look in his eyes. Then, without wasting another moment, he reached into one of the many pockets of his combat

trousers and pulled out a small, brass horn. Raising it to his lips, he tilted his head back and blew into it. To my surprise, no sound came out.

“Sonar,” he winked back at me and blew on the horn again.

Glancing down, I could just make out Potter as he clung weakly to a piece of rock jutting from the side of the Light House. As I watched, a Vampyrus swept in and knocked him from his perch.

“*Potter!*” I screamed, dropping like a stone through the air after him. I didn’t know if I would be able to catch him before he crashed into the burning lake below. The approaching Vampyrus raced towards me from both sides. Lowering my head and tucking my arms in beside me, I leant forward and raced towards him in a complete nosedive. My descent was so rapid that I could feel my flesh rippling against my skull. But I was catching up with him, and the world around me, the red rocks and the Light House, became a blur as if I had left time and space. With only inches to go before I was racing alongside Potter, another one of those giant Vampyrus swept in and clutched at me.

Pushing myself forward, my bones were rattling beneath my skin so much that I thought they were all going to snap. I inched towards Potter, but the Vampyrus wouldn’t give up and within moments, he was on me again. I reached out with my claws and thrust them between the Vampyrus’ ragged-looking ribs. A jet of black liquid spurted from the wound and the creature

let out an agonising moan. I withdrew my claws and the Vampyrus slowed, leaving me the opportunity to grab hold of Potter and yank him free of the lava that bubbled and seethed just feet below us.

I put one arm tightly around him. He seemed dazed and disorientated.

“Are you okay?” I shouted at him.

Potter looked at me and to my complete surprise, he lent forward and kissed me on the cheek.

“Thank you, sweet-cheeks,” he smiled.

I looked at him numbly and with my free hand, I touched my cheek where he had kissed me.

“Why did you come back?” I whispered.

“I told you I was watching your back and you looked to be in trouble,” he said.

“Isidor is dead,” I told him.” He was murdered.

“By who?”

“You tell me?” I asked him, not taking my eyes from his, looking for any reaction.

“Is this like one of those pop quizzes?” he asked. “Because if it is, Kiera, I don’t know the answer. I didn’t kill him. Why would I?”

“Because he was just about to tell me who Elias Munn was,” I told him. “Apparently, Kayla got close to him just before she died.”

“That’s impossible,” Potter snapped, pulling away from me, so he could fly solo. “I was looking out for her. She was with me most of the time.”

“And that’s what scares me,” I told him.

But before Potter had a chance to say anything back, Coanda came racing towards us.

“Look, Kiera! Look!” Coanda was shouting.

I turned to see what appeared to be another giant wave of Vampyrus swoop down. But these were different, they weren’t attacking us, they were attacking the other Vampyrus. And unlike the others, these Vampyrus hadn’t taken on their natural form, they still looked human – well humans with wings – just like I did. They swept through the sky with the grace of eagles.

“Who are they?” I asked him.

“The resistance!” he laughed. “Damn! Have you ever seen such a beautiful sight!”

And they did look beautiful as they swept through the sky, their wings shimmering, muscles rippling as they attacked the Vampyrus. Within seconds, the sky above surrounding the Light House had become a

battleground as Vampyrus fought with Vampyrus. Their fangs and claws sprayed blood as they tore and ripped at each other.

Then I saw him, Luke being chased by a flock of those black, bristling Vampyrus. They snatched and bit at him. He struggled with them, but he was outnumbered, and within moments he was spiralling out of the sky. A black shadow swooped in and snatched Luke away from the screaming half-breeds that waited below to tear him to pieces.

“What was that?” I asked breathlessly.

“Potter,” Coanda said, as he hovered beside me.

I turned to where Potter had been floating just seconds before, but Coanda had been right, he had raced forward to save his friend. Again.

Chapter Thirty-Two

Coanda and I raced towards them as Potter carried Luke to a rocky hill away from the battle that was now raging. Some of the resistance had now leapt from the sky and were now battling with the mutant-looking half-breeds that rampaged across the wasteland surrounding the Light House.

As I soared over them, my heart raced like a trip hammer in my chest as I saw all those distorted imitations of my dead friends, Kayla and Isidor. They were hideous, and to look at them made me shudder.

They raced around at incredible speeds, leaping and throwing themselves at the members of the resistance. All of them had fangs in their misshapen mouths. Their eyes swivelled in pockets of blood. Their heads were kind of pointy in shape and some of them had gaping wounds that looked open and raw. I remembered the 'Isidor' half-breed I had seen in the facility and how it had something close to an umbilical cord protruding from the crown of its head. To see those mutants below me with those fleshy holes made me wonder if that's where their 'umbilical cords' had been ripped out.

Unlike Kayla, Isidor, and me, these mutant half-breeds didn't appear to have wings. Instead, their corrupted DNA had produced a cluster of black feathers that protruded from the backs of their heads, arms, and shoulders. They looked like a mass of crows that had been savagely plucked. Some of them obviously sensed that they should be able to fly as they launched themselves into the air at the resistance that rocketed above them. But their tatty-looking feathers were unable to keep them in the air, and they fell back to the ground in frustration. I even saw a few that didn't have hands at all, but three of those little black, bony fingers. All of them looked gaunt, ashen, and ill – like corpses that had been brought back to life.

Several had clumps of red flame-coloured hair, just like Kayla's, but it stuck from their heads in dry tufts. There were others that were a shattered reflection of me and they raced across the wasteland with streaky black hair flowing from them, but instead of it growing from the tops of their heads, it grew from their faces, necks and arms. They were all an abomination – creatures that had no place in The Hollows – no place in any world. I swept from the sky with Coanda and we landed next to Potter as he was getting Luke to stand on his feet.

Realising it was Potter who had rescued him, Luke pushed him aside. "Get out of my way, *friend!*"

"I just saved your bacon," Potter said.

“I was doing just fine,” Luke snapped, unable to bring himself to look at Potter.

“Didn’t look like that to me,” Potter corrected him.

“Do me a favour, Potter, stop acting as if you are my friend,” Luke snapped. “You’re no friend of mine.”

Potter glanced at me, and I said, “Luke knows about us.”

“Oh,” Potter said and looked at Luke.

“Yeah that’s right, *friend!*” Luke almost seemed to snarl, showing his fangs. “I know all about you and Kiera.”

“I’m sorry,” Potter said going to Luke, and I could see that he looked concerned by Luke’s obvious hurt.

Luke turned to face Potter and knocked his hand of friendship away. “How could you treat me like this?”

“I didn’t plan this you know – it just kinda happened,” Potter said.

“Exactly how did it happen?” Luke stared at him. “When did it happen?”

“Back at Hallowed Manor,” Potter confessed. “In the Gate House.”

“The Gate House?” Luke gasped. “I see – how very romantic. While I was healing up in the attic, you were making a play for my girl.”

“Your girl?” Potter said, now sounding frustrated. “It wasn’t like you and Kiera were engaged or anything.”

“No, but you knew I liked her, though,” Luke said, moving toe to toe with Potter.

Oh my God, they’re going to start fighting in a moment, I thought and wedged myself between them.

“Just stop it!” I shouted at the both of them. “I’m not some possession, you know. This macho shit-head stuff isn’t going to solve anything. If you two haven’t noticed, we’re in serious trouble here!”

“Well, just don’t expect me to like it,” Luke barked. “Don’t expect me to like him!”

“The feeling’s mutual,” Potter quipped.

“Look around us – can’t you see what’s happening here?” I yelled. “We’ve lost friends, The Hollows is at war, and the Earth is soon to be invaded. You need to put your differences aside, for now at least, because we either stand and fight as one or we die alone.”

“You need to listen to her,” Coanda said, coming forward. “Take a look around you. My resistance is outnumbered; they will only be able to protect the Light House for so long. We need to get to the Dust Palace and fast. Only there will Kiera be able to tell the Elders her decision and end this.”

Scowling, Luke and Potter stepped back from each other.

“Let’s just get through this if we can,” I said to them. “We can save our differences for another day – another time.”

Potter took a cigarette from his pocket, lit it and drew in a deep lungful of smoke. “Whatever you say, sweet-cheeks.”

Hearing Potter call me “sweet-cheeks”, Luke shot a quick glance at him and snarled.

Potter shrugged back and said, “Well she has got the sweetest...”

“Stop it!” I shouted at him, knowing that he was just trying to bait Luke.

“Okay! Okay!” he half-smiled, holding his hands up as if in surrender. “I won’t say another word.”

“That will be a first,” Luke cut in.

“And that goes for you too!” I yelled at Luke. “God almighty – it’s like I’m hanging out with a couple of kids.”

“He started it...” Potter said blowing smoke from the corner of his mouth.

“You started it back in the Gate House,” Luke snapped back.

“I give-up!” I cried, throwing my hands up into the air. “Coanda, just lead me to this Dust Palace so I can get this over and done with.”

“Follow me,” Coanda said, scrambling down the rocky ledge we had landed on.

I followed after him and looked up to see Potter and Luke climbing down behind me. They didn't even look at one another.

Once we had reached the cracked and ash-covered ground, we stood and watched the battle rage in the distance. The sky above the Light House was alive with Vampyrus as they fought one another. Even though I was some distance away, I could hear the sound of their giant wings beating and their agonising screams of pain and occasional triumph as they did battle with the Vampyrus.

On the ground, another battle was being waged as the mutant half-breeds ran wild, clawing at and feeding off the fallen Vampyrus. Coanda had been right, the resistance he had put together was outnumbered by the army Munn had grown, either be it artificially or by brainwashing.

I couldn't bear to watch those freaky imitations of Kayla, Isidor, and me anymore, so turning to face Coanda I said, "Which way is it to the Dust Palace and the Elders?"

"Over there," Coanda said, pointing in the opposite direction to the battle. "But I think we've got a problem."

"What sort of a problem?" I asked, turning to look in the direction that he was pointing. But I didn't need any answer from him to tell me of the imminent danger we faced as I looked at the wave of mutant half-breeds that were racing towards us across the wasteland.

Chapter Thirty-Three

They came at us, their eyes burning red on either side of their grotesque faces. They might not have been able to fly, but they had our speed. A wake of red dust and silver ash billowed up behind them as they raced towards us. Their claws gleamed in the orange glow cast by the lava that circled the Light House. The sky had turned a blood red and the stalagmites twinkled overhead like rubies.

We formed a line. There was nowhere else to go. We were surrounded from behind, in front, and above as a flock of Vampyrus swooped towards us. Potter spat away the cigarette that dangled from the corner of his mouth and flexed his claws as he readied himself to fight. Luke's wings beat behind him and he brandished his fangs.

"Do you have a plan?" I asked Coanda.

"No, but I do," someone said from above us.

We all looked up to see a tall, lone figure standing on top of the ledge we had just scrambled down from. Even with his baseball cap pulled down so that most of his face was cast in a shadow, it was his wild, yellow,

gleaming eyes that gave him away. There Jack Seth stood. His emaciated figure silhouetted against the crimson sky.

“I thought you were dead?” Potter growled with annoyance at seeing Seth again.

“And you’ll be glad I’m not,” Seth said back.

“We don’t need your help, Lycanthrope,” Potter hissed.

“Are you so sure about that?” Seth smiled, nodding in the direction of the approaching half-breeds. “Your situation doesn’t look good.”

“I’ve been in worse,” Potter grumbled.

“Time is running out,” Seth reminded us. “Do you want my help or not?”

“Yes,” I yelled, answering for all of us.

“Kiera!” Potter snapped.

“Shhh!” I told him. And however much it pained me to do so, I looked up and said, “Yes, we need your help, Jack Seth.”

“On one condition,” he smiled back, the red bandanna knotted about his scrawny throat flapping in the rising wind.

“Oh great, here come the conditions,” Potter sighed.

“What do you want from us?” I called up to him, knowing the half-breeds were now on our heels.

“I come with you to the Dust Palace,” he yelled back.

“No way,” Luke cut in.

“Done!” I shouted. “Now get your scrawny arse down here and fight!”

Without wasting any further time, Seth stuck two fingers into his mouth and whistled like a man trying to attract the attention of his wayward dog. No sooner had he taken his bony fingers from his mouth, there came a rumbling sound which was so loud and violent, the ground beneath my feet began to shake. I looked up to see Seth tearing the flesh from his body in bloody strips and as he took on his werewolf form, a pack of giant wolves scrambled over the rocks and began to howl into the night. Their jaws were huge, like caves that were filled with razor-sharp teeth and thick, ropey lengths of drool sprayed from them.

Without needing any prompting from Seth, the werewolves leapt from the rocks and bounded towards the approaching half-breeds. The werewolves’ bear-sized bodies shook with muscle and their fur gleamed crimson in the light from the Light House. With their colossal paws, they swiped at the half-breeds sending them flying through the air. Others lunged with their giant jaws, easily fitting the half-breeds’ heads into their mouths. With a quick shake of their powerful necks they had torn the half-breeds’ heads clean off.

Jack Seth leapt from the rocks and landed in front of me, and even though he stood on all fours, he was big enough that he could look squarely into my eyes.

“Thank you for coming to help us,” I said, trying hard not to be caught by his stare.

“Don’t flatter yourself, Kiera Hudson,” he woofed at me, and the hair blew back off my face. “I didn’t come back for you or your friends. I want an audience with the Elders as much as you do. I have my own race to think of and I want the curse that haunts us lifted.” Then he was gone, bounding away, his giant jaws snapping and snarling at the first half-breed he came across.

“Doesn’t that guy ever die?” Potter asked no one in particular as he stood and watched Seth and the other werewolves slice their way through the half-breeds.

“Perhaps he’s hoping you die first,” Coanda replied.

“Not today,” Potter growled, springing into the air.

Without saying a word, Luke took to the air after Potter. Although they now had their differences, when it came to fighting the enemy, they stood shoulder to shoulder, their dislike for each other momentarily put aside. Coanda went after them, and I followed.

We were attacked from all sides, and it felt as if someone or something wanted to rip me apart, to devour me - kill me - from every angle. As a team we flew, ran, bit, and clawed our way through the mutant half-breeds and the Vampyrus that attacked from above. Soon, the hard-panned ground surrounding the Light House had become a bloody wasteland, littered with corpses. We pushed on, following Coanda as he cut through the battle. The air was filled with the deafening sounds of squawking, howling, and screaming. Werewolves leapt and bound, the Vampyrus beat their giant wings and the half-breeds fought with a frenetic energy that was close to madness.

Coanda cut a path through the half-breeds and we followed him into a rugged area of sandy-coloured stone. “We are never going to make it, there are too many,” he roared over the sounds of battle. “Even with the help of the Lycanthrope, we are losing.”

“Any suggestions?” Potter snapped, then he bit off the face of one of those half-breeds that looked like a deformed version of Kayla.

“We’ll have to go via the Murka Tunnels,” Coanda shouted.

“Have you lost your mind?” Luke roared as he gutted a half-breed with his claws.

“There is no other way!” Coanda said.

“What are these tunnels?” I yelled, staving off another attack from the half-breeds.

“They are a labyrinth of passageways that stretch beneath The Hollows which are filled with a fog that is near impossible to see through.”

“They don’t sound so bad,” Potter half-smiled.

“They are named the Murka Tunnels because of the murky fog,” Coanda went on, ignoring Potter’s remark. “But one wrong turn and you’ll never find your way out.”

“Sounds better and better,” Potter said, driving his hooked claws into the throat of a passing half-breed. Blood jetted onto his face, and he wiped it away with his muscular forearm.

“But the fog is rumoured to drive you mad if you are in it for too long. Many have gone into the tunnels but never to be seen again, and they are believed to still be wondering around down there, driven to the brink of insanity.”

“What a load of old bollocks,” Potter grinned. “You’ve been reading too many James Herbert books.”

“I’ve heard the rumours too,” Luke cut in, shaking entrails from his claws.”

Looking at Luke, Potter said, “Someone must have gotten out of those tunnels alive.”

“How do you figure that?” Luke snapped, his anger with Potter still evident.

“How else do we know what these tunnels are like?” Potter grinned with that know-it-all smile.

Before they had the chance to start another argument, I got between them, and staring at Coanda, I shouted, “How do we get into these tunnels?”

“Follow me,” he roared and was racing away across the wasteland as if there wasn’t a moment to lose.

Chapter Thirty-Four

There were iron gates set into a nearby rock face. Over these, slats of wood had been fixed barring the entrance. Looking back over my shoulder, I could see that some of the frenzied half-breeds had broken away from the main battle and were now coming towards us. Seth stood on his back legs, rolled back his mighty head and howled at them. The noise that came from his throat was so deep that the ground shook and my bones seemed to rattle under my skin.

Potter and Luke stood beside him, dwarfed by his giant size. Baring their fangs and claws, their wings taut behind them, they slashed at the approaching half-breeds.

“Give me a hand with this,” Coanda roared from beside me.

I looked and could see that he was trying to rip off the wooden planks that barred our entry to the tunnels. With the wind now blowing hard around us, I hooked my claws around the edges of the planks and pulled. They came away in splinters. Coanda gripped the railings of the iron gate and it shook in its frame.

“Pull!” he barked at me.

I curled my claws round the thick bars and with all my strength I yanked at them. There was some give and I could hear the rock beginning to crumble away around the edges of the gate.

“Hurry!” Luke shouted, his voice almost drowned out by the screaming wind and the cries of the half-breeds.

With my eyes shut tight, I sucked in a mouthful of air and pulled as hard as I could on the gate. Coanda pulled too, and at last I felt the gate come away from the rock face in a shower of red dust.

No sooner had the gate clattered onto the ground, Coanda was shouting at the others, “Into the tunnels! Into the tunnels!”

With more half-breeds coming at us, we dashed into the entrance of the tunnel.

“Bring down the opening!” Coanda ordered. “Seal the entrance!”

As if knowing exactly what he meant, Potter and Luke began to claw frantically at the walls of the tunnel. Then, I remembered how I had watched Potter close the opening to the tunnel that lay beneath the police station in The Ragged Cove. So following their example, I started to claw at the walls surrounding the entrance to the tunnels. Rock began to fall down and cover us in dust as the mouth to the tunnel began to fill. The half-

breeds snatched at us with their claws through the hole, which was fast filling up.

“Faster!” Coanda shouted. “Fill the hole!”

Like desperate animals in their burrows, we raked at the walls with our claws, and I shot a sideways glance to see Seth pounding away at the rocks with his giant paws. It showered down in jagged lumps until we had closed the entrance to the tunnel and sealed ourselves inside. I could hear the half-breeds on the other side scrambling and scratching, desperate to find a way into the tunnel.

“We’ve got to keep moving!” Coanda barked from within the darkness.

I narrowed my eyes into slits and peered through the dark and could just make out his outline as he moved slowly into the tunnel. Then I heard the sound of fabric being torn. Within moments there was a flash of orange light as Potter flipped his Zippo lighter to life. He had ripped the sleeve from his overalls, wrapped this around a large splinter of wood that had come from the planks I had pulled down. I watched his face glow yellow as he held the flame to the torch he had made.

Smiling, he looked at me and said, “A smoker’s way saves the day.”

“That stuff will kill you,” I reminded him.

“Yeah, and so will a lot of other things,” he winked back at me.

Luke brushed quietly past us and began to follow Coanda down into the tunnel. Seth began to twitch and spasm beside us as he changed back into his human form. He looked at me, his yellow eyes glowing as fiercely as the torch that Potter held in his hand. Then, pulling the beak of his baseball cap down over his eyes, he walked away.

“C’mon, sweet-cheeks,” Potter said to me and I followed him into the tunnel.

We hadn’t walked far, when a dirty yellow fog began to swirl up from the ground and surround us. It had a bitter smell and choking quality. I covered my mouth and nose with my hands and coughed. But, the deeper we went into the tunnels, the thicker the fog became and even the light from Potter’s torch failed to light the way. Something scuttled over my feet and I gasped.

“Take it easy, tiger,” Potter whispered from within the fog,” It was just a rat.”

“I don’t like rats,” I told him. “And besides, it felt way too big to be a rat.”

“God knows what’s lurking down here,” Luke suddenly said from beside me, the fog now so thick, I hadn’t even been aware he had been there.

“That’s just your imagination,” Potter said back.

“Is it?” Seth grinned as he loomed up so close to me, that I could see the giant rat he held in his fist. It was the size of an overweight cat. The rat kicked wildly in his grip, its unnaturally long tail swishing back and forth. With his eyes spinning like two suns, Seth rammed the rat’s head into his mouth and snapped his jaws closed. The sound of the rat’s skull being crushed by Seth’s teeth made me gag.

“You’re so disgusting,” I heaved and moved away, losing sight of him again in the yellow fog.

I continued forward, and as I did I was sure I could hear the sound of voices. It was faint at first, like children whispering behind their hands. Someone brushed past me, but I didn’t know who.

“Potter?” I called out but he made no reply.

“Can anyone else hear those voices?” I asked, as the fog swirled all around me.

Silence.

Then, those little voices came again. It was definitely the sound of children – I was sure of it.

“Can anyone else hear those children?” I called out.

There was no answer, only the touch of someone as they hurried past me, as if running.

“Who’s there?” I shouted, now beginning to feel panicked and lost. Then, there was the sound of a scuffle, like two people fighting.

“What’s going on?” I called out, my heart racing as I spun around on the spot trying to locate the sound.

There was a sudden cry as if whoever had made it was in pain. I turned towards the sound. There was more running as someone pushed past me, shoving me against the wall of the tunnel.

“Help me!” a voice sounded from somewhere in the fog. “Come quickly! He’s dead!”

Chapter Thirty-Five

With my hands held out before me and my heart thumping, I staggered through the fog towards the sound of the voice that kept shouting over and over again, “He’s dead! He’s dead!” My ability to see through the dark had no effect down in Murka Tunnels. The fog was so thick and dirty I could just make out my own hand in front of my face.

I headed towards the voice as I cut my way through the murkiness. As I drew nearer, it lost its muffled quality and I realised it was Potter who was calling for help. I made my way as fast as I could towards him. And then through the smog, I could just make out the glow of his torch as he waved it back and forth through the air.

I reached him, and standing so close that we almost touched, he looked through the haze at me and said, “Coanda’s been murdered.”

“What?” I gasped.

“Take a look for yourself,” Potter said, bending down.

I got down onto my knees, and put my hands to my face in shock. Spread-eagled against the wall of the tunnel was Coanda. He was slumped

forward, his chin resting against his chest. Gently, I raised his head, and could see his dead eyes staring back at me through the yellow fog that swirled all around him. I looked down at the ragged hole in his chest and could see that his heart had been removed.

“Who did this?” I whispered, glancing over at Potter.

“I don’t know,” he said. “But take a look at this.”

Holding up the torch, he passed it close to the wall just above Coanda’s corpse. Written in blood above his head was this:

Kiera follow the sound of the children

“What do you think it means?” Potter asked me.

“Haven’t you heard them?” I whispered.

“Heard who?”

“The children.”

“What children?” he pushed.

“It doesn’t matter,” I said standing.

“What’s going on here?” Potter asked me as he stood up, and as he did, I saw the hand that he held the torch with was smeared with blood.

“You tell me,” I shuddered.

Potter glanced at his hand, and realising that I had seen the blood, he sighed and said, “When I found Coanda, I touched him. I thought he had stumbled and tripped in this goddamn fog – that was all. I must have got some of his blood on me.”

Before I had a chance to say anything, Seth and Luke appeared from the smog. To be able to see each other clearly, we had to stand almost side by side. I felt Seth brush against me and I recoiled. He felt me flinch, and his eyes shone at me from within the gloom and I could just make out his rotting teeth as he smiled with pleasure at the thought of repulsing me.

“What was all the shouting about?” Luke wheezed as if choking on the fog.

Potter held the torch over Coanda’s head. “Now we are three,” he said.

“Four,” Seth corrected him.

“I’d forgotten all about you,” Potter said dryly.

“Who killed him?” Luke asked.

“I wonder?” I said, peering at Potter. With our number depleting by the hour, the list of suspects was growing smaller and smaller. I didn’t have to see anything to know that the killer – this Elias Munn – was either Luke or Potter. But to even think that made my heart ache. How could either one of them be Elias Munn? It couldn’t be possible – I would’ve seen it. But

there was one other, and I glared at Jack Seth through the smog. I had believed him to be dead after Potter had pushed him over the cliffedge. But he had survived and had followed us. Maybe that's who Kayla had heard following us. But would Kayla have fallen for Seth? He was an ugly, disgusting child killer. Then, seeing his eyes spinning through the fog, I understood how he got Kayla to fall in love with him.

"I love you," she had said to whoever had been hiding behind the weeping willow. Seth had entranced her with his stare. Isidor had said how he couldn't understand how Kayla had grown close to this person. She hadn't fallen in love with him at all. Seth had tricked her like his son had tricked his victims – those women he had butchered. With my heart racing in my chest, I understood why Kayla had undressed just before being murdered. Seth had seduced her with his stare. He had made her want him, just like he had made me desire him when I had looked into his eyes in the caves beneath the Fountain of Souls. Even though I could see him torturing me, hurting me, I had still seen myself undress for him, lay down for him and let him take me.

"And what does that message mean?" Luke suddenly asked, but I hardly heard it. I couldn't take my eyes off the murdering Lycanthrope.

"Maybe you should ask him?" I said, pointing at Jack Seth.

"Me?" Seth sneered, with a bemused smile on his face.

“Or perhaps I should call you Elias Munn?” I whispered in shock.

“What are you going on about,” he barked. “I know these tunnels are believed to be filled with a fog that can drive you insane, but I had no idea the effects would take hold so fast.”

Ignoring Seth, Potter looked at me and said, “What are you talking about, Kiera?”

“Jack Seth is the killer -”

“We’ve known that for years,” Luke cut in.

“No!” I snapped. “He’s responsible for killing Kayla, Isidor, Coanda, Murphy and all the others that have lost their lives...”

“I didn’t kill Murphy,” Seth spat. “That was Phillips, you saw him...”

“No, but you led us to him,” I cut over him. “It was you who told Murphy that we should pay a visit to that monastery where we all nearly lost our lives. How have I been so dumb? How have I not seen it?”

“I don’t have to stand here and listen to...” Seth started, but before he’d had the chance to finish, Luke and Potter had taken hold of him. “This is an outrage,” he struggled.

“That’s the real reason you wanted to get to the Dust Palace because you haven’t been able to get me to fall in love with you,” I said. “So many times you’ve looked into my eyes and shown me the perverted pleasures

you have to offer. You hoped that I would fall for you. But each time I've resisted, so now your last chance is to get inside the Dust Palace and kill the Elders."

Then, fixing me with his stare, he looked into my eyes and said, "You stupid girl, you didn't resist me. It was I who resisted you. You couldn't have stopped me from taking you if I'd really wanted you. Nothing could have stopped that. But you were my test, Kiera Hudson. To be able to resist you, to not take you, rip you apart, eat you every time I laid eyes on you, told me that I could be redeemed, that I could fight my desire to kill and butcher."

"I don't believe you could resist killing anyone," I hissed. "Potter was right, you are murdering scum and you deserve to die for what you've done."

"Then kill me," he suddenly growled, and struggled free of Luke's and Potter's hold. "If you really believe that I'm Elias Munn, kill me now." Ripping his bandanna from his throat, he threw it at me and bared his neck. "Go on, suck the life out of me, you bloodsucking vampire bat, because that's what you are!"

With images of Kayla and Isidor racing across my mind, I lunged at Seth and sunk my fangs into his ropey-looking neck. His hot blood washed over my tongue and down my throat, where it burnt like acid. Then, as Seth

writhed against me as if gaining some morbid pleasure from me feeding off him, I heard those children's voices again. But this time they were closer, as if whispering in my ear.

"No, Kiera," their voices sung softly all around me. "Bring the Lycanthrope to us and you will see all." Then, those children, if that's really what they were, giggled and were gone again.

Opening my eyes, I took my mouth from Seth's neck.

"What did you hear?" he asked me as I stepped away, wiping his blood from my lips with his red bandanna and placing it in my pocket. Continuing to stare at me, he said, "You heard them, didn't you? You heard the children."

"What children?" I gasped, feeling out of breath.

"You heard the voices of the gods," he said.

"The gods?" I asked, feeling light-headed.

"I heard them once before," he said. "The day they cursed me and my race. And that's my reason for wanting to seek an audience with them; I want to beg them to lift the curse they placed on us all those years ago."

And then as if being haunted by ghosts, I heard the sound of those children's voices again, whispering and playfully giggling amongst the fog. I turned my back on Seth and peered into the yellow vapour that swirled all

around me. The voices came again, but this time they were fainter as if moving away from me. I followed the sound through the tunnel.

“Hey, Kiera!” Potter called out from behind me. “What are we doing with the wolf man?”

“Bring him with you,” I said. “But don’t let him leave your side.”

“Easier said than done in all this fog,” I heard Luke say.

But I didn’t stop, I just followed those voices.

Chapter Thirty-Six

Through the tunnels I went, not knowing where I was going or what direction I was heading. It didn't seem to matter to me. For some reason I trusted those innocent-sounding voices. I could hear Potter, Luke, and Seth behind me as they followed the sounds of my footsteps echoing back down through the tunnels. Could they hear the voices? I doubted it or they would have asked me about them. No, these children, whoever they were, were only talking to me – guiding me.

I don't know for how long I followed the voices through the labyrinth of tunnels, but eventually the fog started to thin out and eventually evaporate. There was a dim, orange light at the end of the tunnel, and I sped up.

“Where are you taking us?” Potter called out.

Ignoring him, I raced forward towards the light. Stumbling out of the tunnel, I gasped in a mouthful of air, glad to be free of the suffocating smog. Blinking in the light that now bathed me, I looked ahead. The others

stumbled into the light and coughed and sputtered as they gasped in lungfuls of fresh air.

We stood in a narrow valley which ran between two vast cliffs that towered above us on either side. But unlike the red rock that seemed to make up so much of The Hollows, the cliffs were a dull grey as if they had had their colour sucked from them. The sky above us was a black void. There were no twinkling stalagmites here. The orange glow that illuminated the valley came from the ground, which was covered in a similar type of moss I had seen back at the resistance camp. Just like the ground there, this was spongy, like a luxuriant carpet. At the opposite end of the valley, I could see what appeared to be four giant pillars sculpted into the rocks. Set between these pillars was a rusty-looking door that stretched up for as far as the eye could see.

I looked at the others and said, "The Dust Palace?"

"I guess," Luke shrugged.

"What are we waiting for?" Seth barked, keen to get going and have his curse lifted, if that was his true reason for wanting to get inside there.

"Watch him," I said to Luke and Potter, as I set off across the valley.

The others followed at a distance, Seth sandwiched between Luke and Potter. A cool breeze fused with sand meandered about us, and our wings rippled. The sound of the children laughing had faded. It was as if

they had led me this far, but had now disappeared, leaving me alone to find my own way into the Dust Palace.

Before the giant door stood several stone steps. Placing my foot on the first, I looked back at the others as they joined me.

“Are you sure about this?” Potter asked, taking me to one side so that we were out of earshot of the others.

“I’m not sure of anything anymore,” I whispered looking up into his dead, black eyes.

“Does that include me?” he asked.

Not knowing what lay ahead on the other side of the door and fearing this could be our last moments together, I said, “I do love you.” Then, I headed up the steps.

As I climbed them, I could see that the building set into the rocks wasn’t made of stone at all, but of smouldering ash. It glimmered red as if on fire, and wispy trails of smoke seeped from the cracks that covered it. I could hear a hissing sound as if the palace was on fire, or at least smouldering. Heat radiated from the building, but oddly I felt cold. I reached the giant door that towered high above me and could see it was coloured brown with scorch marks, as if at some time in the distant past it had been set on fire. The door was open, just enough for me to step through.

The others joined me on the top step and there was an eerie silence between us. Not one of us said anything, and we all shared a nervous glance. Even Potter seemed to have lost that cocky look of his, the arrogance melting away before the Dust Palace. None of us had to speak, there were no words that could explain the seriousness of what was about to happen – the gravity of the decision I was going to make on the other side of the door we now stood before.

Every step I had taken since arriving at The Ragged Cove had been leading me here, to the Dust Palace, the home of the Elders, where I would decide the fate of two races. Both good, both bad, both capable of true greatness, if only they had someone to show them the light.

I looked at Luke and his face was ashen, gaunt, and tired. Potter took a cigarette from his pocket, stuck it in the corner of his mouth, then spat it out as if thinking better of it. Seth stared at the crack in the door, his eyes burning bright.

There was only the four of us left; only the four of us had made it this far. Two Vampyrus, a Lycanthrope, and one half-breed. An unlikely quartet, one of which was a traitor. Who was it and how many of us would leave the Dust Palace alive?

Not knowing the answer to my own questions, I slipped between the gap in the door and entered the Dust Palace.

Chapter Thirty-Seven

A long, stone corridor lay before us. The walls were lined with a thousand or more candles. As the last of us stepped into the Palace, the door slammed shut behind us and a thousand flames flickered, casting shadows up the ashen walls. There was only silence and it was louder than any sound I had ever heard. The four of us stood side by side and looked straight ahead. My heart was racing so fast inside my chest that I thought it might just explode at any moment. Without saying a word, I took a deep breath and stepped forward.

The floor was made of burning coals and they hissed and spat with every step I took. But my shoes didn't smoulder or perish; in fact, like the rest of me, my feet felt cold, as if I had just plunged them into a tub full of icy water.

The four of us moved forward, not one of us daring to say a word. We came to the end of the corridor and found ourselves in a vast chamber that didn't look too dissimilar to the inside of an ancient cathedral. Ash-covered pillars stretched up into the ceiling which looked as if it had been

constructed from hundreds of seething, wooden beams. It was as if the whole palace was slowly smouldering like the embers of a dying campfire. Just like the many cathedrals I had visited, this had an altar that was on a raised platform. It was supported on four raised legs, as if the altar itself was set inside some kind of smaller temple. Before it stood four robed figures and their faces were covered with hoods.

“Welcome to our home at last, Kiera Hudson,” one of them said, and although they were the size of adults, the voice was that of a little girl, no older than six years.

With goose flesh running up my spine at the sound of the Elder’s voice, I knew that it was the same as the voices I’d heard in the tunnels. I looked at the four of them and because their faces were shrouded, I couldn’t tell which one of them had spoken.

“You have done well to have come so far,” one of them said, but it was a different voice this time, the voice of a small boy. “You have *seen* much, but you have been *blind* too.”

“Blind?” I whispered.

“Oh, Kiera,” another of them said from beneath their hood in a child’s voice. “Can’t you *see* what you have done?”

“I don’t understand,” I said.

“You’ve led our enemy – Elias Munn – into our home,” one of them said.

I glanced along the line at Potter, Luke, and Seth, then, turning to face the Elders I said. “I’ve seen who this Elias Munn is,” I told them. “You are right, he is amongst us and his name is...”

“Shhh,” one of the Elders said, then giggled in a childish way. “Let’s see if you have seen right, Kiera Hudson.”

There was a pause of silence before one of the Elders said in a small voice, “Will Elias Munn please step forward.”

I shot a glance down the line and none of them moved. I looked at all of their faces as they stared straight ahead at the Elders. None of them seemed to show any emotion, their faces passive, lifeless.

With my blood beginning to boil, I stood in front of Seth and hissed, “Go on, reveal yourself. I know it’s you.”

Jack Seth just stared back at me, his eyes gleaming yellow and crazy as ever.

“Tell them that it is you,” I demanded, and tugged at his arm. If he wasn’t going to step forward, then I would drag him before the Elders myself.

Then, from the corner of my eye, I saw someone move. With my heart aching in my chest, I watched Potter take a step forward.

Chapter Thirty-Eight

“No!” I gasped, turning to face Potter. “Tell me it isn’t true.”

Potter just looked at me with his dead, black eyes. His face was devoid of all emotion.

Taking hold of him, I shook him and screamed, “It’s not you Potter! Tell me so! Talk to me!”

Then, without taking his eyes off mine, he opened his mouth as a thin, black line of blood ran over his lips, down his chin, and splattered onto his naked chest.

“What’s going on?” I gasped in confusion. And it was as I looked at the blood running down his body that I saw the fingers sticking out of the hole in the centre of his chest. Clutched between those fingers, was something red and black, and it pulsed in and out.

Not understanding what I was seeing, I watched the hand disappear again.

“Potter?” I groaned as he slumped forward into my arms to reveal my mother standing behind him. She stood clutching Potter’s heart in her

fist.

“Oh, my god, what have you done?” I mumbled, still unable to comprehend what was happening.

“He was in the way,” she smiled down at me as I lowered Potter to the ground.

“In the way of what?” I breathed, my mind still trying to make sense of what was happening.

“The person who really loves you,” she said, dropping Potter’s heart to the floor. “A good mother knows who is right for her daughter and it wasn’t Potter. Elias Munn is who you are destined to love.”

“*What are you talking about?*” I screamed at her, my mind now realising that she had killed Potter so I would be free to love Elias Munn.

“Elias loves you, Kiera, but you’ve just been too blind to see that,” she said.

I looked down at Potter’s face as he stared blankly back at me from my lap. “*But it’s Potter that I love,*” I screeched. “What have you done? Oh my god, what have you done to him?” Not needing any answer from her, I pulled Potter up and cradled him against my chest. “No! No! No! Wake up, goddamn it!” I cried, tears falling from my eyes onto his upturned face. But Potter just flopped lifelessly back in my arms. “*You can’t die!*” I screamed at him. “We were going on our first date when this was all over. You

promised me! You were going to tell me what your favourite food was!" I shook him again, hoping I could make him come alive, but in my heart I knew he was gone. He had left me and I just wanted to curl up and die.

"He could never have made you happy," my mother said, as she looked down at me, her face pale, older-looking, and the ends of her raven black hair turning grey.

I looked at her and the sight of her disgusted me. With tears rolling down my cheeks, I sobbed, "Potter did make me happy. So happy you could never know."

"Nonsense," my mother snapped at me and I just wanted to rip her fucking throat out. "Your destiny lies with Elias."

"*Who is he?*" I roared at her.

"I'm Elias Munn," a voice said, and I turned to see Luke looking down at me. "I love you, Kiera, I always have."

I laid Potter's body on the ground, then springing to my feet, I lunged at Luke. "*You!*" I screamed. "It was you the whole time!"

"I love you, Kiera," he said again, grabbing hold of me. "We are meant to be together."

"Get off me!" I screamed at him. "*Get your fucking hands off me!*"

"Kiera, I know you love me too," he smiled. "You were so close to telling me in the underground lake. You know it in your heart to be true."

“I hate you!” I screamed into his face, spittle flying from my lips and showering him. *“I hate you! I want to rip your fucking heart out!”*

Then, gripping me like a bear, he leant forward and kissed me on the mouth. I tried to resist but my attempts to fight him off were fruitless. It was like he was sucking my strength from me. I kicked wildly against him at first, but my legs grew weaker and weaker until eventually I closed my eyes and just let him kiss me.

Just as if a thousand flash bulbs were popping inside my head, I saw myself in Kristy Hall’s open grave. I called for Luke but he was gone. *Where was he?* I wondered. Shadows flickered above me as I climbed from her grave. Then as if watching from above, I saw myself being chased across St. Mary’s graveyard by Kristy Hall. Then I was in the police car trying to escape as she smashed the windscreen with her face, desperate to get me.

But where was Luke? I wondered again.

Then, I could see him. There he was, watching from the doorway of St. Mary’s church, but he was with someone else – Father Taylor.

“Let’s see if Kiera is as resourceful as we’ve been led to believe,” Taylor said to Luke. But Taylor had been deceived too, he didn’t know who it was that hid in the shadows next to him, for Luke’s face was masked in that shadow I had seen so many times in my nightmares.

Then, Kristy Hall was exploding in a shower of dust, as I watched myself thrust the crucifix into her tongue.

“She’s good,” Taylor smiled at the figure that loomed beside him. Then Luke was fluttering away in a spray of shadows and I could see him running to my rescue. I could see his black police boots in the rear view mirror as he approached the police car.

Another of those flash bulbs popped inside my mind. I could see myself staggering away from my little red Mini that had become stranded on the road that led from The Ragged Cove. I was running away from vampires in the snow as they were chasing me. There was a shadow in the sky and it was moving fast. It was killing the vampires, it was Luke and he was rescuing me. But he wasn’t really rescuing me, he was stopping me from leaving The Ragged Cove; he was taking me back there so he could get me to fall in love with him. He needed me to love him so that the decision I had to make could be his.

The flash bulbs went pop again, and I was being dragged through the sky above St. Mary’s Church by Phillips. We were diving towards the burning steeple and I saw Luke take his chance. He could save me, but that meant sacrificing one of his agents, but what did he really care, he had armies of them. So saving me and scolding himself, he made me think that he was selfless, that he truly loved me. And he sacrificed Rom too as he

ripped him to shreds in front of the church – how would I ever expect that he was one of my enemies if he slaughtered one in front of my very eyes?

Then I was in Hallowed Manor, and I could see him through his window as he skulked in the darkness of the attic. He wasn't hiding because of the burns he had received saving me at St. Mary's Church, he was sneaking away at night, returning back to The Hollows to organise his agents as he knew the time was close. He had to pretend he was hiding away up there or his friends would have wondered why he kept disappearing. But all the while keeping me close, that's why I was really brought to the Manor – I could see that now.

"We must bring Kiera here," he had told Potter and Murphy. "She isn't safe without our protection."

So Potter and Murphy agreed to his plan and tricked me to going to Hallowed Manor on the pretext of watching over Kayla.

But why hide away at the Manor? Because that's where Doctor Hunt and Ravenwood were working on the cure for the half-breeds. He had positioned himself close at hand to steal it when their work was complete.

But Doctor Hunt suspected a traitor was close by so he had to be disposed of. Luke had him kidnapped, but left Ravenwood to work on the cure. But Taylor was a wild card and didn't follow the plans that Luke, as Elias Munn, had ordered. Taylor had started to bring vampires to the Manor

and the situation became dangerous. So from his hiding place and unaware of his true identity, Luke manipulated Taylor and Phillips to invade the Manor, this would give Luke a smokescreen to slip away, meet with Sparky, kill the half-breeds and take Ravenwood back to the facility where Hunt was being forced to work on the cure. He gave Phillips instructions to take Kayla, as he needed a healthy half-breed to test on.

When the fight was over, I watched from above as Luke came back to the Manor, pretending that he had flown after Phillips in an attempt to rescue Kayla. He had deceived us all. But not Murphy.

The lights flashed inside my head again, and I was in the signal box next to the disused railway line. I was secretly awake and listening to Murphy tell Potter that he suspected a traitor amongst them. But I hadn't been the only one pretending to be asleep that night – Luke had been awake, too. Knowing Murphy suspected a traitor, he knew he had to have him killed. With time running out and still desperate to get me to fall in love with him, he tried again to seduce me in the lake beneath the caves.

“Tell me you love me,” he said, as I now watched like a secret spectator from the shore of the lake. But, I'd started to fall in love with Potter by that time, and I couldn't tell Luke that I loved him.

Frustrated and fearing that Murphy might discover his true identity at any time, he engineered his disappearance when the vampires attacked at

the Fountain of Souls. Luke couldn't risk being anywhere near when Murphy's life was taken, so, pretending he had died at the hands of vampires, he skulked away until his agent, Phillips had murdered Murphy.

Fearing he might never be able to get me to truly fall in love with him, Luke decided that if he could dehumanise me, to get me to see humans as nothing more than food, or better still, get me addicted to their flesh, then I would surely choose the Vampyrus to survive over the human race when the time came for me to make my choice.

So, revealing his true self to my mother and only her, Luke seduced her into feeding me that flesh – knowing that if I had one mouthful I would become an addict. I watched from above as Luke promised her a position of power in his new kingdom, and as he did he fed her own addiction with thin slithers of human flesh.

“You like this, don't you?” I saw him smile at her as she grabbed the meat from his fingers.

“Yes,” she groaned as she gorged on the flesh.

“You wouldn't ever want me to take this away from you,” he teased her.

“Never,” she moaned.

“And you only want what's best for Kiera, don't you?” he whispered in her ear, as he fed my mother more of the flesh.

“Yes,” she whispered, sounding intoxicated.

“Then help me,” he smiled. “Help me to get Kiera to forget her human self and become a Vampyrus like us. You must feed her the flesh.”

“I will,” she smiled, as he brushed his lips over hers, and the sight sickened me. How could my mother have been so weak? She had become nothing more than a junkie, prepared to sell her daughter to get her fix.

But she hadn’t been the only one. With those flash bulbs still popping inside my head like paparazzi cameras, I saw Luke visiting Kayla in her cell at the zoo. Instructions had come to Phillips for her not to be given any of the red stuff, even though they had made her an addict. At night Luke would creep into her cell and supply her with some, pretending that he was putting his own life on the line by sneaking from his cell to help her.

“I risk everything to come here each night,” he told her. And Kayla was grateful for his help. I could hear him warn Kayla not to tell anyone – not even me.

“Why not Kiera?” Kayla had asked him around a mouthful of flesh.

“Kiera wouldn’t understand,” he said. “Kiera is special – she is unique. She can fight her cravings and she will expect you to do the same. I don’t blame Kiera as she is strong and beautiful, but we are not like her. We are weaker, we crave the flesh, but she will be able to fight it. So please,

Kayla, don't tell her I've given this to you or I won't be able to get you any more."

"I promise," Kayla said, nibbling the flesh that dangled from between his fingertips.

Then I was on the road again that led to Wasp Water, and I could see that Isidor and I had both lost weight during our time at the zoo, but Kayla hadn't and I now understood why – I understood why she hadn't been able to beat her cravings. But Luke had whispered something else to her on his visits to her cell. He had told her that she was beautiful and how those words felt like sweet music to her ears. For so many years she had been bullied at school, called 'stickleback,' so when someone as handsome as Luke told her how beautiful he thought she was, Kayla couldn't help but lap those words up as quickly as she lapped up the red stuff he brought her each night. He truly was her saviour.

Then, one night Kayla said, "I love you, Luke."

"You love me?" he smiled back at her, taking her hands in his.
"Why?"

"You have been so kind to me," she said, looking into his eyes.

"And I love you too, Kayla, but like a sister," he told her.

"A sister?" she asked, sounding disappointed. "Don't you love me more than that?"

“Perhaps,” he half-smiled. “But I can’t think about that now. If we ever manage to escape from here, then perhaps my feelings will become clearer.”

“What about Kiera?” I heard her ask. “Don’t you love her?”

“I think she loves me,” Luke told her. “So you must never tell her about this conversation. I will tell her when the time is right. You wouldn’t want to hurt her, would you?”

“No,” Kayla whispered, shaking her head. “I could never hurt Kiera, she’s my friend.”

“Good,” Luke smiled, leaning forward and kissing her gently on the mouth. And then he was gone.

Then, I was in The Hollows, in the cave with Coanda. Kayla was waiting alone by a nearby cave. I saw his hands sneak from the darkness and pull her inside. She shuddered in his grasp.

“Kayla, I need your help,” he told her. “I think Kiera is in great danger.”

“How?” Kayla asked him.

“I need you to listen to what Coanda is saying to her,” Luke said.

“But that would be wrong, wouldn’t it?” she whispered. “You, know, to eavesdrop on somebody else’s private conversation.”

Taking her gently by the shoulders, I watched him lean in close to her, and say, “We don’t really know this Coanda. He might be leading us into a trap. He might want to hurt Kiera.”

Kayla looked up into his eyes and he could sense her unease about carrying out his request, so pulling her closer still, he kissed her. And this time it wasn’t a brotherly kiss, but that of a lover. He pulled away from her, and looking into her eyes, he said, “Please, Kayla, for me.”

So, turning her head towards the cave I was in with Coanda, she relayed every word of our conversation to Luke.

But, someone saw Luke kiss Kayla and the sight of it disturbed him. Unseen by Luke or Kayla, Isidor had been watching them from nearby. I watched Isidor, wide-eyed and opened-mouthed as he saw Luke kiss his sister. Isidor slunk back into the shadows and I could feel his heart beating, like a child who had stumbled across a secret they wished they hadn’t seen. But not only could I feel his heart, I could see into it as he remembered stumbling across Luke and me naked together in the lake beneath the caves. I remembered the way his cheeks had flushed scarlet at finding us there. And that’s what caused his heart so much pain as he stood, hidden by shadows, watching Luke and his sister kiss, how would he ever tell me – wasn’t I in love with Luke?

Then, I heard Isidor's voice whisper against my cheek as if he was standing beside me, but he wasn't standing beside me, he was dying in my arms, blood streaming from his throat in thick, black streams, as Luke laid the crossbow between the gap in the rock then disappeared between it.

"I saw him kiss her at the resistance camp," Isidor had gargled in my arms. When she was on her own, I asked her what was going on."

I looked away; I couldn't bear to see Isidor die in my arms all over again, but then I saw him with Kayla, lying next to each other by the campfire halfway up the Weeping Peak.

"Please, Isidor, you mustn't say anything," Kayla whispered to her brother over the snapping and hissing of the fire.

"But what about Kiera?" he asked her. "I thought she and Luke were together?"

"She likes Potter," Kayla told him.

"Then you should tell her about you and Luke," Isidor insisted.

"No, not yet."

"Why not?"

"Luke said he will tell Kiera when this is all over," Kayla told Isidor.

I watched from afar as Isidor, rolled onto his side and said, "I don't like it, Kayla, not one little bit."

As I looked at him, all those flashbulbs flickered and flashed inside my head, and I understood why he had been so quiet on our journey across The Hollows. He wished he hadn't seen Luke and Kayla; he didn't want to be the one who would have to tell me about their betrayal – he didn't want to see me get hurt. And in his heart, he was angry with the both of them.

Then, something brushed my face and it was the leaves of the weeping willows as I made my way through them. I could hear sobbing and I moved towards the sound. Kayla was by the tree, and as I peered through the leaves, I could see myself watching her from the other side of the clearing. But from my new hiding place, I could see who Kayla was talking to.

“I love you,” she whispered, and Luke smiled at her, that smile that made his face look radiant.

“You have to keep us a secret until Kiera has made her choice,” he said softly.

“I know what I have to do,” Kayla murmured. “I know the decision that Kiera has to make. I know I have to be strong until the end.”

“Good,” he smiled again.

“Then can we be together?” Kayla asked him, tears on her cheeks.

“Come to me tonight, Kayla,” Luke whispered. “When we camp, come to me and we can be together tonight.” Then, hearing me coming

through the willows, he slipped back in amongst the trees, dropping a cigarette end as he went.

“I love you,” she said again and I watched her bury her face in her hands.

The bright lights flashed again, sending pinpricks of light dancing across the inside of my eyelids. The spots of lights formed shapes, images that I didn’t want to see.

Kayla was there, I could see her standing in the dark. She was waiting for him. Her wait wasn’t a long one, as Luke came to her out of the darkness. She ran to him, and he took her in his arms, kissing her face and neck.

“Do you really think I’m beautiful?” she whispered in his ear, and I could feel the insecurities in her heart. How could Luke love her? She was the stickleback, right? The girl who had been ridiculed and mocked by her peers because she was different. She didn’t deserve to be loved by someone like Luke – this only happened in books, in movies.

“You are beautiful,” he whispered back, pulling her close and unbuttoning her overalls. He pulled them down over her shoulders and she made a murmuring sound.

“Luke, maybe we should stop,” she protested gently.

“But you are so beautiful, Kayla,” he said, as her clothes fluttered to the ground.

I wanted to scream at her – to tell her to run and never stop. But I was a passive observer, myself held prisoner in Luke’s embrace as I was forced to watch how he had betrayed us, how he had murdered Kayla.

And although she felt embarrassed and uncomfortable, she couldn’t help but feel overjoyed that at last someone thought she was beautiful. So, looping her arms about his neck, she let him kiss her face, her chest and his kisses were so gentle.

Then, she was pushing him away and folding her arms over her breasts in embarrassment. “Someone is coming,” she whispered, reaching for her clothes.

“No...” Luke started.

“I can hear them,” she said. “It’s the same person who followed us up the mountain.”

“It’s just your imagination,” he said, pulling her close again, but keeping one eye on the woods behind her, as if he were expecting someone.

“Please, Luke, stop...” she gasped as she tried to push him away, I could tell by her racing heart that she knew that something wasn’t quite right.

But before she could break herself free of him, Luke sunk his fangs into her chest and bit her heart. Kayla shuddered in his arms, then, went rigid. My mother appeared from the woods, a rucksack over her back. And as Kayla twitched in Luke's arms, she came forward and placed a hand over Kayla's mouth to stifle any dying sounds she might make.

Between them, Luke and my mother laid Kayla upon the ground. Leaning over her, as if kissing her one last time, Luke removed Kayla's ears with one quick swipe of his claws.

"Wasn't eating her heart enough?" my mother asked. But she didn't sound revolted, just curious.

"I want to send that fool, Coanda a message," Luke said, placing one of Kayla's ears in each of her hands. "I want to tell him that I know he was taking her to the Light House to listen."

"What about these?" my mother whispered, pulling an identical set of clothes from the rucksack.

"Help me put them on her," Luke ordered, lifting Kayla's feet and removing her boots.

"Why?" mother asked him.

"The kid, Isidor will smell me on her," Luke said. "He can't know that we have been together. If I ever thought he had found out, I would have to kill him."

“Kill him anyway,” my mother said.

“I just might,” he told her, smiling.

And as they redressed Kayla, I knew why Potter had seen Isidor sniffing his sister’s body as he laid her to rest. But Isidor’s sense of smell had been stronger than Luke had known, because even though Luke had gone to great lengths to hide his tracks, he had left a trace of his scent behind. In her hair, perhaps? On her flesh? I couldn’t be sure but Isidor had smelt Luke. And as those dreadful images of Kayla flashed before me, I heard Isidor whisper in my ear again, “As I laid her in her grave, I could smell him on her. I don’t know if he was the one who killed her, but they had definitely been together.”

Isidor’s voice faded into that of a child’s – a giggling child. I looked around and I was in the Murka Tunnels again, and I could see through the fog this time. It was as if it wasn’t there. I saw Luke run past me and as he did, he sent me flying against the wall. He didn’t look back. He was so intent on finding Coanda – the last person who stood in his way. The person who had raised a resistance against him, the resistance that was now circling the Light House and battling his army.

Seeking out Coanda in the murky gloom, Luke wasted no time in removing Coanda’s heart. Then, once dead, Luke dipped his forefinger into the hole in Coanda’s chest and inscribed the message above the wall. Luke

knew I could hear the Elders, but fearing I might believe them to be the ghosts of the insane that were rumoured to be blindly wandering the tunnels, he had to make sure I followed them as they would lead me – *him* – to the Dust Palace.

Chapter Thirty-Nine

With those flashes of light fading like lightning during a summer storm, I pulled my lips from Luke – Elias Munn – and stared into his eyes.

“I saw it all,” I whispered. “I saw everything. But how come I didn’t see it before – how come I didn’t see you?”

Still holding me close, Elias Munn, for that was his real name, smiled at me and said, “The problem with you, Kiera, was you were only ever interested in what you could see at your feet. You were always looking for the smallest of clues on the ground, but you never looked up, you never saw the big picture. That was your mistake.”

Looking into his eyes, I said, “And your mistake was Potter. You never saw him – me and him together. He stopped me from falling in love with you. Just like my mother said, Potter got in the way.”

“But now he is dead,” Elias smiled, “and we are alive.”

“I’d rather be dead,” I told him.

“Kiera, you are meant to see things,” he said. “You’re meant to be a visionary, so why can’t you see what it is that I have to offer you?”

Squirming from his hold, I looked at him and said, “I can see, alright. I know what it is that you have to offer me. A lifetime of war, bloodshed, and heartache.”

“There you go again,” he half-smiled at me as if I were a child who just didn’t understand. “I could give you the world, Kiera. You have it in your power to destroy the human race and let the Vampyrus live above ground – to create a kingdom. You can decide right now, Kiera.”

“And what sort of kingdom will you rule over?” I spat. “A kingdom where you murder and kill those who don’t believe in your twisted view of freedom? That isn’t a kingdom, that’s a dictatorship and I can’t be a part of that.”

“And if you chose the human race over the Vampyrus, then you become what you most despise – a killer!” he barked at me. “If you let the humans live, they will only continue to fight amongst themselves, destroy the planet and in turn, us!”

“You are no different from them. Look what you have done!” I yelled at him. “You’ve started a war. You’ve turned your own kind against each other. You’re destroying the world that *you* live in. Your army is raging war over the Light House, the very thing that brings light to your world. Humans and Vampyrus are not so different. They just need to learn to accept each other.”

“There you go again,” he roared, and I could see anger and hate for me in his eyes. “You just don’t see it! If only you could find it in your heart to love me, Kiera, then I could take the decision away from you. It would become my burden. It would be me who would have to carry the guilt of killing the entire human race.” Then reaching out and stroking my face, he added, “Let me show you how much I love you, Kiera, let me make that decision for you. I can feel your anguish and unhappiness at the thought of making your choice. I can take that from you – relieve your pain.”

I slapped his hand away, and hissed, “The only pain I feel is the heartache for the deaths of my friends Murphy, Kayla, Isidor and the man I was in love with, Potter. You wouldn’t feel any pain at the thought of destroying the humans – you hate them because one of them rejected you. That’s what this whole thing is about. It’s about your pain – the pain you felt when your lover turned away from you. And the saddest thing of all is that you are hurting more than anyone because you have never known what it is like to truly be in love.”

“But I loved her!” Elias roared, remembering how he had been rejected.

“If you had loved her, you would’ve set her free to find true happiness with someone else. But instead, you ripped out her heart and ate it so she could never give it to another.” Then, stepping close to him, I

looked into his eyes, and added, “I see you, Elias Munn. I see into your heart and pity you, because you will never know happiness.”

I had nothing more to say to him, and I knew in my heart the choice I was going to make. So, staring up at the Elders, I said, “I’m ready.”

But before the Elders spoke again in their childlike way, Seth roared, “Kiera, behind you!”

Then, as if time had slowed down, I spun around to see Elias Munn lunging through the air at me. With my claws before me, I punched my fist into Elias Munn’s chest and curled my fingers around his heart. With it pumping in my hand, his mouth dropped open and he looked down at the blood that was now pumping from him.

“Kiera,” he gasped, raising his head to look into my eyes. Then, his body began to shake as it distorted before me. His face changed shape, and it was as if someone else was looking back at me as I gripped his heart. Elias Munn’s hair turned blond, brown, and grey. He had blue eyes, then brown, hazel, green. His face changed shape, plump, thin, long. He suddenly had a beard, a moustache and then a goatee. And as he changed in front of me, I knew I was witnessing the many guises that he had taken over the hundreds of years he had lived. Then at last, he looked like Luke, just as he had when I saw him for the first time, dripping with rain in the front office of the police station in The Ragged Cove. That boyish look, with his

glistening green eyes, chiselled jawline and jet black hair. But it had just been a mask.

“I love you, Kiera,” he breathed, and just for the briefest of moments, I thought I saw him smile.

Remembering what I had seen, how he had murdered Kayla and Isidor, and knowing that Potter lay dead at my feet, I ripped Luke’s heart from his chest and said, “I know.”

I watched him drop to the floor, his chest soaked black with blood, and I knew that in a sad way, he had loved me. Dropping his heart, I turned back to face the Elders.

“How do you choose?” one of them asked, and it was the one who sounded like a six-year-old girl.

Before answering, my mother came forward and threw herself at my feet. “Please, Kiera, choose the Vampyrus, I don’t want to die.”

I tried to kick her away, I didn’t want her near me, I couldn’t bear to feel her touch. But she gripped hold of my leg and began to sob.

“Please, Kiera, don’t let me die,” she wailed. “You wouldn’t let your mother die...”

Gently, I prised her fingers free of my leg, and holding her face in my hands, I whispered, “My mother is already dead.”

Snivelling, she crawled away towards Jack Seth who stood nearby. And even by his own murderous standards, he must have been sickened by her, as he moved away. I looked at him, and he stared at me with those yellow eyes.

“You might want to get out of here,” I told him.

Shrugging his scrawny shoulders, he flashed his broken teeth at me and said, “Doesn’t bother me which way you choose, I ain’t human and I’m definitely not a Vampyrus.” Then chuckling to himself, he added, “I didn’t ever think I’d see the day when I was grateful for being a werewolf! No, knock yourself out, you make your decision. I’m gonna hang around for a while, me and the Elders have some unfinished business.”

I looked one last time at Potter as he lay dead at my feet, and with tears in my eyes, I smiled at him and whispered, “I love you, Potter.” Then, raising my head, I stared at the hooded Elders and said, “I refuse to choose.”

“Oh, Kiera,” the boy said. “You must choose – it is the path that you were born to take.”

“I won’t do it,” I said flatly. “I will not decide.”

“But you must,” one of them giggled, “Even though Elias Munn is dead, his armies will still invade above ground. Munn will soon be replaced by another.”

“I’ll help them to find peace,” I said, refusing to budge.

“But, Kiera, that has been tried before,” the girl said. “That is why you were chosen, a half and half of both species to finally choose which race would live and which would die. A half-breed would understand.”

“Choose the Vampyrus,” I heard my mother whimper from the corner.

Ignoring her, I continued. “I will not be responsible for destroying an entire race of people.”

“But by refusing to make a choice, you are destroying two races,” one of them giggled again. “The Vampyrus are already creeping from the sewers, flooding the subways, and the crater is complete. Thousands are poised to attack above ground in moments. You must choose now, Kiera. Now!”

Then, looking at them, I said, “I’d rather die!”

“You can’t die,” one of the Elders mused. “Who is going to kill you?”

Turning my back on them, I slowly crossed the chamber and headed towards Jack Seth. His eyes met mine, and I stared straight back into them. They spun the brightest of yellows as if on fire. I wrapped my arms around his neck, and breathing into his ear, I whispered, “I’m all yours, Jack Seth.”

Knowing he wouldn't be able to stop himself once I had offered myself to him, I stared one last time into his crazy eyes and said, "Kill me!"

I heard a howl of murderous passion, felt razor sharp teeth sink into me, and then everything went black.

Chapter Forty

There was nothing. No light or sound. There was only weightlessness. I wasn't in pain, I wasn't happy or sad. Nothing. Was this what death was really like? Wasn't there meant to be some kind of tunnel? A bright light even? Where were all my friends who had passed before me? Weren't they meant to be waiting to greet me? Great beaming smiles to welcome me home? But there was something – I was thinking, having conscious thoughts. So that was like being alive, right? Like being in a coma, but not being able to move or speak.

“Oh no, Kiera, you're not alive. You really are dead,” a voice said from beside me and without even turning, I could see that it was one of those hooded Elders who had spoken to me. But its voice no longer sounded childlike and playful. Now it sounded deep and old.

“The Lycanthrope mauled you to death,” another said, and this time the ancient voice came from above me. “If only you could see yourself, Kiera. He made a right mess of you.”

“And my mother?” I asked them.

“The Lycanthrope’s lust for blood was unforgiving once he had eaten you,” another of the Elders said, this time from beneath me.

“Where am I?” I asked them.

“Nowhere,” the fourth replied.

Then, seeing them for the first time, they removed their cloaks and revealed themselves. But their cloaks didn’t come fully away; they flew behind them like wings. I could see the fabric had been stitched to their flesh. It wasn’t the only stitches I could see. Their decrepit faces and bony bodies were a crisscross patchwork of scars. They were hideous, and the sweet, innocent voices they had spoken with were no more than a deception to hide the true horror that hid beneath their robes.

“Where’s nowhere?” I asked, fearing the answer.

“Kiera, you chose to end your own life over that of the Humans and Vampyrus!” the female of the Elders said, her face a writhing mass of wrinkles. “You saved two entire races even though you were not one of them. And that is your true greatness! You’re not great because you can fly, race at incredible speeds and see what others cannot. What you have truly seen is the potential goodness in both the Humans and the Vampyrus and you gave up your own life – your own species as you were the last of them – so that the Humans and Vampyrus could find their way. That has been your true greatness, Kiera Hudson.”

“So what happens to me now?” I asked.

“Because you failed to make your choice, you are now out of the reach of God’s blessings. You have been cursed to walk in the shadow of death.”

“But I couldn’t choose,” I cried out. “Your God asked the impossible.”

“The decision was made for you,” another of the Elders said, its toothless gums rubbing sorely together. “The Hollows have been sealed forever. Those Vampyrus that had made lives for themselves above ground have been snatched back, never to return. All of them will forget about their past lives, just as the humans will forget about them.”

“And the war?” I asked.

“The humans will not remember how some parts of their cities fell. As you know all too well, the humans are resourceful and imaginative creatures. They won’t be able to explain what happened, but they’ll imagine something, they always do.”

“Earthquakes, I shouldn’t wonder,” another of the Elders roared with spiteful laughter.

“And what of me?” I asked them, desperate not to look upon their grotesque wounds and faces.

“You are now one of the living dead,” the female said. “Cursed to walk the Earth alive, yet dead.”

“You have become one of the Dead Flesh,” one of them boomed like thunder. “You have no heart and no soul. You are unable to enter Heaven or Hell. Until...”

“Until what,” I begged.

“Until your curse has been lifted,” another of them said, its voice growing fainter.

“And how is the curse lifted?”

“We will send three dark angels to guide you,” the female said from beneath me as if fading away.

“How will I know who they are?”

“Their names are Malachi, Gabriel, and Uriel,” The Elder’s voice no more than a distant whisper.

“Where will they guide me to...?” I asked as I gazed into...

Chapter Forty-One

...the eyes of the pathologist. I looked round at the morgue. The policeman was clutching his legs as he lay on the floor screaming. There was another guy in a white lab coat cowering in the corner.

“How did I get here?” I asked the female pathologist, and my face felt odd, as if I had just recovered from some injury.

“I was carrying out a post-mortem on you,” she mumbled, as if not believing herself.

“But where did I come from?” I pushed.

“Your body was found up on the mountainside,” The police officer screeched in pain. “You shouldn’t be alive. You had no face or fingers – you have no *heart*!

“What’s he talking about?” I said, looking down at my hands, then, gently touching my face with them.

“It looked as if you had been mauled by some giant wolf,” the pathologist told me. “He’s right, you were brought here in a body bag, with half your face and fingers missing. But...”

“But what?” I asked.

“They grew back right in front of us,” she mumbled as if she were going to cry.

“You’re fucking dead!” the police officer roared, in pain and fear.

“And now you’re walking around the morgue.”

Then, staring at me as if I were some interesting medical freak show, the pathologist said, “Who are you? What are you?”

Before I’d the chance to answer her, the mortuary door crashed open and two figures came running in. And it was my turn to look shocked, confused, and bewildered.

“I thought you were dead?” I breathed.

“We were,” Isidor said, aiming his crossbow at the police officer lying on the floor.

“Stop pointing that goddamn thing at me, will ya?” the police officer roared. “Can’t you see she’s busted up my legs?”

Then, turning to the second figure that had come crashing through the door, I said, “Kayla, is that really you?”

Smiling at me, Kayla came forward, and said, “Kiera, what happened to you? You look like shit!”

“Can someone tell me what’s going on here?” the pathologist asked, backing away from the three of us.

“I’d like to know the answer to that myself,” I breathed, not believing that Kayla and Isidor were standing before me.

“You’re alive,” I gasped, reaching for them to make sure that they were real.

“No, we’re dead!” Isidor said, stepping back towards the door as if preparing to make a quick exit.

“In fact, we’re angels,” Kayla corrected him.

“I get it,” I said as Kayla pulled me towards the door. “They said there would be three of you.”

“C’mon, we don’t have time,” Isidor shouted at me, looking back over his shoulder. “We’ve got to get out of here – something really bad has happened!”

Before I could ask what, Kayla took my hand and dragged me towards the open door. I looked back at the pathologist and said, “Kiera Hudson.”

“Sorry?” she frowned.

“You asked me who I was,” I reminded her. “My name is Kiera Hudson, and I’m one of the Dead Flesh.”

Then I was gone, racing out into the night after my friends, not looking back.

I followed them to a car, its taillights burning an angry red in the night. There was someone leaning against the side of it, but it was dark and I couldn't see who it was.

Kayla and Isidor raced towards the car as if there was no time to lose, and I raced after them, unable to take my eyes off the figure standing against the car. There was something vaguely familiar about the shape and size of his silhouette and if I'd had a heart, it would have been racing in my chest.

Within feet of the figure I knew who it was, and I raced towards him, throwing myself into his arms.

"Take it easy, tiger," Potter whispered as he held me tight.

"I love you," I whispered back, and he kissed the tears that flowed down my face. Leaning back from his arms so I could look into his eyes, needing to make sure it was really him, I said, "Potter, is it really you?"

But before he'd had a chance to answer, Isidor climbed into the back of the car and as he did, he grinned, "Yeah, it's him alright, except his name isn't Potter anymore, it's Gabriel."

Letting go of me, Potter raced around the side of the car, but not quick enough to stop Isidor from slamming the door shut in his face.

"My name is *Potter*!" he shouted through the glass as Isidor grinned back at him. "It's not Gabriel, that's a freaking girl's name!"

“That’s what those Elders named you when they brought you back,” Kayla reminded him as she winked at me and climbed onto the backseat next to her brother.

“I couldn’t give a rat’s arse what those old farts called me,” Potter barked and stuck a cigarette in the corner of his mouth. “My name’s *Potter*, okay?”

“Whatever makes you happy,” Isidor smirked from the backseat of the car.

“Can you believe this shit?” Potter moaned at me. “I’ve been raised from the freaking dead to spend the rest of eternity listening to that wise-arse!”

“Nothing changes you, does it?” I said, looking over the roof of the car at him.

“Listen, sweet-cheeks, it’s not me who needs to change,” he snapped. “It’s that dumb arse.” Then, he climbed in behind the steering wheel.

I got in next to him as he fired up the engine and sped out of the car park. Smiling to myself, I watched as he chewed on the cigarette that dangled from the corner of his mouth.

“And that’s another thing,” Isidor said from the back. “Do you have to smoke all the time?”

“What’s the problem?” Potter snapped at him. “It’s not as if it’s gonna kill ya! You’re dead already, you Muppet!”

“But it stinks...” Isidor continued.

Then shooting me a sideways glance, Potter said, “Do me a favour, sweet-cheeks and put the radio on - I’ve had enough of his whining already.”

I switched the radio on, and the car filled with the sound of Coldplay singing *Charlie Brown*.

Settling back into my seat, I made the most of this happy moment, all of us being back together again. Because somewhere inside of me, I got the feeling this happiness wouldn’t last for long.

Dead Flesh & Dead Night

(Kiera Hudson Series Two) books 1 & 2



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